

‘A Cacophony of the Unheard and the Yet-to-Be’:

Voicing the Lost and Found in the People’s Palace for Future Renewal

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The People’s Palace, Alexandra Palace in north London (1873; rebuilt 1875, 1988), is redolent with the history of popular entertainment, from music hall to the site of the first regular public television transmissions in 1936, courtesy of the BBC, a tenant of the palace. It is alive with voices – and in

order to evoke fully the narrative of the building, the writing must be too. Accordingly, it employs a polysemous multi-levelled approach, foregrounding layered voices from first-person accounts: local users, volunteers, staff members, management, architects and master planners. Using imaginative and critical writing, historiography and creative non-fiction, this piece demonstrates a method of re/producing place, by presenting what the palace has lost over its period of existence that needs to be found, in a sense, to sustain its future. Recognizing that this palace of used-to-be is still the space of what's to come, the yet-to-be, the areas of writing cultivate and investigate a 'factish' method for greater understanding of the building's cultural recovery, affirming a role for the fictional or speculative in regeneration. It explores and exemplifies the use of writing *in* and *as* architecture, through inscription of its existence in writing inspired by observation, plans, images and archive work. Excerpts from three of the 'Scenes' – *Lost/Missing, People/Public, Found/Futures* – that formed part of my PhD-by-practice,¹ are used to show how writing can be used in renewal work, to address and respond to what a building's publics need and want.

Speaking of the relation between writing and architecture and their respective uses, Adrian Forty suggests that language makes buildings come alive, that it can 'do things' that buildings cannot, such as nuance, metaphor and storytelling.² Between evidence and imagination, rooted in the real and taking flight from it, this paper brings together what Forty describes as the certainties of the material building and the multiple 'truths' of language. It 'shows', as well as 'tells' how instrumentalizing forms of writing can contribute to cultural renewal. The texts work individually and collectively toward this, through repeatedly examining and retrieving themes and events.

The plurivocity of the title above, developed to create a sense of the disjunctions and synchronies in Alexandra Palace, a construct of overlaid, individualized responses, strikes notes that reverberate through and across the building's panoply of uses. To address the question 'Can writing contribute

to the cultural recovery of a building?', the flavour of being at Alexandra Palace is captured in a distillation of user experience over its existence through the writing-as-methodology. Close examination and research into the Palace led to a process of devising systems of writing, in relation to subject and approach, articulating a fabric of intertwined and shifting pictures, giving a depth to the portrait and a sense of movement. As a method of writing the building, plurivocality is designed to respond to the building's uniqueness, to capture and represent different opinions and experiences, whether of the past or present, marginal or official. As an 'imaginative method' of uncovering and recovering a building's specifics, it offers a response to what Katherine Shonfield describes as 'what happens when we accept that architecture does tangibly exist, not as a pristine impervious whole, but in the perception of the beholder'.³

The array of voices deployed brings broader and deeper history into contention. Plurivocality asserts that the single voice in isolation struggles to articulate the profuse and vibrant nature of the building's narrative over time, and so the method incorporates and uses the repetitions and slippages between users' responses and experiences. This includes those voices ignored or forgotten through the usual discriminations of class or race or gender. They also give voice to those who may have been made absent through the effects of war: prisoners, interned 'enemy aliens' and refugees. These users of the Palace were absent from its narrative for many years. With plurivocality, the writing creates a fabric in which users and their voices are part of the building and part of making it.

One method employed in 'writing Alexandra Palace' involved walking/writing sessions on site visits, exploring the urban environment to establish a subjective sense of place. Also known as a psycho-geographical practice of wandering or the *dérive*, this relates to the Situationism of practitioners such as Iain Sinclair, whether in relation to a single building such as London's Dome/O2 Centre (1999) in *Sorry Meniscus* or his well-trodden

explorations of east London (although departing from Sinclair's masculinist polemics). The sense of W.G. Sebald walking his subjects into existence before writing them was noted too.

Highlighting repeated and enduring uses, and those curtailed or abandoned, creates an understanding of the intended and received meaning and purpose of the building and its effectiveness. The unfolding of the unsaid and the unimagined voices contributes to repurposing and retrieval for new times and new conditions, adding to the documented and the official. To extend the response to Katherine Shonfield started above, she continues: 'The story of how a space is used, as an adjunct to character and action, reveals an unspoken history of the role of space within the city'.⁴ The plurivocal method ranges beyond the excavation and inclusion of 'character voice' texts; the plurality of its name refers also to the multiple layers of authorial voice embodied in critical, historiographical, thematic or contextual writing. Historiographical writing generated by the architecture – one of the articulations of the voice of the building itself – in turn initiates and inspires critical, thematic and character-led writing. Using diverse materials from archival sources, interviews and chance conversations, the strands of writing respond to the building in its various iterations, constructing a narrative of individual and collective certainties and doubts, founded on views of the palace as people see it, as both precarious and enduring. Whether transcribed from interview or fictional, the voices are all mediated through the author, through selection/request for meeting, questions, editing or origination.

Lost/Missing

An essential precondition for planning or conjecturing on any renewal or reinvigoration involves consideration of what is missing there. This is in terms of what Alexandra Palace needs for its future iteration to operate effectively, and what may have worked in the past and then been lost, both literally and figuratively. In order to write on the recovery of the palace and

contribute to it,⁵ a solid understanding of the development of the building in its various iterations and uses was needed. A series of episodes for historiographic writing, constructing a narrative through critical evaluation of written and visual materials relating to the building, were selected to underpin the project's methodology. These were: 1873 to 1875, the unbuilt to second version; 1900 to 1919, public ownership to First World War; 1935 to 1976, the BBC years and the Second World War; 1967, counter-cultural happenings; 1980 to 1988, Greater London Council to London Borough of Haringey ownership. On the page, this linear narrative acted as an 'armature' or chronological baseline to support and inspire imaginative writing. Aside from the issue of human and architectural lifespan, the character voices and foregrounding of the user were designed to provide the strong accent on social and economic conditions considered crucial for an overview of the building from inception to refurbishment, and so how the current situation there evolved. The various types of voices of the user are therefore embedded into the methods used to construct the polyvocal narrative, chosen or invented to animate these key historiographic phases.⁶

Excerpts from Scene 2: 'Lost/Missing'

[Enter: 'Anton']⁷

It was the smell. Nobody ever talks about that. They talk about the glass, the light, the domes, the hill and the shape of it. That's some peculiar kind of hell; men who were driven to wax lyrical about the structure of their incarceration. The sweat of fear and anxiety and loneliness. That's what it smelled like. You'd think the smell would be not so strong, because of the cold, and everyone talked about the cold; there was no argument there.

[Enter: 'Jim']⁸

The switch radiates 'don't touch' but, shockless, the fluorescents glow and sulk their way to on. Somehow it casts a gloomy tinge – the colour of Cellophane on a shop window to stop the stock spoiling in the daylight. Nobody left here in a hurry: the marks of slow departure remain in score-



Fig. 1. The Willis Organ in the Great Hall, Alexandra Palace, 2014.
Image by Rosa Ainley

cards and fixtures and team lists. Membership books are stacked up, and the big old tea pots with the handle on the top and one on the back; it looks like they just got up and walked out.

'History repeating.' Except it doesn't. And it does. That's what I'm saying! From Hyde Park to Cromwell Road to Muswell Hill, cultural pavilions duplicate, repeating in paper fictions and in factual versions from Hyde Park and Crystal Palace. The people like the Palace, if only the one (or only the once). They love it, but a single iron and glass temple may have been enough, and that was already a reinscription in a multitude of ways from its inception. History repeats, but not success. A leap of imagination plants a Palace for the people on the hill, on land a few decades from suburban, beyond the sprawl of the city. Or is it wilful disregard? Like a *grand projet*, only wrong time, wrong place, wrong culture.

The anxiety of confronting change, of grasping at memory may be allayed by fabricating a story of what there is to be recovered. It is a ghost that stalks or an echo that brings it back gently, a ripple that spreads after-effects. The disorientation of what is to come is attached to certainties and clarities to be laid bare and named. Alexandra Palace resounds with what it has lost, what it has never quite found, what keeps being found and what's already been working. If what has been lost can be identified, it may be possible to find it again.

In part a response to the Palace being closed seven times since 1875, and getting through a similar number of management companies and owners,⁹ the Alexandra Palace and Park (Public Purposes) Act of 1900 firmly established the area as 'a place of public resort and recreation and for other public purposes, and to make all provisions necessary or proper in that behalf.' The freehold was sold for £100,000 to the local borough council, who said: 'The hope is to make the Palace a free resort without parallel, a home of happiness, health and culture . . . available for the free use and



Fig. 2. Palm Court, Alexandra Palace, 2014. Image by Rosa Ainley

recreation of the public forever.¹⁰ 'Free use' and 'free resort' are two more phrases that have haunted every company and committee since then.

People/Public

The term 'people's palace' is examined in this scene, both in relation to public space and to the inherent contradictions of exclusion and openness in a palace, in public ownership since 1900. The research demanded a way to write architecture as lived and used, to root the so-called inoperative spectators in the narrative as a maker of the building through their contribution as users, conferring authority on to the life of the building post-'completion', as generally understood, often unheard in architecture writing. Equally, the narrative of the ordinary person has historically been missing in architecture – judged insignificant outside oral history and cultural studies, or community-based projects. As Jonathan Hill has it in his much-quoted passage from *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (1998), 'architecture is not just a building. It is, primarily, a particular relation between a subject and an object, in which the former occupies the latter.'¹¹ Jill Stoner's enquiry about 'who is subject to whom' in the architect/client relationship takes this further. In her conception, 'architecture' is always under construction, always being made and remade by its users and their expectations and, more literally, the uses they make of it.¹²

In bringing the user on to the stage as part of the creative process, meaning is attributed to spaces by virtue of the associations they arouse. With a focus on user experience – reception – rather than on the producer or intentions (architect's or author's), reception theory was fruitful. It highlights the relation between the individual and the collective, the private and public, and contributed to an understanding of the changing characteristics of cities.¹³ As expounded by Hans Robert Jauss, the role of the reader/user is part of the production of meaning, playing a crucial role in mapping changing responses to text or building¹⁴.

In terms of revisiting and reinterpreting the culturally accepted significance of a building, Jauss's focus on individual disruptions was productive. New responses are foregrounded against the background of the old, so the response is not fixed or single or exceptional. In relation to the building's recovery, it could then be 'made new again, by looking or re-looking, asking again what this building could be for, opening up the assumption and expectation of change and reinterpretation of its cultural significance.

Excerpts from Scene 3: 'People/Public'

[Enter: 'Philip']¹⁵

That was the thing – it was free. We didn't charge for playing and they didn't charge for tickets. They said at the Palace they couldn't give tickets away, for concerts or anything else at that time. But we had packed houses. It was good of them to do it, nonetheless. Even so, what they got out of it was worth much more than a half-full concert hall.

Nobody's home at the People's Palace. It is the house of the ordinary people, devoted as much to everyday pleasures regularly and frequently repeated as to the singular and extraordinary. As built, the fantastic newness of the vessel draws people up the hill to a warehouse full of colonial riches. That's a wonder, right there. A public spectacle in a public park.

Doors open, Alexandra Palace starts as it means to go on: a business enterprise with inclusive provision of entertainment for public edification and enjoyment. What a performance going on there always already: the conjuring trick of commercial Palace-as-public-building. Everyone sits down under the same roof, not at the same table. That's the ethos; that's the point. Everyone knows their place, even when that place is sometimes in a Palace.

'This is direct television from the studios at Alexandra Palace.'

A plaque with this announcement by presenter Elizabeth Cowell marks Alexandra Palace as the site of the first regular television transmissions in 1936.



Fig. 3. View of BBC mast across Exhibition Hall, Alexandra Palace, 2014. Image by Rosa Ainley

The first television outside broadcast was also transmitted there at the North London exhibition, on 6 October 1936. The site was chosen because it was high enough above sea level and there to be occupied, and its location was judged to give access to a larger potential audience. The BBC extended the life and use of the Palace by taking out a lease on, initially, a small part of the southeast of the building. This is one of the main reasons why it is considered important in the country's national heritage and why it has endured. The award of a grant for refurbishment of the East Wing, where the Victorian theatre is located, recognizes its history as a pleasure palace and acknowledges its status as a listed building. This was granted in particular on the basis of the spaces of the Great Hall at the Palace's centre, where concerts and music hall evenings took place, as well as the theatre.

Found/Futures

This scene outlines what Alexandra Palace could be for, how it could be programmed, reaching toward its next phase of existence with new and adapted suggestions for revitalization and reprogramming as a tool for, and a driver of, regeneration. It offers answers about what else is missing there for sustainable operation, what else the public might want and what will tempt people to use their Palace this time around. Raul Lejano, Mill Ingram and Helen Ingram stress the importance of alternative methods for retrieving narratives to be used in the implementation of policy: "[A] purposeful attempt to collect a more complete narrative with multiple voices allows for different dimensions of actors to emerge.¹⁶ Hence, the writing reaches for a multi-layered cacophony rather than an ill-fated attempt at voicing an exhaustive array of 'representative figures'".

The plurivocal method leads to a portrait of a building and its use that feeds into a more nuanced regeneration, through its selection and creation of voices. It would then be more pointed too, through a focus on subjects and interview questions and placement within the writing structure. Paradoxically, this would lead to the portrait overall being more rounded, and there-

fore a stronger one. A public (or, rather, several layers of public) is needed to form and occupy a public space, according to their own patterns and preferences rather than or as well as those programmed into it. The individual experience is, visibly and audibly, part of the collective voice. By turns supporting and undermining official or institutional views with what is said in thematic or historiographical writing, the use of these voices is part of 'a process of joint storytelling, where the past drives the narrative onward into new territory',¹⁷ rather than the imposition of a single, sanitized, feel-good narrative.

Excerpts from Scene 5: 'Found/Futures'

[Enter: 'Christos']¹⁸

But hasn't it had its day? I'm sorry, it's a tatty old wreck. It would make more sense to build houses up there, flats for people in the borough? That's what we need more than anything in London, not just round here.

[Enter: 'Jan']¹⁹

I don't buy into the whole 'Our Ally Pally' thing. Ours on paper maybe, but how much say do we get? I mean, on anything? The council has always made a mess of it. I'd like to see a wing or a floor of the place being run as a community enterprise – so that we can make some of the actual decisions for ourselves for a change, see if we can do any better.

A building with a 150-year lifespan full of drama and mundanity is about to be given what is hoped to be a kind of rebirthing of all that it has meant and contained. The Palace itself is the story: it has become its own contents, the innards and the exterior and the depths, a kind of curatorial principle. As a free centre for a specific user group, locality or a particular use, the idea is out of time and too large an undertaking. As a purely commercial enterprise, it is more likely out of place and in the wrong time too. Other venues have the advantage of being purpose-built. And yet the Palace attracts bookings, audiences, backers, support and funding.



Fig. 4. South façade, main stairs and colonnades, Alexandra Palace, 2014. Image by Rosa Ainley

The strengths of the building accumulate on a mixed footing of overlaid opinion and its imbricated repetitions lead to both transformation and preservation. Retellings come from alterations: as the surface is disrupted, stories float up. Press play (again) and crank up the volume. Listen, can you hear it now? The arrival, the waiting, the new, on its way: this is how it starts.

Clive Aslet, in *Country Life*, was unusually supportive: 'Had the Emperor Diocletian chosen to make his home in Wood Green one feels this building might have been his,' he enthused²⁰. If Diocletian had relocated from Split, the majority of the building would never be seen by public eyes. This container would be viewed from afar, its royal inhabitants-contents the only, mostly unviewable, spectacle. There might be other echoes of the Palace as it is now in daily life – a ritual performance to mark an anniversary, a display of fireworks to celebrate a victory...

'Writing the building' using the plurivocal method can instigate the inclusion of narratives in a process of recovery, as partial responses to past and future plans and iterations. It is also designed to be transferable to other buildings with adaptations for their specific characteristics. The use of writing in and as architecture adds value to the literary in terms of research and in practice, as layers of expression and varied opinions and memories can feed into decisions about redevelopment under consideration. In its multi-layered approach this polyvocal method contributes knowledge for reworking the future use of the Palace, through discovery of what has been missing there at specific points in its history. In this process of examining how spaces were produced, how they exist now and how they can be renewed and transformed, it offers more than simply memorializing or reinstating forgotten strands of history. Alexandra Palace is more than one building, more than the three built versions and the two auxiliaries. The big shed, the container, is itself a theme park, with its contents of individual and



Fig. 5. Regeneration site hoarding, Alexandra Palace, 2014.
Image by Rosa Ainley

collective memories of popular culture, contemporaneous events and public entertainment, for everyday ordinary aristocracy in the People's Palace.

- 1 Rosa Ainley, *Writing Alexandra Palace: Plurivocity as a Method of Cultural Recovery of Buildings*, unpublished thesis (London: Royal College of Art, 2016).
- 1 2Adrian Forty, speaking at *Writing Architecture?* lecture series, Royal Academy of Arts, 31 March 2014, London.
- 3 Katherine Shonfield, *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City* (London: Routledge, 2000), 160.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 This was part of the original contribution of the research.
- 6 How people tell stories is equally important, as is the language they use and the reasons why they agree to talk to the interviewer.
- 7 Based on Anton Wüst, composer and conductor of internees' orchestra while detained at Alexandra Palace during the First World War.
- 8 1930s bowls club member; based on interview material.
- 9 Janet Harris, *Alexandra Palace: A Hidden History* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), 25.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Jonathan Hill, *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (London: Routledge 2005), 4.
- 12 Jill Stoner, *Towards a Minor Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).
- 13 In any case, only the intentions of Owen Jones, architect of the unbuilt design, are recorded, in his 1858 brochure.
- 14 Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982)
- 15 Organist and local curate, pre-Second World War.
- 16 Raul Lejano, Mrill Ingram and Helen Ingram (eds.), 'Linking Narratives to Practice' in *The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 194.
- 17 Ibid., 193.
- 18 c. 2015, a sceptic about new development, based on press cutting.
- 19 c. 2014, very local, very much a supporter of new plans, based on conversation.
- 20 Clive Aslet, 'People's Palace Lives Again', *Country Life*, 10 January 1985, 54.