ARTISTS' BOOKS

Ruth Ewan: How to Make Archway Tower Disappear

Stephen Hodge: The Master Plan

Master planning has become fashionable again, as the government and local planning committees have come under pressure to find solutions to the housing crisis and an outdated transport network. Indeed, architect Sir Terry Farrell has recently been commissioned by culture secretary Ed Vaizey to lead an architectural review and to look into the potential of introducing a formal government architectural policy. Given the deployment of public art as a regeneration strategy over the past decade, one might ask whether artists should be called upon to get involved in master plans. Artists are wise to being implicated in schemes that price out the poor and weak, yet it is cynical to suggest that they should not have a social responsibility or offer a more creative complement to the pragmatism of planners and architects. Two recent artists' projects by Ruth Ewan and Stephen Hodge, in London and Weston-Super-Mare respectively, took a research-based approach to public art, gathering information on the history and memories of their public realms to offer witty, imaginative 'solutions' to urban problems.

Ewan's *How to Make Archway Tower Disappear* took the form of a strategically placed telescopic viewer on Holloway Road (from April to September 2012) that magically caused Archway Tower to apparently vanish, and a book that gathers together archival material and interviews with people connected to the much-hated Tower, a now-empty office block built in 1972 that nonetheless continues to dominate the cityscape. Commissioned by AIR, a Central Saint Martins research initiative that explores the relationship between artist and place, Ewan's project was inspired by discussions with her previous collaborator and local Archway resident Fang, whose woeful memories of the Tower when it was a dole office prompted him to suggest: 'I think it would be a good present to the people of Islington if we could make the Tower disappear.' It turned out that Fang assumed she could do something like David Copperfield had done when he made the Statue of Liberty vanish. As Ewan notes wryly: 'Seemed possible to me. All we needed was a rotating platform, several spotlights, helicopters, a TV channel and crew, a small live audience and perhaps some cash to pay them off. Great idea I thought, but unlikely to happen.'

We never find out exactly how she did it (other than some vague reference to software and airbrushing), and there is little documentation of the physical part of the project other than a few black-and-white documentary photos of people looking through the viewer. Unusually for an artist working in the public realm, Ewan admits that she is not very interested in buildings, but rather in 'unlikely places, sites which amass invisible clusters of meaning'. What Ewan foregrounds in this book is the strength of feeling that the Tower still generates and how opinion about its form as a 'brutalist' block is inseparable from its previous function as the Thatcherite former DHSS office. In 1989 New Model Army had a hit single with 'Archway Towers', which described the band members' grim experiences as young hopefuls from Yorkshire signing on at the Tower and the misery they witnessed: 'It's open season on the weak and feeble', they sang. Interviewed in the book, former member Joolz Denby recalls that – unlike the courtesy of today's public services – the staff were specifically instructed to be as obstructive as possible, even suggesting that she should 'fuck off back up north'. Such was the expected animosity that there were separate entrances for staff and claimants, and plate-glass windows. A 1984 photo by Paul Graham, included in the book, captures the bleakness of the DHSS waiting room, littered with fag butts and crisp packets. There are also environmental issues with the Tower, which creates such a vortex of wind at its base that market stalls have to be screwed down and old people fear being blown away.

A small minority of interviewees stand up for the Tower – the way it acts as a marker, signalling the start of central London, or indeed symbolises 'home'. An architect, who has never actually been inside the Tower, nonetheless makes a case for its Le Corbusier-inspired qualities, claiming that its three-slab format was directly copied from the iconic Dreischeibenhaus in Düsseldorf. For him, it is important to remember the socialist roots of Modernism, rather than Archway Tower's associations with Thatcherite privatisation and the shrinking of the welfare state. After all, he reminds us, Thatcher was more of a neo-Georgian fan than a modernist.

The story of Archway Tower could be that of dozens of now similarly reviled tower blocks across the country – sold off by the state to a succession of private developers (only to be re-leased back to the state at an inflated price) who have left it to rot. Archway Tower now stands empty: too expensive to knock down, and unsuitable by today's environmental and safety standards to be leasable.

Hodge's book *The Master Plan* similarly explores the UK's relationship to Modernism, contrasting the optimism of postwar town planning to contemporary issues around regeneration. As part of the Exeter-based group Wrights & Sons, Hodge was commissioned in 2010 by Situations and Field Art Projects to produce a work for Wonders of Weston, a regeneration project for the seaside town funded by the New Labour-backed Sea Change initiative. Wrights & Sons made a series of 41 signs calling on the public to reimagine their town; the collective title *Everything you need to build a town is here*, like Ewan's project, challenged the idea that the artist must necessarily produce something new or patronise locals with their plug-in knowledge.

In researching the project, Hodge came across an unpublished transcript of a 1947 public consultation regarding a master plan for Weston, which he chose to reprint with his own annotations and related visual material. The term 'consultation' is now largely regarded as window-dressing or, worse, deflection from unpalatable decisions, but here the idea that a master plan should be informed by the desires of the locals themselves is treated as an exciting 'experiment in democracy'. It is difficult to tell whether the speaker Lionel Brett (standing in for his architectural partner Clough Williams-Ellis, of Portmerion fame, who was too ill to attend) is convinced of the merit of letting the locals mess with his plans. Comparing himself to a doctor prescribing medicine and giving the patient 'a general overhaul', he appears by turns magnanimous – granting people's wishes for an additional swimming pool and community centre – and also dismissive when the public makes suggestions he feels are irrelevant.

Brett repeatedly insists on the gentle nature of his and Williams-Ellis's plans: 'Don't be afraid', he tells the people of Weston. So it takes a while for it to sink in that the master plan involves lining the beachfront with Le Corbusier-inspired high-rises (mostly hotels) – to which, surprising with today's more cautious architectural tastes, none in the meeting voice any objection. Hodge does not elaborate on which of the master plan's many schemes were eventually adopted and why (whether for economic, practical or aesthetic reasons) other schemes were abandoned. Master plans then as now are as much about fantasy as reality.

Modernism might have had a more positive image in the UK – been actively embraced even – had postwar reconstruction and master-planning not become embroiled in issues of land value and subsequent speculation, and had the image of high-rise buildings not been tainted by their association with substandard housing, office work and bureaucracy. Despite its outward gratuitousness, *How to Make Archway Tower Disappear* makes a serious point in proposing that the best thing to do with inadequate architecture is to demolish it – an act that seems frustratingly difficult to carry out – while Hodge's Wonders of Weston commission shows up public consultation as the meaningless exercise it is (and always was) and maintains that local residents' views be taken seriously – ahead of those of public artists. From these two

projects, it seems that artists are still reluctant to be instrumentalised. It will take changes in government attitudes towards artists to convince them of the value of contributing ideas – both concrete and imaginative – towards urban planning. ■

Ruth Ewan, *How to Make Archway Tower Disappear*, AIR University of London, 2012, 40pp, pb, £5, 978 0 9557533 8 1.
Stephen Hodge: *The Master Plan* (edited by Claire Doherty), Book Works/Situations, 2012, 96pp, pb, £12, 978 1 9060123 8 0.

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The Nabokov Paper

Masters of European Fiction was the literature class taught by Vladimir Nabokov at Cornell University during the 1950s that required him to give a series of annual student lectures which he devoted to seven canonical novels: *Mansfield Park, Bleak House, Madame Bovary, Dr Jekyll*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis, Swann's Way* and *Ulysses*. Nabokov's lectures have become legendary, inasmuch as they were essentially performative events and thus unrepeatable. After all, Nabokov once told his class that he would rather have devoted the time allotted for his lecture to 'silent contemplation of the glory of Dickens'. If documented at all, he would have liked them to have been filmed or broadcast on TV, but this was never achieved. He strictly forbade the printed publication of his preparatory notes, but they were published posthumously anyway in 1980. At the end of that book are some samples of the exam questions that Nabokov set his students about *Bleak House* and *Madame Bovary*. They are unorthodox and odd questions, both unusually particular and disconcertingly open-ended, such as: 'Follow Mr Guppy through *Bleak House*.' How would you do that exactly?

The translator Kate Briggs has collaborated with graphic designer Lucrezia Russo to supplement some of these surviving exam questions with additional Nabokovian ones of their own. The resulting fictional exam paper, which they called 'The Nabokov Paper', was responded to by 38 pan-European visual artists, designers, illustrators, writers, academics, translators, architects, a librarian, a curator and a computer engineer. Each was invited to choose one exam question from those available and to 'answer' it in their own way. An exhibition at Shandy Hall of the creative responses evidenced a great variety of outcomes, from the quite evasive to the immediately comprehensible, from the wholly textual to the essentially haptic. The contributions take the form of word-processed and handwritten texts, computer-generated diagrams, paintings, films, objects and a board game from Poland set out on a green baize table.

Some examinees address themselves to Nabokov himself. Forbes Morlock writes a letter to 'Dear Prof Nabokov', explaining why he can't answer his exam question. Guillaume Constantin interleaves a copy of *Bleak House* with a reordered Pantone swatch book, taking almost literally Nabokov's poetic concept of the 'coloured shadows' that he feels accompany each character as they appear in Dickens's narrative.

The numerous plans and maps in the exhibition reflect the sketched layouts of fictional houses that appear in Nabokov's lecture notes. Otherwise, the lists, indexes and structural textual analyses that appear here are heirs to the 'aesthetics of information' that originated with Max Bense – participants setting themselves tasks like finding one text within another or rendering an elegantly rhythmic colour-coded abstraction from the narrative of a novel. There is much evidence, too, of the more recent influence of the graphs and maps that are the trademark of the quantitative methodology of Franco Moretti's fashionable literary analyses. And then as far as you can get from those sorts of processes are objects like Chloe Briggs's spectre of a beetle painted into a piece of found wallpaper, a series of small but lovely Proustian acrylics by the late architect Gianni Lavacchini and Maurice Carlin's wearable glove-like objects, derived from Flaubert's descriptions of how Madame Bovary held and read books.

The exhibition successfully avoided (albeit narrowly) accusations of being too wordy, too literary, too centred on academic preoccupations, too demanding upon the attention span. Partly this was down to the care with which it had been assembled and displayed, but also because of the appropriateness of the exhibition's locus. *Tristram Shandy* was not one of Nabokov's seven selected great European novels, but the siting of the exhibition at Shandy Hall at Coxwold in rural North Yorkshire was no accident. The modest 18th-century home of the novelist Laurence Sterne is open to the public, and its book collection is a lure for bibliophiles. For some years, the upper floor of a converted granary adjacent to the house has been used for art exhibitions. The Hall's current curator in residence, Patrick Wildgust, has successfully established a programme of exhibitions which relates closely to Sterne as the pioneer deconstructor of both the narrative and physical forms of the novel, making the gallery 'a place to re-contemplate the book'.

The exhibition found itself topographically within the zone of influence of Sterne. The house and its contents (including Wildgust's own complementary collection of off-centre literature), its second-hand bookshop, its garden with its large nocturnal population of moths – the proximity of all these things subtly coloured the exhibition, like a version of Nabokov's 'colour shadow' conceit. Wildgust's own 'exam paper' contribution is an evocative index of moths, linked by sentences found in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and echoing Nabokov's lifelong passion for identifying and classifying lepidoptera.

The exhibition at Shandy Hall ceased on 22 November, except as a memory, just like Nabokov's inimitable lecture-performances. Nevertheless, everything that was in the exhibition is in its related publication (the longer texts are best absorbed sitting down). Published by the 'information as material' imprint, British proponents of 'conceptual writing', it is the same size and heft as a student's A4 lined refill pad, designed clearly and unostentatiously by Russo. And yet the publication and the exhibition are not simply duplicates of each other; they are different, parallel incarnations of the same idea, leading a double life.

Written fictions are prevalent these days within the visual arts. Artists publish their own novellas, and fiction sections appear in art magazines. This exhibition, however, established itself to one side of this tendency: equally on the margins of both the art exhibition and literary publishing mainstreams. There is a plenitude of texts about exhibitions, but an exhibition about reading is much scarcer. This project invites us to examine for ourselves how to read a novel, where to read it, whether to re-read it, how to relate it to other fictive disciplines, and what we think about literary canonisation.

Designated by its devisers as 'an experiment in novel reading', the project aims to induce a desire within us to answer some of its 'exam questions' ourselves. It worked for me – I am impatient to 'follow Mr Guppy through Bleak House', as Nabokov wanted me to do. ■

The Nabokov Paper, eds Kate Briggs, Lucrezia Russo, information as material, 2013, 104pp, £14.99, 978 1 907468 20 9. The exhibition took place Shandy Hall, Coxwold, 26 October to 22 November.

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