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Residual ambiances – An Illustration of Urban Heritage as a Sentient Experience

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Abstract. *Our urban heritage incorporates many instances of abandoned buildings awaiting rescue, where residual fragments of past occupancies provide a stage for an immersive journey into the ambiance of the interior across past and present thresholds. Accordingly, this project illustrates a unique perceptual encounter between the abandoned interior of Poplar Baths in London and the author, while subsequently, the emotive affect of the sentient experience is synthesised into a performed scenographic narrative. The interest of the project lies in its ability to articulate how sentient experiences activate a deep empathetic connection between body and space in the context of urban heritage.*

Keywords: *urban heritage, sentient, experience, emotion, body, space*

Residual Ambiances

‘All buildings are, more or less, psychological entities - projections, even. They are expressions of ideas, skeletons on which we hang notions of self, society, status, heritage, value ... Buildings are not merely *there*, as coordinates of space and time; buildings live most powerfully in the mind and we constantly process them, assimilate and digest them, reimagine them’ (Littlefield, 2007).

Introduction

Littlefield tells us that buildings are much more than a composition of construction materials, volumes and forms. He highlights the significance of the interdependence between body and space, the way we project ourselves onto the spaces we occupy and their affective influence on the mind. Thus, perceptions emerge in the context of body-space encounters. Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1945) and Professor of Philosophy Morris (2004) draw attention to the sentient nature of bodily perceptions. They also emphasise the dynamic nature of perceptions as they arise ‘within movement that crosses body and world’ (Morris, 2004). Accordingly, as we move through space, we are in constant dialogue with our environment and this dialogue is undeniably sentient. Our experience of space is governed by sensory bodily engagements, and, as the feeling of a building unravels itself to the sentient body, our experiences are shaped, at least in part, by the subjective world. Indeed, we learn less about what spaces mean to us when they are observed from a purely objective perspective. We may know construction materials, we may be familiar with the interior layout. Although this information is useful, it lacks the meaningful dimension that arises from perceptions. It doesn’t tell us what it feels like to be in

the space or what the space may reveal about itself. 'Buildings *speak* - and on topics which can readily be discerned. They speak of democracy or aristocracy, openness or arrogance, welcome or threat, a sympathy for the future or a hankering for the past' (de Botton, 2006). In order to *hear* buildings we must reach out through the more complex world of subjectivity and actively immerse ourselves into their ambiance, into the richness of perceptual narratives associated with experiences, emotions and imagination. Accordingly, this project is presented as a sentient journey that articulates perceptions of subjective experiences, and invites a deep emotional engagement with the ambiance of urban heritage across past and present thresholds.

Project Site

Poplar Baths is located on East India Dock Road in the Borough of Tower Hamlets, London. The site of public baths since 1852, the current building dates from 1933. It was used as a swimming pool, public baths and vapour baths, and transformed into a theatre, dance hall, cinema and exhibition hall in Winter when the main pool was flooded over. The building sustained substantial bomb damage during World War II and remained closed until 1947. Following extensive repairs it reopened to renewed popularity, however, lack of funding combined with changes in the area and leisure pursuits resulted in the facilities permanently closing in 1988.



Figure 1. View of the building from East India Dock Road

The abandoned building fell into disrepair, its original interior badly damaged through a combination of neglect and human intrusions. Considered at risk, it was listed as Grade II by English Heritage in 2001¹ while more recently, it was announced that it would be restored into a leisure complex. Therefore, a site visit, initiated by the course team of the MA Interior Design at the University of Westminster in London, was an opportunity to experience the building in its abandoned condition before it was transformed. The visit was conducted with only limited previous knowledge of the building and its history in order to maintain a spontaneous agency between body and space, and to experience a genuine emotional response to its

1. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1334939>

ambiance. Therefore, the site visit became a conduit for a sentient enquiry into the dynamic atmospheric interplay between body, space and time.

At first glance, the interior presents itself to the objective mind as a succession of rooms and corridors with blistering paint, debris of glass and fallen plaster, dirt, dust and rusted metal. It has clearly been neglected, even abused, as some of the damage and graffiti would suggest, for a number of years. Dreary peeling wallpaper and cheap imitation wood laminates show that previous attempts at renovation haven't been kind to the interior either. Yet, amongst the decay and dirt, or possibly because of it, the sensitivity of the mind to the pervasive ambiance seems to intensify. Details present themselves. The building's remaining original Art Deco features - an elegant bevelled ceiling, slate blue tiles, black and chrome edging, mosaic floor tiles - are progressively revealed as the body moves through the interior, and it becomes possible to imagine what it must have been like in its heyday. In imagination, the interior becomes imbued with diffused notions of past occupancies - excited groups of children pouring through the entrance, people enjoying a few moments of restorative care in the vapour baths, joyful couples eager to warm up on the dance floor during the cold winter evenings. Suddenly, a dimly lit passage opens up onto a large rectangular volume framed by a series of striking hyperbolic arches flanked by cascading windows. This unexpected revelation used to be the main swimming pool.



Figure 2. View of the abandoned swimming pool

In sharp contrast to the dark and dusty corridors, it appears majestic and serene, bathed in soothing sunlight. Even decay has its own kind of beauty. Walking at the bottom of a swimming pool feels odd and it's almost as if one can imagine ghost like figures of swimmers moving through the water. The temporality of the situation, the residual qualities that emanate from the space and its features, induce sensory perceptions that resonate across space and time as imagination reaches into the depth of consciousness.

Sentient Experience

As residues of the past embodied by architectural features, objects, dust and air, merge with present conditions, the subjective world fluctuates across space and time. Diffused reflections, akin to a form of atmospheric resonance, an echo through space and, in this instance, also time, emanate from the perceived ambiance of the interior. We can therefore consider that the interior retains traces from its previous occupants. 'All inhabited spaces become loaded with biological debris - the dust of flaking skin, the hair, the exhaled air, the humidity, heat and bodily fluids that get left behind by generations of occupants can only combine to form a peculiarly human trace. And this is a trace, one which fades gently over time, that is surely detectable by others from the species' (Littlefield, 2007). The ensuing residual ambiances facilitate the formation of mental images of the building's past, not fantasies but imagined reconstructions, as the mind becomes emotionally connected to the building. Morris (2004) also explains that '[t]he dynamics of perception [...] are intrinsic to the situation of perception, and can differ across individuals, habits and social settings', which suggests that the outcome of the sentient experience is dependent on the mind's own recollections and subjectivity. 'A building's voice can be very potent, but it is ultimately the inner voice you are hearing - your own voice' (Tavenor, 2007 cited in Littlefield, 2007). Experiencing the ambiance of a building is therefore unique to the person, event and time. Hence, the rationale of Malpas (1999) on the multiplicity of narratives also applies here, not only to experiences but also emotions, and the sentient narrative structure recorded in this project is only one possible variation.

So far in the journey, the ambiance that emanated from the decay and neglect in the abandoned interior provoked a feeling of relative despondency. This was however followed by a feeling of optimism, brought about by the sudden revelation of the main swimming pool. The next episode in the sentient journey illustrates further layers of emotional encounters with the space. The site visit was organised with a group of students and, after venturing into the depth the building, I suddenly realised that I was alone. I quickly retraced my steps and came across a set of stairs, and to my left, a badly damaged corridor entirely covered with a dark, seemingly bottomless, pool of water. Not a space I wanted to explore though I didn't know which way to go to rejoin the group. The uncertainty of the situation was temporarily alleviated when I heard the voices of what I assumed to be the people I came with. However, this feeling was quickly followed by a sense of dread when I realised that the voices were irrationally reverberating across the tiled surfaces of the staircase and, more worryingly, corridor. They seemed to be coming from different directions all at once. I felt truly lost and sensed a chill in the building's ambiance. Were those the voices of the group or was the building playing tricks on me? Then, clarity abruptly returned. With a sense of relief, I was able to locate the source of the voices with absolute certainty.

Interestingly, and although the event only lasted for a brief moment, with this ambiguous and unsettling experience came the realisation that the building itself was lost. The juxtaposition of residual ambiances with the reality of the abandonment and decay created a displacement in the structure of the perceptual narratives. In consciousness, the displacement of the sentient experience through time connected present and past, real and imaginary. Sartre (1948) tell us that '[t]he two worlds, real and imaginary, are composed of the same objects, only the

grouping and interpretations of these objects varies. What defines the imaginary world and also the world of the real is an attitude to consciousness' (cited in Pallasmaa, 2011). It is therefore in consciousness that the affect of residual ambiances occurred. Space and body became intertwined through perceptual narratives and corresponding emotional projections. In this instance, the experiences that occurred during the site visit instilled an empathetic connection towards the interior and, as empathy 'is only possible on the assumption that we already grasp the existence of those with whom we empathise' (Malpas, 1999), an ability to perceive through the building itself.

Scenography

Following the visit, the emotional interplay between body, space and time was made into a one minute film. Set in a studio, the performance titled 'Lost Times - Residual Ambiances'² was initially mapped across a series of diagrammatic drawings to illustrate the sequence and tempo of movement.



Figure 3. Slides from the performance

The performer wore an original 1930's woman's dinner jacket with a badly damaged lining as an image of the once beautiful but decaying interior. Thus the performer became the building. The interior of the present was represented by a projection of one of the rooms on the wall of the studio and the interior of the past by a chair covered with a white sheet. The chair suggests waiting while the sheet eliminates traces of any former identity. The performer, sitting on the chair, slowly stands up and starts walking aimlessly across the room. The building is lost, damaged, neglected. The mood is downcast. Suddenly, the sound of voices permeates the interior, echoing across its surfaces, and, in hope, the performer tries to locate its source, twisting and turning frantically across the room. The sound stops abruptly and the performer slows down. The mood shifts back to downcast. The scenography is repeated across four recurring sequences to suggest the passage of time while in the film, images of the damaged interior fade in and out at irregular intervals to intensify the feeling of uncertainty generated by fluctuations in atmospheric resonance. Finally, the performer returns to a sitting position to remind us that the building is still waiting.

2. <https://vimeo.com/161299058>

Conclusion

This project tells a story. The story of a perceptual journey framed as a sentient and emotional encounter between the abandoned interior of Poplar Baths and the author. It is personal and subjective, an artistic rendition of an event. Nonetheless, as the journey through the interior progressively reveals an environment that resonates with residues of its past, the sentient experience highlights the interdependence between body and space, subject and object, as it manifests itself in consciousness and, in the convergent ambiances of the imagined and the real, produces a deep emotional engagement. These events highlight the significant potency of a building's ambiance in the context of urban heritage, and points to possibilities for considering 'the perceived space as we experience it before objectifying it' (Morris, 2004), an interesting proposition when contemplating building transformations. Hence, as a complement to the traditional *objective* site visit, it is worth taking time to also explore a building from the perspective of subjective encounters, opening the mind to sentient narratives perceived through residual ambiances. Time cannot stand still and transformations are often much needed, however, it is pertinent to retain a degree of sensitivity to the original ambiance of a building in order to nurture interrelated dynamics between body and space, and enrich the subjective experiences of future occupants.

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