

Useless: A Space Without a Function



A functionless space within Will Alsops *Palestra*, Transport for London headquarters, London 2012

"I have several times tried to think of a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing.

For all my efforts, I found it impossible to follow this idea through to the end. Language itself, seemingly, proved unsuited to describing this nothing, this void, as if we could only speak of what is full, useful and functional. [...]

A space without a function. Not 'without any precise function' but precisely without any function; not pluri functional (everyone knows how to do that), but a-functional.

I have tried to follow where this limp idea led me. I have encountered many unusable spaces and many unused spaces. But I wanted neither the unusable nor the unused, but the useless. How to expel functions, rhythms, habits, how to expel necessity? [...]

I have never managed anything that was really satisfactory. But I don't think I was altogether wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might a statute of the uninhabitable."

(Georges Perec, 'A space without a use', *Species of Spaces*, 1974 p.33)

Introduction.

In brief, *Useless: A Space Without a Function* is a quasi-scientific experiment that wants to utilise and repurpose that which surrounds us. It is a place where nothing happens. A true non-place. A place that is neutralised by its concentration and excess of all the architecture and rule that envelops us today. It is a place where virtually nothing is permitted - a place to stop, stand still, succumb and hopefully come out on top.

Might surrender in fact yield freedom? This project doesn't have a premeditated point to make and nor is it cynical. It wants to turn things around to our advantage, consider the unconsidered and make extraordinary what is usually deemed anything but. Whilst it guarantees respite, a justification I believe sufficient in itself, it also wonders if it might even provide transcendence, an idea that like many before me I am prepared follow forever.

This isn't the chill out room. There is no facility, only restriction.

Might this be our only refuge from ourselves and each other? Can the temporary removal of all our freedoms, real and digital, in fact afford us the only physical and emotional space left to truly objectify, see through to the crux and resume control?

Technical Description.



An example of a prefabricated Kingspan structure

Useless: A Space Without a Function is a permanent interactive public sculpture that would comprise a prefab glass architectural structure, approx 5x5m wide and 3m high, produced by a company such as Kingspan (the manufacturers of various B&Q, M&S and other stores as above) and would be furnished according to a survey of 5 public-access buildings from each of the 5 UK major cities (ie. Leeds, London, Glasgow, Sheffield and Birmingham).

Whilst surveying these 25 venues for the most generic and ubiquitous of design elements (ie. tables, chairs, lamps, flooring etc.), I would also amass all of their official 'Codes of Conduct' (some of which are listed at the bottom of this document) and all of which would be enforced within this interactive installation.

The glass structure would act as a huge public vitrine where, with the use of a two-way mirror film, those outside could observe the actions of those inside whilst those inside would experience a sense of isolation and immersion in their immediate confines. The work would be accessible by 5 participants at a time and I suspect would be open to the public for approx 6 hrs a day. The rules would be enforced by one invigilator/guard and would be made available to anyone upon request.

Explanation.

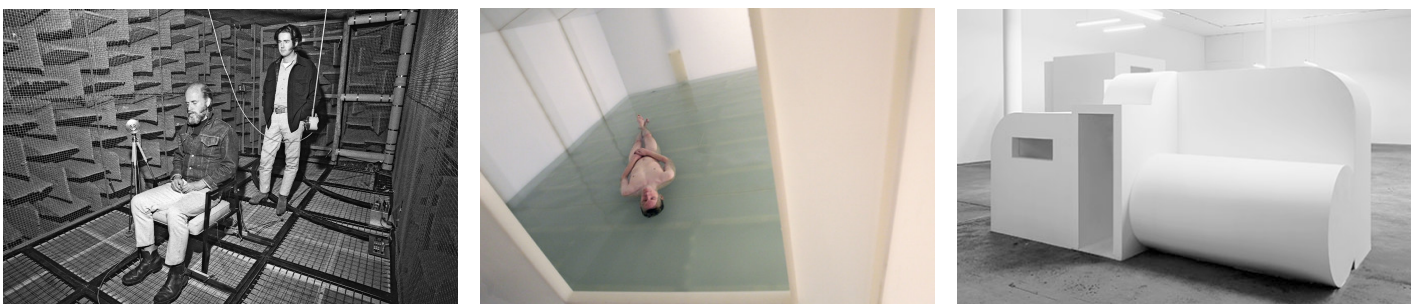


(from top left) Some examples of the most ubiquitous design initiatives as evidenced in Eurostar Lounge, Paris; Excel Arena, London; Foxtons Estate Agents, Manchester; Sheffield Hallam Library, Sheffield; Monsoon HQ, London; Vodafone shop, Birmingham; Westfield Shopping Centre, London and Mc Donalds restaurant, Leeds.

Over the past few years my artistic activities have been centered around a fascination with the non-specificity of the design of our built environment. Whether this be as a result of increased privatization, economic agendas, material technologies, health and safety restrictions, building regulations, fashion and taste preferences, functional requirements or changing behavioral characteristics, and whether or not this is something you welcome or refute, one can certainly not deny that our built environment is becoming more and more homogenous as it melds in to one and becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate a library from a leisure centre and a museum from a mall.

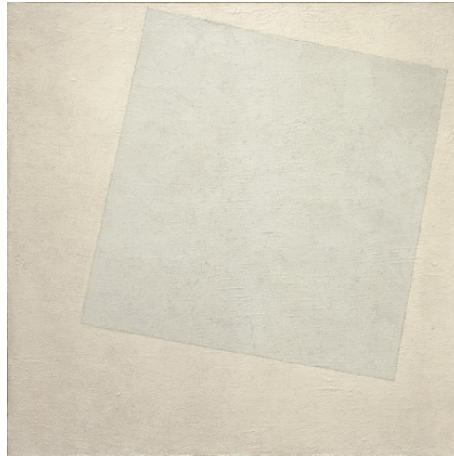
Aside from the material and formal aspects of this phenomenon, we are also increasingly aware of the freedoms we are having to give up in order to maintain the safety, security, efficiency and prosperity of these modern environment's. Whilst some people are willing to pay this price as a kind of maintenance fee for the security and cleanliness we have become accustomed to, I have always found the degree of surveillance and sterility a little claustrophobic, lonely and anxiety inducing. However, upon rethinking some old ideas and with that revisiting some old texts, namely Marc Auges *Non-Places* and Georges Perecs *Species of Spaces*, alongside exploring some more contemporary analysis of post-crisis capitalist tendencies by the likes of Franco Bifo Berardi and Mark Fisher, I am starting to wonder if in fact surrender could be more liberating than resistance.

I have been at loggerheads with many of my students over the past few years who, in my mind, were unquestioningly appropriating much of the information and material technologies, as well as many of the stylistic tendencies I consider to comprise the late-capitalist scenario I describe above, to the point of reverence and occasionally even collusion. However, having looked again at some of my own previous solutions that I will go on to describe, I realise today that the removal and objectivity artists like myself have been striving for might in fact finally be proving unattainable and therefore propose using this opportunity to explore a new idea of conscious surrender by way of enabling a momentary withdrawal from the pressures we find ourselves constantly subjected to in this third millennium.



(from left to right) Robert Irwin's anechoic chamber, Carston Hollers Psycho Tank and Absalons Cellule No.3

I wonder if rather than devoting all my time to a project of resistance and disobedience in the name of artistic freedom and creativity, maybe there is a way of turning things around to our advantage? Like many artists before me, I have previously tried to establish ways of escaping the hustle and chaos of today's 'supermodernity' but like them have only explored this via attempts at removal (ie. sensory deprivation). For example I tried to build anechoic chambers at art school much the same way as Robert Irwin did in the 1960's and I'm guessing with similar incentives to Carston Hollers recent Psycho Tanks that offer a similar degree of sensory deprivation, only this time in a floatation tank instead of a foam-lined cell. Other key artists might include Absalon with his modernist Cellules No.1 to No.6 that he produced before he died in the early nineties and that were intended for single-person occupancy, or Joep Van Lieshout's slightly less purist sheepskin-lined Skull Chairs of a similar time.



Kazimir Malevich, White on White 1917

I guess this history traces back to Malevich's Suprematist endeavours, namely his 'White on White' series of 1917 and 1918, and whilst the aesthetics of transcendence was arguably accomplished, the one aspect of figuration or immanence Modernist abstraction has to this day still failed to overcome was that the artwork still had to remain as a physical object.

This is why I am wanting to create something chameleonic - something indefinable and in fact confusing in it's seemingly unremarkable, shape-shifting and polymorphous appearance. I want to create a space that doesn't stake it's claim nor it's function, a space that could almost go unnoticed and even upon entry leaves the participant confused as to what is expected from them or it.



Ikea pop-up showroom, Warsaw, Poland 2012

This desire comes from a combination of my aforesaid previous endeavours; a fascination with today's indistinct 'non-places'; a curiosity of what can actually be done amidst the ever-increasing list of rules and restrictions we are subjected to; a recent decision that more is in fact less (ie. overload stimulates calm more than nuance) and a fortuitous encounter with an Ikea pop-up advertising initiative I happened upon in Warsaw, Poland last year.

Conclusion.

Ripe for removal, reflection and even meditation, maybe the increasingly homogeneous landscape of our built environment is in fact becoming the amorphous equivalent of the blank canvas, the infinity cove or the anechoic chamber, and maybe this overload of rule and restriction I refer to is in fact finally pronounced enough to overwhelm to the point of trance?

I can't be sure, but I think it's worth a try and I think it's definitely got the necessary ingredients for an exciting formal and interactive sculpture.

A mixture of rules and restrictions so far amassed from Tate Modern, LSE Library, Braunstone Leisure Centre and Bluewater Shopping Centre:

Groups of more than five without the intention to shop will be asked to leave the centre.

We do not permit unsociable behaviour that is detrimental to our environment.

Pets are not allowed, with the exception of assistance dogs.

No items of clothing which restricts the view of one's head/face (with religious exception)

Leafleting, canvassing or the conducting of third party interviews or surveys is not permitted.

We do not permit unauthorised busking or the selling of goods in the car parks.

No cycling, roller-blading, using micro-scooters or skating.

Do not consume food or drink on the premises.

Deposit large items in the cloakroom.

Please respect the rights of other visitors to quiet contemplation and study.

Photography is not permitted at any time.

Anyone found to be eating will be asked to dispose of the food or take it to the ground floor.

Food left unattended will be removed.

Alcohol cannot be consumed anywhere in the building.

Smoking is not permitted in the building or outside near external doorways..

Furniture, fittings or equipment must not be misused or their arrangement altered.

Users may be asked to present their bag for inspection by staff.

No person shall bring any item which may threaten, annoy, soil or damage any person or any property.

No person shall write, draw, paint or fix anything.

No person shall spit, drop litter or leave waste.

Mobile phone use is prohibited. Phones should be set to silent mode in the building

No person shall molest or wilfully interfere with the comfort or convenience of any other person.

All persons shall join the rear of the queue and obey the reasonable instructions.

No person shall use any escalator except by standing or walking on it in the direction intended for travel.

No person shall enter by the exit or leave by the entrance.

In the case of automatic closing doors, no person shall enter or leave by the door when it is closing.

No person shall place, throw, drop or trail anything capable of injuring, damaging or endangering.

No person in charge of an animal shall allow it to foul or cause damage.

Not climbing or sitting on any balustrade, barrier, fence or railing.

No inappropriate use of customer lifts and escalators.

Clear access routes must be maintained for emergency services

We reserve the right to deny a person from entering the property and have the right to escort them off.

Any person found to be hanging from Changing Room doors will be removed from the Centre.

Any person deliberately found to be blocking the toilets will be removed from the Centre.

Any member of the public found to be verbally or physically aggressive will be removed from the Centre

No food is allowed anywhere, this includes sweets and chewing gum.

No person shall enter in a state of intoxication.

No person shall use any threatening, abusive, obscene or offensive language.