

***Pianola Karaoke and other attractions: performing heterotopias in a ruined music hall.***

Concealed behind a crumbling façade, above a functioning, contemporary amusement arcade, in a building that sits on the cusp of Glasgow's regenerating Merchant City district and its deprived East End - lie the decaying remains of one of the UK's oldest surviving music halls. Established in 1859 as the Britannia Music Hall, the building is now known as the Britannia Panopticon, combining two of its previous titles.

Amid the ruins of this place of popular entertainment, a group of volunteers, operating as the Board and Friends of the Britannia Panopticon Trust, continue to mount - in the limited space which remains publicly accessible - an erratic and eccentric programme of performances, tours and exhibitions.

This regularly features their own amateur music hall re-enactments alongside a semi-permanent display of memorabilia, artefacts found in the building and assorted bric-a-brac.

Their presence is sanctioned by the building's owners, the Mitchell family, who operate the amusement arcade on its ground floor. Despite its official status as 'of special historic interest' (as designated by Historic Scotland, 2008) and its presence on Scotland's Buildings at Risk Register, no secured funding for the building's conservation and maintenance, or coherent plans for its future currently exist.

Read in this context, the Britannia Panopticon building exemplifies 'in-between-ness': between regeneration and decline, between past, present and future, between conservation and decay, between 'living' building and static monument, between material culture and cultural memory, between public and private...

It might also be considered as what Michel Foucault – in his much debated and contested, but highly influential text, 'Of Other Spaces', termed a 'heterotopia'.

A site which, 'is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' and which brings about 'a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the spaces in which we live'.

As I understand the term, in a heteroptic site, conflicting ideologies and utopian visions coexist, never to be resolved or to offer liberation from predominant power relations. So, in the Britannia Panopticon building, the Trust volunteers continue to peddle their rose-tinted version of music hall nostalgia above a gambling hall frequented by some of Glasgow's most underprivileged residents – while experimental musicians create ambient soundscapes in response to the building's atmospherically decomposing fabric.

In this paper, I would like to describe and comment on the context, realisation and reception of a suite of site-responsive artworks – or interventions - which I made at the Britannia Panopticon building from 18 to 27 October, 2007.

The work was part of a three-year research project, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, which explored the potential of site-orientated practice to critique and shape conceptions and perceptions of the built environment.

Using sound, projected imagery and performance, the interventions were intended to explore the *productive* in-between-ness of the site – its potential to resist drives to fix or determine readings and uses of the built environment.

They were intended to invigorate the site, reinforcing and promoting its heterotopic qualities – its potential to allow us to juxtapose alternative images, experiences and interpretations of our pasts and presents, and, perhaps, to imagine our futures.

## **The interventions**

I made four pieces of work in the building, titled: *pianola karaoke*, *façade fruit machine*, *shoe box archive* and *real estate?* The four interventions, which took place simultaneously, varied significantly in form and the media they employed. My intention was to mirror and emphasise the multivalency of the site by delivering what art critic Ken Neil described as ‘a hotch potch of entertainments to diverse audiences’.

### ***pianola karaoke***

For *pianola karaoke* I invited eleven people to choose the song that they would like to sing in the old music hall, inspired by their personal responses to the building.

Specially commissioned accompaniments to the songs were converted into paper rolls for the Britannia Panopticon’s pianola, and were performed live, by the song-choosers, on the evening of 17 October. Recorded versions, accompanied by projections of scrolling lyrics, played on-site throughout the following week.

Song choices ranged from Kate Bush’s *Wuthering Heights* to traditional ballad *Unfortunate Rake*. The singers’ reasons for making their choices – their responses to the context of the crumbling music hall, with its eccentric assortment of artefacts and occupants – were equally varied. They reinforced

the site's definition as a space that connects with and reflects on other spaces, which both contains and points to a multiplicity of other sites - that is open to numerous, competing interpretations.

For instance, Janis F. Murray, choir mistress of The Parsonage Choir (who sang the song) said that she was surprised by the overwhelming sense of sadness she felt on entering the Britannia Panopticon. She chose the Rolling Stones' song, *As Tears Go By* as she said it made her think about 'being old and disenfranchised [...] being displaced because of age'.

In contrast, Ella Finer chose The Velvet Underground song *After Hours* because, she said, 'it *celebrates* the enclosed and dark nature of the space rather than highlighting it as a ghostly or sad place'.

Aileen Campbell's choice, *Mama's Opry*, written by country singer Iris Dement, recalls the musician's memory of her mother singing at home and her sense of how this imaginatively transformed the domestic space of their house into a public performance arena - *The Grand Old Opry*.

Ross Sinclair chose *Wan Light*, written by Glasgow post-punk band, Orange Juice. He said, of his choice: 'The words seemed to suggest this idea of the music hall being this other place. The first line [of the song] is "There is a place which no-one has seen where it's still possible to dream" [...] it's about how to make this space that could be another kind of space - even for a moment'.

While the variety of the singers' responses - the range of songs chosen - supported its heterotopic characteristics, the evening of the live performance was, perhaps, less effective in promoting the site's multivalency.

On one level, the performance was an overwhelming success. There was a capacity audience whose responses were almost exclusively complimentary. Invited to comment on the event, audience members used words such as: 'life affirming', 'sociable', 'memorable', 'fabulous', 'informal' and 'intimate'. Singers, too, were unconditionally positive. Stevie Jackson made a typical observation, saying: 'people reached out to it and were entertained and fulfilled by it, you could totally feel it'.

The event appeared to induce a sense of community and shared experience amongst audience and performers - a warm, supportive atmosphere that was described as 'uplifting' and 'moving'.

Pleasurable as it was to receive such positive feedback, I did feel an unease that this perceived moment of unity, of shared celebration and sentiment - among what was, predominantly, a white, middle-class and 'arty' contingent - perhaps functioned to erase difference, ignoring exclusions and opposing voices, rather than to promote the juxtaposition of alternative readings and experiences of the site.

Taken in isolation, the live event could be read as a failure in engendering the productive disjunctures characterised by Foucault's notion of heterotopia: a site 'in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted'.

However, considered as one element in a suite of interventions, and an element that was transitory and fleeting - it could be argued that the momentary semblance of unity it induced reflected back on the site revealing itself as a utopian illusion and highlighting the messy realities of the building. Departing visitors may have been heard to comment 'I think we'll always remember this as a great Glasgow night', but they did so as they walked past the punters in the amusement arcade, past discarded syringes at the side-lane exit and past the East End's own crowded karaoke bars.

## ***shoe box archive***

In a second intervention, I installed 600 shoeboxes in the auditorium of the music hall.

The boxes referred to one of the building's previous roles as a shoe warehouse, and were inspired by the recollection – quite possibly a false memory – of my first visit to the space, and the piles of boxes I 'remember' filling the stalls area.

In 150 of the shoeboxes, I placed one of the many artefacts that have been excavated from under the floorboards of the Britannia Panopticon. This everyday detritus from the 1860s – 1930s: ticket stubs and spent matches, a whelk shell and a baby's dummy; lay discarded for decades. Now, re-claimed, the status of the detritus oscillates between value and worthlessness, between repository for cultural memory and a load of old rubbish.

Visitors were encouraged to interact with the boxes - to rummage through them, discovering what they contained and connecting with the objects in an intimate, personal, tactile and imaginative way – as a counterpoint to the labelled artefacts on display under glass in the Britannia Panopticon's permanent exhibition.

As one visitor observed of their experience: 'It's like finding the lost items yourself'.

In the remaining 450 empty boxes labels fixed in their bases invited visitors to 'please leave something in the box'.

Over the duration of the intervention, more than 300 items were left in the empty boxes by visitor-participants.

Some could be read as setting up correspondences with the 'historical' objects – for example, a set of headphones for an MP3 player was left beside a programme for the music hall. Others hinted at more freely associative responses from their donors: a ticket from the national museum in Istanbul and a tiny architectural scale model of a human figure were among the items placed in the boxes. While others still seemed simply to be examples of the mundane junk that we carry around in our pockets – loose change, till receipts, paper clips...

Overall, the accumulated artefacts, together with visitors' comments about the installation, suggested that it had brought about what Nigel Thrift describes as an extension of 'the imagination into matter' in his writing on 'the new materiality'.

The intervention appears to have encouraged visitor-participants to engage with the objects as carriers of interwoven, yet irreconcilable cultural memories, to make imaginative associations and connections. And, perhaps, to begin to comprehend the world as, in Thrift's words: 'a heap of highly significant fragments' 'contingent and complex, a space for opportunities and events'.

One visitor remarked: 'It reminded me that every person who visits leaves something behind, takes away or experiences something different.'

While art historian Vee Pollock wrote of the piece:

'Given that the layered history of the building is still present in the wooden beams and projection room, the installation, for me, disturbed the way in which we try to "read", understand and pigeon-hole chronologically. [...] It raised questions about such sites and whether we do not actually do them a dis-service 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.'

The remaining two interventions interacted with the exterior of the building. They sought to engage with audiences additional to those who chose to enter the building, and to relate the building to its ever-changing urban context.

### ***façade fruit machine***

In *façade fruit machine* an animated sequence was projected in the windows of the inaccessible second floor of the building, making reference to signage on the façade from the past 150 years of its existence, and to its current identity as an amusement arcade.

Letters spun like the drums of a coin-operated fruit machine, sometimes, momentarily, resolving into words that pointed to the building's former roles as music hall, tailors' warehouse, waxworks and cinema.

The work was intended to offer fleeting traces of the building's multiple, fluid identities – past and present – the restless cyclical movement of the letters suggesting its perpetual in-between-ness. By animating the normally dark and empty upper floors of the building, my intention was to encourage spectators to speculate on its uses and the events it might have witnessed – to teasingly invite them to imagine a space from which they were excluded.

To a considerable extent, the audience for this intervention did not overlap with that which experienced *pianola karaoke* and *shoebox archive*. Many of

the people who came to the opening event, or who visited the exhibition during the following week, did not notice the exterior projection (even although it was listed on the information sheet they were given on entry).

Those who did commented on how the work had altered their readings of the building.

As one observer put it: 'the light work on the exterior of the building [...] made me look up and therefore look at more than the street level. It forced me to have a look at the building as a built object that had a role in the cityscape beyond – or maybe before - its commercial, entertainment and "heritage" one'.

The most concentrated audience for the intervention, and one on whose conversations it was easy for me to eavesdrop inconspicuously, was provided by waiting passengers at the bus stop opposite to the Britannia Panopticon building.

Remarks overheard at the bus stop revealed that a relatively small number of spectators had linked the animation's rotating letters with the building's function as an amusement arcade and that an even smaller group – who clearly had prior knowledge of the site – had recognised some of the building's former titles in the animation. (The words Britannia, Panopticon and the local nickname for the music hall, 'pots and pans', were all spelt out). The majority of viewers, however, appeared to remain unaware of the animation's relationship to the site's commercial, heritage and entertainment identities.

Many of the comments and much speculation about the work was concerned with its purpose – leading some spectators to discuss, as I'd hoped, what was housed inside the ostensibly empty upper floors of the building.

Initial responses tended to assume that the animation was some kind of advertisement. But then, when the spinning letters settled into an apparently meaningless string of words – or random letters – this assumption appeared to be forgotten, with several spectators entering into the game of ‘find the hidden word’ – some even reluctant to leave it behind when their buses arrived.

This willingness to enter into a playful engagement with the piece – to seemingly abandon assumptions that it must have a, probably commercial, purpose – appeared to suggest that it had succeeded in disrupting, albeit momentarily, the dominant function of the city centre shopping street.

In many ways, the general failure of spectators to recognise the relationship between the projected words and the building’s histories functioned to open up the site’s multiple possibilities, rather than as the exercise in naming, labelling and categorising it might have become. Instead, spectators entered into a performance with the site, participating in a word game with no discernable rules, played out on the city street.

### ***real estate?***

In the final piece, *real estate?* photographs of details of the building’s interior – many of inaccessible, decaying corners - were mounted in the shop front window of the amusement arcade, mimicking the displays in estate agents’ windows.

The photographs themselves were fragmentary images, displayed at disorientating angles and captioned with text lifted from house vendors’ schedules.

They were installed to form a permeable layer through which the two existing window displays – the Britannia Panopticon Trust’s music hall memorabilia and Mitchell’s Amusement Arcade’s neon advertising signage - could be glimpsed.

The intervention was intended to suggest the tangle of overlapping interests and investments bound up in the site as it sits between restoration and ruin, where the slick new patina of regenerating Glasgow rubs against the impoverishment of the post-industrial city.

### **Concluding remarks**

Based on observation of visitors and participants, and comments collected through questionnaires and structured discussions, the work appears to have been successful in encouraging visitors from diverse backgrounds to engage with, and appreciate, the building as a site of over-lapping, yet incompatible, narratives. While a small minority of visitors expressed a wish to see the site, as they put it, ‘returned to its former glory’, the majority of comments celebrated its lack of resolution and regulation – its in-between-ness.

Typical responses included: ‘[the artworks] made me think whether we should restore buildings – I feel so much power and feeling would be lost by restoring this wonderful space’ and ‘the interventions set up a lens through which we can see that this is an impossible space to capture and restore. It’s quintessence is irregularity’.

The project appeared to identify a desire, even a need, to experience sites which encompass what Daniel Defert, writing about Foucault’s heterotopias, described as ‘ruptures in ordinary life, imaginary realms, polyphonic representations’.

Heterotopias don't promise solutions. They can incorporate, and even enact, utopian visions – as unattainable aspirations that reflect back on untidy, uncomfortable, realities – but their role is, as Foucault states, to 'illuminate a passage for our imagination'.

Town planners, conservationists and city officials may be obliged to find an answer to the question: 'what will we do with this crumbling, unregulated, unsustainable building?' But performative practices - fluid and ephemeral - have the potential to invite the continual, restless, re-writing of a site's possibilities – to provide, in the words of Orange Juice, 'a place [...] where it's still possible to dream'.

## References

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**Minty Donald**