

Uncommon Building: collective assemblage of a speculative archive

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In the City of Birmingham, UK, in 2017, Eastside Projects commenced preparatory work on a structure intended to provide prototype spaces for artists to live and work in. 'Uncommon Building: Collective Assemblage of A Speculative Archive', convened together with Theatrum Mundi, set out to imagine that structure in the form of a future memory. Guided by questions designed to invite creative conjecture as to its origins, life, shape, and fate — alongside information suggesting that the structure was intended to be 'light', 'medium-term', 'bespoke', and 'nomadic' — we commenced a collective assemblage of the Artists House from the perspective of a future time and future place.

The workshop was, in effect, a collaborative exercise in speculative fiction: we set out to creatively document a building that does not yet exist, as if it did. In response to the questions provided, contributions included the following: the building's smell, bottled; an unreadable artefact made in the structure; reflections on staircases and the lifespan of the structure's secrets; the voice of the building; a rendering showing its relationship to pre-existing buildings in Birmingham; a marketing proposal. The presentation of these, and others, led to discussion of topics such as these

House and Home

Amongst our guiding questions was the question of who called the building home. We also asked whether the building was homely. These questions led to a discussion of identity and belonging in relationship to the Artists House as a structure of residence or residing. It was pointed out that to ask who called Artists House 'home' was also to pose the question of who can or who gets to call themselves as artist. Did residing there — whatever your occupation or trajectory — effectively make you an artist? How far and in what ways does this extend or constrain the question of what or who an artist is? What is the relationship between art and residency more broadly? And what is the relationship between artistic practice and domesticity? What was the home of the structure — Birmingham? Or something less tangible?

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Tone and Texture

We smelt the bottled smell of the structure and thought about its texture in relation to other senses (ocular, sonic). We confronted the various discourses surrounding the structure and seeking to articulate it (economic, financial, political, ethical) and discussed the question of tone in connection with representation.

Affordance and Form

Our conversations often turned on the relationship between prescription and flexibility in relation to familiar structural forms. What is the relationship between regulation and convention or between rules and directives and practices and habits? How is and was the use of the building determined? What if a staircase was stretched, elongated, installed horizontally or in reverse – what if a familiar form was in other words defamiliarised? What effect would this have had on pace and passage and on the structure's temporality? To an extent this was also a question of affordances, in the sense of an object or environment's possible actions, dormant or otherwise. What actions are afforded by a form — what actions does a form afford, or deny, or constrain? Here Caroline Levine's work on form comes to mind:

“Affordance is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs. Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. [] Let's now use affordances to think about form. What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet capable of doing?”
Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015)

Choreography

Rhythm and movement were recurring subjects of conversation throughout the workshop. The staircase was again a focal point. We heard a quotation from Steen Eiler Rasmussen detailing how the design of the Spanish Steps in Rome:

Seems to have been based on an old-fashioned, very ceremonial dance — the Polonaise — in which the dancers advance four by four in a straight line and then separate, two going to the right and two to the left; they turn, turn again, curtsy, meet again on the large landing, advance together, separate once more to left and right, and finally meet again at the topmost terrace where they turn to face the view and see Rome lying at their feet.” Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (1959)

We discussed patterns of circulation as a form of choreography and thought about the ways in which the structure moved beyond itself — in and by means of bodies, for example, or as a network, or as a patterning in time and space as opposed to something solid. What if the structure was itself a kind of choreography?

Loss and Memory

Loss came up constantly in our discussions. Is it possible to think of the structure as being as much responsive to loss or

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forgetfulness as to memory? Is forgetfulness actually a form of possibility? Does forgetfulness afford possibility and therefore creativity? How does a structure remember itself? How is a structure remembered? We talked about structural inscriptions (textual and otherwise) as a sort of manual (what if we imagined a set of variations on “push” and “pull”, for example), and we discussed the layering of material and virtual realities and the ways in which this might project — both in time and in space — flexibility into a structure. Could the Artists House be edited? We talked about questions of readability, which returned us to the idea of choreography as a way of reading the building, as well as to the idea of the gestural. We talked about the building gesturing beyond itself — or giving a sense of spatial invitation. We also thought about obsolescence, both the possible obsolescence of objects made within the Artists House, and the obsolescence of its secrets. We imagined the status and nature of the structure’s secrets at points in an extended timeline: whereas during the time of its inhabitation a secret could consist of a treasure hidden behind brickwork, far into the distant future, in a geological landscape now unimaginable, even the structure’s purpose would be a secret.

