

glimmers in limbo: Britannia Panopticon

Comments from invited respondents

Visitors who had attended discussion groups at *glimmers in limbo: Britannia Panopticon* were invited to respond further, considering particularly whether the discussion and artworks/interventions had affected their perceptions or preconceptions of the Britannia Panopticon building.

I found the event very useful as a means to help me grapple with the utter complexity of how the space should be treated in conservation/sustainability terms.

As for the art works, for me the boxes were the most interesting, it has changed my perception of the 'detritus' aspect of the building which has always been something I was aware of but this enabled me to confront its reality, all the little pieces of bits of individuals' lives. The building isn't a building plus theatre it is a building with accompanying collection. The artwork and your event allowed me the space and time to gain this understanding.

(Anne McChlery, October 2007)

I think the event [*Pianola Karaoke*] worked to uncover a landmark building in the city giving access - physical, artistic and emotional - to the building. It provided an experience which played with the idea of risk, increasingly rare in our risk-averse society and created a place and a space to dream.

It didn't change my perceptions of the place as I'd been there before but it did provide an experience which animated the building in the best possible way - with a live event, and with sound (as opposed to a primarily visual event which would have been overpowered by the very potent atmosphere of the Panopticon). The project was both true to the history and to the contemporary situation without being anachronistic and thus false.

(Lorraine Wilson, October 2007)

I guess that the key thing your project did – that certainly changed my reading of the building – was put people into it. Obvious, I guess, but seeing the room peopled (on the Thursday night) really demonstrated the intimacy – and close-up-ness – of this kind of nineteenth century popular theatre. The fact that they were singing – again so close to the audience – really underlined this. Although, of course, I knew that the building was one of performance, you kind of forget what that means in terms of space of performance – and the lighting also reinforced my understanding of that. The other key intervention of your art works that changed my reading of the building was the light work on the exterior of the building: it made me look up and therefore to look at more than the street level. It forced me to have look at the building as a built object – that had a role in the cityscape beyond – or maybe before - its commercial and entertainment and 'heritage' one. (Adrienne Scullion, October 2007)

My 'song': John Cage 4'33". Walking into the Britannia I am always struck by the tensions between presence and absence. The space seems to demand performance but remains silent. It demands voices (chatter, performance...) but none are there. There is that expectation of a performance that is always thwarted. It is not just as if someone has turned down the volume, it is expectation coupled with emptiness, sadness. Amidst the paradoxical visual vitality of dilapidation, there is a distinct sense of something missing. Exactly what, I don't know - perhaps that is where the wonder lies. Perhaps it lies also partly in the fact that at moments, particularly of intense silence, the space evokes those voices, a babble, laughing... but maybe that's just me. The remnants in the shoeboxes in the context of the more 'conventional' display made me reflect upon the status of these remnants. To open the shoeboxes was to act out, to perform that discovery, to be a-historical and to go against the neat, compartmentalised, instantly understandable and satisfying "historical" narrative. Given that the layered history of the building is still present in the wooden beams and projection rooms, the installation, in a way, for me, disturbed the way in which we try very much to 'read', understand and pigeonhole chronologically. In subverting that understanding it raised questions about such sites and whether we do not actually do them a disservice through period restoration, through display boxes, through meta-narratives that tell some stories and silence others. For me, it highlighted the value of disruption, of discovery, of lessening narration in favour of imagination, of constructing our own stories about the place, of fiction but a very living fiction. I liked the not-knowingness of it all but that not knowingness coming from something that was very real. I don't think that the power of the fragment should be underestimated. Crucial to this was the context - the building and the surrounding display.

[...] the idea that it can/should exist as this space of creative discovery, of otherness, of edgyness, untouched by the regenerating forces that seem to prevail. I think this 'power' would only be enhanced if the rest of the outside were to be regenerated as will probably happen over the years. I do think that were the popular imagination revitalised, and that somehow the space could be re-invigorated through multiple (non-commercial?) uses then it could become quite a 'hub' for various communities. Just because societies perhaps don't operate in that way now, doesn't mean that they won't or can't and this is perhaps where we need to be more creative and daring in what is done.

Anyway, the over-riding thing for me was that such an intervention can make us critically reconsider both how we engage with the 'site' but also how we then re-tell the 'site', it made me think about whether that process of creative discovery and subversion can only work on an individual level or... It also acted as a catalyst for considering the role of the building in contemporary social, economic and cultural contexts.
(Vee Pollock, October 2007)

I think that the question that you raised at the outset about the spirit of the building rather than the bricks and mortar of the set piece and the very provocative contributions about the nature of interventions and 'regulations' was one that will exercise me for some time - especially in relation to Britannia. As for the exhibition itself - quite apart from the brilliance I think of the lighting of the windows - I thought that the internal works of the shoe boxes, the pianola and the estate agent adverts were beautifully conceived and executed, very clean and contemporary and fitted well into the very patina-ed space of the music hall.
(Liz Davidson, October 2007)

For me I suppose the greatest impact of *glimmers* was actually visiting the Panopticon - I've never been before. And I would definitely encourage other people to visit. I'm not sure what I expected so it was great to experience it first hand. I'm not sure why, but I think the volume surprised me. And also that I thought it would be higher up the stairs.
I think the key point was the ability of the place to generate new memories through contemporary work. I'd heard about the objects, but seeing them for real again brought home the history. I can't get beyond this idea though that we need new work to reinvigorate places and not to conserve the historical.
(Ben Spencer, October 2007)

The artworks certainly affected my perceptions of the building, although I had very few preconceptions it must be said, so it was a case of me learning about the building and its history over the course of the evening. I like [the] concept of the active museum - something which preserves the fabric and some of the astonishingly interesting deterioration, but something which also, in the true spirit of the place, delivers a hotch potch of entertainments to diverse audiences.

The fruit machine-style anagramising I thought was excellent. Very clever and engaging installation. I don't doubt that Joe Publics are intrigued by that and twig when the Panopticon comes in.

(Ken Neil, October 2007)

My preconceptions of the Britannia Panopticon were that it was an inaccessible, uninviting and decaying space, and that it was only very occasionally doing one-off, music hall-type entertainments. Someone had once partially described its interior to me, and I just got the impression that it was dank and inhospitable. *glimmers in limbo* radically changed my perceptions and preconceptions, as it actually facilitated my entry and access to the space, and on my first visit, pre-*Pianola Karaoke* night, I was thrilled to be given a bit of a guided tour and taken up above the stage area and into the old foyer. This had the effect of engaging my imagination and contemplating its previous incarnations and the memories the building held. Through this first encounter I found myself developing an affection for the place. This was cemented further by my experience of the *Pianola Karaoke*, which had the affect of breathing life into the space, at the same time as conjuring nostalgic memories through the performance of the songs to the pianola. The shoeboxes also promoted a connection with the place, by the contrast of original, 'found' objects and those of everyday, contemporary living. It provided a very tangible link with the past to the present. Finally, I stood for sometime after this event watching the projection of letters in the windows of the building and I was simply filled with a sense of wonder and excitement at the Britannia Panopticon's past significance and future potential for being a re-invented and vibrant, cultural and architectural find.

(Adrian Howells, October 2007)