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Good morning. I was asked to make a presentation here as a consequence of co-writing, with Saskia Lewis, the book *Architectural Voices*; listening to old buildings. Since that invitation, my circumstances have changed. I am now a senior lecturer in the Department of Planning and Architecture at the University of the West of England, Bristol. This change of circumstances does not in any way change my agenda; indeed, it has allowed me to focus much more deeply on some of the issues explored within the book. Some of you may know the book – for those who don't, or for those who have only a sketchy impression of its contents, the underlying thesis was this:

That buildings, indeed all built spaces, live just as powerfully in the mind and the imagination than they do as physical artefacts – perhaps more so; that the significance of buildings lies not in their fabric and spatial coordinates but in the meanings we attach to them; that human beings have an extraordinary ability to attach meaning, and value, to ordinary matter – indeed, we animate matter; and that experiencing space is a process of some sort of conversation between building and inhabitant, in that the qualities of spaces trigger responses within individuals, while individuals simultaneously project their own values onto their surroundings. In this respect, the importance of symbol, association, metaphor and narrative cannot be underestimated. Buildings and other constructed spaces – even those built of mere stone and clay – become revered, protected, symbolic, sacred, destroyed. By understanding our relationships with buildings we learn much about ourselves.

In *Architectural Voices* Saskia and I posed a series of simple – but metaphorical – questions: if a building could speak, what would it say? What would it sound like? Would it be worth listening to? This interconnection of building and language, and the notion that perceiving and experiencing a building is one of negotiating the relationships between our internalised selves and the contexts in which we find ourselves, is something I am currently exploring at the Roman baths in Bath. In particular, I am interested in the interpretation and use of the words “authenticity” and “heritage”, and the role that narrative can play in positioning a set of spaces within the framework of those two words. I would like to add a further pair of words to the mix – strange and estranged. If a narrative is to be found for the spaces I am about to describe, then strange, and estranged in particular, are proving to be rather useful.

What is a strange space? And what, indeed, is an estranged one? These vaults, out of sight and little known, are barely-used, semi-neglected spaces that lie literally on the other side of the wall which defines the edge of the principal space within this world heritage site. Located along the southern edge of the baths, beneath York Street, the spaces contained within the vaults provided, during the Roman period, external arcades with some minor internal bathing facilities at their western end. The ground contained within these spaces has always played some sort of ancillary, back-of-house role.

These became, like the rest of the spa complex, buried over the passage of time. There is evidence of medieval or Georgian stonework within the spaces, built as basement-level structures, but the main structural elements date from the 1890s, after a period of excavation

and the construction of a new building, in Classical language, to frame the recently excavated Great Bath. Curiously, the zone within the vaults, although containing Roman remains – the foundations of walls, evidence of a steam room, and, most intriguingly, the base of a doorway – never formed part of the Victorian display of the Roman estate. Perhaps this was due to the need to reinstate York Street, while the spaces created by the vaults which run beneath that Street served as useful storage for miscellaneous Roman stonework, much of which lies where it was placed more than a century ago.

Significantly, these largely Romano/Georgian/Victorian spaces are likely to be redeveloped within the coming 18-24 months. This research project aims to explore the poetic and spatial potential of the vaults, searching for (or conjuring up) meaning hidden within their fabric, and looking for narratives which can provide a more complete understanding of them. Hidden away, uncurated and uncatalogued, can these vaults be exploited as spaces of value – spaces worth experiencing for their own sake? Indeed, do the vaults embody an “authenticity” lacking in the main heritage space?

This project, as yet unfunded, is being undertaken by staff from three universities (myself and Thom Gorst from UWE), Ken Wilder from Chelsea College of Art & Design and Mathew Emmett from the University of Plymouth. Collectively, the team has been granted the status of “artists in residence” for the duration of 2010. The original intention was to search for, and study, spaces that lie outside normal architectural experience – that is, strange space. The use of the word “strange”, however, begged a number of questions. Does the quality of the strange reside in the space itself, or in the mind of the person experiencing it? Does a space become less strange the more one visits it? How is strangeness culturally defined? Indeed, can spaces be curated in order that they become strange? Encountering the vaults at the Roman baths not only emphasised the pertinence and difficulty of these questions, but offered up the word “estranged”. The line of enquiry suggested by this new word focuses not so much on the vaults themselves but on the relationship between the vaults and the public spaces adjacent to them.

To use a literary analogy, the spatial relationship can be compared to the main house and the attic in *Jane Eyre* – the former a place of domesticity and comfort, the latter a closed world of darkness, fear and captivity. Importantly, the word estranged does not suggest that there is no relationship – rather that the relationship is of a very particular type. Once *Jane Eyre* becomes aware of the secret of the attic, the main body of the house becomes altered. The same is true of the Roman Baths; once one becomes cognizant of the presence of the “other”, a relationship is established which alters one’s experience of the baths. The research project is an examination of how this relationship works, and how the presence, or even resonance, of the one space affects the other.

A fascinating essay written by US academic Edward Bruner in 1994 focused on issues of authenticity in New Salem, Illinois. New Salem was a village in which Abraham Lincoln lived as a young man for six years in the 1830s. However, New Salem had a life of only a single decade, and it was abandoned in 1839; indeed, by the time Lincoln had become a national hero there was barely any trace of New Salem at all. Around 1900 a range of interest groups decided to begin the process of recreating the village where, it was considered, Lincoln spent his formative years, and New Salem was reconstructed as a best guess around

the time of the First World war. In the 1930s this recreation was pulled down and recreated along other lines. That re-recreation survives today, and stands as an exemplar of the “authentic reproduction”. So what is the role of authenticity at New Salem? To make the best use of original artefacts? No. To provide a facsimile of the original village, in such exactness that Abraham Lincoln himself would be fooled into thinking it was the genuine article? Absolutely not; New Salem is also a place of restaurants, gift shops, security systems, guttering, electricity, modern sanitation and forest (where once trees would have been cut for timber and fuel trees now stand as lush parkland). Is it a place where today’s visitors are provided with a credible experience of what they imagine an 1830s village to have been like? That is more to the point. New Salem is a self-conscious creation, administered by authorities dedicated to the expression of a narrow set of ideas, which reinforces American myth while providing a lense through which visitors can view history and its relationship to the present. New Salem is not the original and authentic settlement from the 1830s, but if the village had survived it would no doubt have adapted to its times and grafted onto itself the improvements which became available in the 20th century. Authenticity, argues Bruner, is “a struggle”, but he further argues that New Salem continues to offer what can be described as “an authentic experience”.

Bruner writes: “There are many New Salems. Tourists construct a past that is meaningful to them and that relates to their lives and experiences, and this is the way that meanings are constructed at historic sites . . . The particular pasts that tourists create/imagine at historic sites may never have existed. But historic sites like New Salem do provide visitors with the raw material (experiences) to construct a sense of identity, meaning, attachment and stability.”

Parallels between New Salem and the Roman baths are not terribly obvious, and I do have a number of reservations with Bruner’s position. If buildings live powerfully in the mind, as I said earlier, how do we best respond to recreations of long-lost buildings – recreations which are programmed to induce particular emotional responses, not least of which are feelings of national identity and cultural rootedness? Perhaps a monument is more suited to the task. I would argue that if, in the absence of buildings and built space, all that is left is meaning, those original buildings ought to be left unreconstructed, rather than recreated with a view to reinforcing messages that the lost buildings were supposed to have generated in the first place. Authenticity should not be such a struggle that it results in paradox.

Parallels between Roman baths and New Salem do begin to arise, however, when one considers the layers of history present within Bath itself. The space contained within the 19th century, neo-Classical frame for the Great Bath, which perhaps some tourists mistake for a Roman original, contrasts with the vaults in which I and my research colleagues are looking at so closely. Here, there is no recreation or reconstruction for the purposes of heritage, identity, myth-making or tourism; nor, because of the back-of-house, service nature of these spaces, has there ever been any attempt to disguise contemporary interventions. Threaded by pipework in every state of condition, these spaces have been roughly handled and treated unsympathetically. Electrical wiring and other evidence of the modern era has been installed (often crudely) with a premium on maintenance rather than respect for anything so far as heritage. Located beyond the boundary of the Heritage zone, the vaults represent a spatial “other”, a territory where the curatorial and conservational values of the Roman Baths

do not apply – even though they occupy the same overall estate and contain Roman relics and archeology. They are, however, authentic in the sense that they are unmediated by a tourist/heritage agenda; they are simply there, embodying something of the architectural uncanny described by theorist Anthony Vidler as “a distancing from reality forced by reality” or “the familiar turned strange”.

My reading of the Roman baths is that the difference between the public, curated, tourist zone of the baths and the back-of-house, uncurated and uncatalogued zone of the York Street vaults is also one of heritage and authenticity – in that heritage lies on one side of the wall (the side the tourist occupies) and authenticity lies on the other. This is not to say the baths themselves are inauthentic – the spaces are, of course, dependent upon original artefacts from the Roman age. But they are presented for the tourist gaze, and the framing and curation mediates between the archaeology and the tourist experience of it. Heritage is at work here, in that the baths are packaged and marketed as a commodity. The overwhelming purpose of this zone is to privilege and present what is Roman – anything else is managed to best serve those original Ancient baths.

The York Street vaults do not lie within the realm of heritage. Everything within them can be said to be original, in that nothing is disguised or apologetic. Here, the Roman is not privileged over other eras. Every age takes its place matter-of-factly and the vaults become a candid, unmediated record of human occupation. Within the vaults no historic hierarchy exists and the result, especially when one visits for the first time, is one of shock and dislocation. Here, everything is legitimate and the selective powers of the authorities have barely begun to get to work.

Site managers are now, however, asking themselves how the tourist zone can extend into at least some of these spaces. They have engaged the services of a specialist design consultancy which has yet, to my knowledge, not submitted a formal proposal. This is not the first time designers have been commissioned to examine the potential of the vaults – a previous study suggested converting the east and west ranges of these spaces into interpretation areas, flanking a central “Roman IT café”. Site managers have already, in preparation for some sort of intervention or rehabilitation of these spaces, ordered that certain recent, make-shift interventions be removed or re-routed. The suggestion has already been made that floor areas be concrete covered in order to remove trip hazards and create a more useable and stable surface.

The starting point for myself and my research colleagues is based on a number of fundamental assumptions:

- to treat everything as legitimate, therefore averting (or at least delaying) the need to make judgements concerning authenticity;
- to attempt to unravel a narrative for the site based on what we find, rather than preconception;
- to be slow in reaching judgement; and lastly,
- to consider the space as a site of continual and authentic occupation.

Close examination of the vaults, and much time spent sitting quietly within them, reveals that the perimeter is not, in fact, an impenetrable barrier; rather, it can be imagined as a semi-permeable membrane through which matter passes from without to within. Daylight penetrates through small apertures, turning the vaults (when in darkness) into a camera obscura – images from the Great Bath are captured by the vaults, inverted and projected onto stone walls. Every visitor who passes along the north side of the Great Bath, unknowingly, appears within these vaults as a faint and fleeting projection. Sound, too, penetrates these spaces, and one hears fragments of conversations, often in many languages, the sound of footsteps, and the music of buskers from the street above. These are disembodied sounds which invade these dark, still spaces in much the same way as light projects ghostly images onto the walls, and in much the same way as Victorian columns sit alongside Roman fabric of indeterminate use. From within, the vaults offer suggestions of routes and openings into the world outside, but clear views are thwarted; spaces continue off the picture plane but (in the same way as a painting has edges) the viewer is denied the view. Curiously, just as these spaces capture inverted images from beyond the membrane, a stone bearing the inscription “Abbey Street” has been incorporated into a wall upsidedown; clearly, during the process of covering, uncovering and recovering this ground, a 19th century building has been demolished and its stone recycled in the construction of the vaults. What was once located above street level finds its way far beneath it, and that is the condition of these spaces. Curiously, to add to the feeling of spatial dislocation, raw archaeology is located not beneath one’s feet, but in front you, within earthen walls.

The experiential power, atmosphere and quality of these spaces is bound up within a mix of factors including:

- the sudden difference, in spite of their proximity to normative space, leading to a certain shock and dislocation;
- the role of the threshold, in which the change of space is made very abrupt;
- the very uncurated nature of the spaces and the objects within them, creating a sense of discovery, and an atmosphere of near abandonment;
- the relative scale of different zones, and the ways in which internal volumes are modulated, varying from the compressed to the capacious;
- the sense of purpose, while that purpose remains opaque;
- the blurring of historic layers and the overall impression of antiquity rather than discreet periods – partly a consequence of the almost consistent use of Bath stone;
- the (perhaps natural) thrill of going behind the scenes, or seeing what is ordinarily unseen;
- the vaguely threatening atmospherics of the vaults, perhaps caused by a coalescence of light, shadow, texture and its curious acoustic properties. I can imagine writers describing this space as one which might be holding its breath;
- the kinaesthetic manner in which one experiences the vaults – it contains a topography that requires careful negotiation, and the quality of light is such that one has to look very carefully and very hard. You even notice the manner in you breathe, such is the quality of the air. Being in the vaults is very much a physical experience.

These spaces are strange, in the sense of unfamiliar, and estranged in the sense that they have a tense relationship with the public, curated and more conventionally beautiful spaces nearby. It is Bath’s “other” in that it reveals a life beneath the polish and grandeur. The project in which I’m engaged will, we hope (and funding will be the key to this), lead to a number of

outcomes in order to demonstrate the qualities outlined above, including: a photographic record of these spaces and their present condition; a film which demonstrates the ways in which the threads of history are tangled here; an event within the vaults to highlight the qualities of found space and caution against the rapid value judgement; the involvement of a German academic group called PerceptionLab which records the physiological responses of people as they walk through unfamiliar spaces; and a website in which our work, and the work of others interested in similarly estranged spaces, will be made publicly available. And a good deal of writing, of course. Certainly, what we want to do is establish a network of similarly minded researchers and practitioners who can, collectively, begin to unpick the delicate issues surrounding the historic and the now.

As a research group we are interested in spaces which are off the map of ordinary, public life. Perhaps outcast spaces. They are, in a sense, unselfconscious – sitting there in society's peripheral vision.

The purpose of this work is try to understand these spaces as having an aesthetic value. We aim to look, listen and think about what makes these spaces worth examining, what essence or trace of meaning, if any, can be found and made manifest. We ask what it is to experience these spaces, and what makes them worth experiencing. We seek clues to which we can attach meaning and narrative, to contrive an energy and life for these spaces - to magnify what lies latent. Importantly, we hope to influence the ways in which the owners of these spaces understand them before embarking on refurbishment or rehabilitation projects. Because it may be that these spaces do not need to be rehabilitated at all, only revealed.

In essence, the quality of these spaces is that they are estranged; their significance lies in what they are not. Any intervention should therefore be one of restraint. In the process of becoming more fully occupied, how much change can these spaces sustain before they cease to be estranged? It would, however, be an irony to suggest no change should be visited upon these spaces – the process of continual change and the fact they bear the marks of continual inhabitation has made them what they are. The issue concerns the degree to which any change can be unselfconscious.

Anthropological notions of “place” and “non-place” are especially pertinent to the vaults. They are uninhabited, and barely visited, but they have an experiential power which is worth understanding. Unpicking these themes lies at the core of this research project. So, too, is the determination to establish a set of research tools and methodologies by which other estranged spaces can be understood. Indeed, it will be interesting to see whether or not this estranged, aberrant space can teach us anything about space generally. The York Street vaults are something of a laboratory. Just as neuro-scientists and psychologists can learn much about the brain by examining the effects of damage or unusual conditions, we ask whether or not, or how, estranged space can help us better understand the dynamics of the everyday.

THANK YOU

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