

Factory Night @ Dundas House, Middlesbrough

Curious cartographers drawing invisible maps

The old adage '*Don't judge a book by its cover*' can be a difficult principle to abide by when first confronted by Middlesbrough's evocative skyline of arching cranes, zigzagging pylons, steaming cooling towers and elaborate industrial bridges. That this 'Teesside Rococo' influenced Ridley Scott's direction of *Blade Runner* is neither a secret, nor a surprise. The close coupling of industrial extravagance with urban decay is, at first glance, reminiscent of a fittingly science-fiction dystopia (just think *Mad Max* meets *Metropolis*). But surface appearances, and historical accounts, can be misleading. What draws these 30-odd artists, architects and creative practitioners from all over the country to an empty former-office block is not simply an interest in aspirational modernist architecture but a deeper curiosity concerning a place, its people and its social history.

From the 7th floor of Dundas House we look down upon a landscape of flat, concrete roofs and quiet pedestrianized streets. Opposite our vantage point, a loop of seagulls hang on the upwind generated by a 17 storey block of empty offices, swaying as if suspended there by invisible strings. Further out from the centre, row upon row of grey monopoly houses stretch out in uniform little terraces and beyond those, the low horizon and swelling clouds of the North Sea at Redcar. As everyone arrives and congregates with an assortment of greetings, sketchpads and hot drinks in takeaway cups we are met by Suzanne and Janine from Rednile who introduce their collaborators and the order of the weekend. The project begins with Alan Dowson, described to us with the correction "not a historian but a social anthropologist". Dowson, now living in Peterborough, occupies a very particular time and place in Middlesbrough's history; namely those formative years of his youth during the 1950s which he spent in a part of town long since demolished as part of the urban clearance schemes of the 60s and 70s – The Wilson Hill Street neighbourhood. As his talk moved amongst the idiosyncrasies, customs and self-contained ecologies of the former Victorian terraces we were persistently reminded of the need to *look closely* rather than rush to assumptions. The generalising effects of history have often daubed Middlesbrough - and many Northern towns whose evolution was propelled by the Industrial Revolution - as drab and grey places (just think of the oft quoted, infrequently challenged trope '*It's grim up North*'). Even those voices which have extolled the city – Gladstone called it the "Infant Hercules" during his 1862 trip to Teesside – have been those of the industrialists and politicians which only serve to monumentalize and aggrandise. What Dowson's talk introduced us to -and what our encounters throughout the weekend would remind us - was the human, personal and highly subjective heart of any town or history that we would need to observe quietly, carefully and persistently rather than succumb to dehumanising overgeneralisations or be seduced by its icons of industry (The Transporter bridge, The Riverside Stadium etc).

One of the overwhelming first impressions I had of the city of Middlesbrough was of a place whose landscape had been shaped with a utilitarian purpose, now all but vanished. This impression was mirrored in Dundas house itself; formerly the site of The Middlesbrough Winter Gardens (1907 – 1963) as demarked by an inconspicuous blue plaque in the back alley between bins and anti-theft barbed wire; then rebuilt as a BT call centre (the open plan offices still containing the furniture and

documents of its former occupants); now it stands as an almost empty building whose heritage resembles an archaeology of Middlesbrough's own short history from industry, to commerce, to occupation (a few floors of the building having been recently taken over as artists studios and offices for Navigator North). Entering the building as I did through the basement car park, there is a highly poetic transition which takes place from the dark, chaotic, subterranean (or 'nonconscious') of the building up through the back service lift towards the light and quiet top floor with its panoramic views of the town. But if the top floor is, as Bachelard suggested, the 'clear thinking mind' of the building, the zenith of its enlightened consciousness, then there is something very peculiar about the mind and psyche of Dundas House... The top floor, unlike any other in the building, is divided into a series of smaller roof rooms. The layout seems more like that of a holiday bungalow in Wales than an office block in Middlesbrough with one family-sized room leading off into the next. This incongruous appearance of faux-domesticity is heightened by the faded and peeling floral wallpaper and the antiquated, tar-stained net curtains. Occasionally the faint smell of cigarette smoke emanated from the walls or one of the few remaining furnishings, evoking a stale but ghostly atmosphere. For a while some of us stood in silence, gazing at the dead flies, the cracked wall paper, our feet, inhaling, exhaling, thoughts drifting to past occupants who must have done the same... inhaling, exhaling... thinking their own thoughts and looking out at the view of Middlesbrough...

As we move through the building the idiosyncrasies of each floor (defined for the most part by their original use and purpose) contribute to a growing sense of the impermanence and fragility of everything. The 'smoking flat' embodied a time and place when it was not only socially permissible to smoke indoors, but defined as a leisurely activity: one to be enjoyed in homely, comfortable surroundings distanced (literally and aesthetically) from the pressures of the work space. Similarly, the open plan offices of the floors below denote an approach to interior design once coveted by large businesses but since proven detrimental to the wellbeing and productivity of the workforce (due in part to increased stress and noise levels). There was a haunting, Mary Celeste quality to this experience; it was not the ruins of ancient history we were walking through but the relics of living memory and ideologies which had only recently been deserted, ruptured or undermined either through developments in the economy or ways of thinking. Most of those in the group could vividly remember the shift in the law to prohibit smoking indoors and even more had spent some time working in similar office layouts and call centres. The proximity to recent history both underlined the fragility of our own moment in time (and the inherent ideologies which we are perhaps often oblivious to) but also, for many of the group, this nearness of the past catalysed a sense of the nearness of the future and of their role in elucidating, shaping and building that future.

The second presentation of the day was given by Tim Bailey - Partner and Architect from Xsite Architecture (Newcastle and Middlesbrough) - offering an insight into the ways in which Middlesbrough has been defined and shaped by the coupling of Industrial innovation and individual visionaries. His overview telescoped between the few remaining, locatable monuments in Middlesbrough and their unique relationship to wider social, historical and economic context (such as the Dock Clock Tower, originally built in 1847 but without clock hands in order to prevent the workers from clockwatching). From near dereliction to flamboyant town 'Master Plans' Bailey's presentation was both an overview of the landscape seen through the enquiring, socially motivated perspective of an architect but also an opportunity for the group to start asking some fundamental questions about the project, their location and their responses to both. Some of these began to lace their way into the post-talk conversations; *What would a contemporary monument in*

Middlesbrough look like? What is the social utility (if any) of art and architecture? Who are we making this work for and what do they want and need?

Over the course of the weekend I followed the group as they scouted the streets like voracious explorers, collecting fragments of urban poetry, photographing the ephemeral monuments of human activity and talking to anyone who stopped long enough to gather and trade thoughts, opinions or stories. Many of the group continued their enquiry back at Dundas House as they started to translate and explore their ideas further through making; one artist traced the perimeters of an office cubicle with a microphone, the sound projecting back out into the empty office space, another hung sheets of fine, luminous gauze from the ceiling which seemed to dematerialize space, suffusing it with pure colour and light, others filmed, photographed and sketched. What struck me profoundly about the whole event was the way in which the project seemed to develop *both* collectively, individually and intrasubjectively... As the group of thirty-something individuals compared and collated findings, exchanged ideas and conversations, it was as though an imaginative re-mapping of the town was occurring... This invisible, co-authored map was neither static nor finite but mutable, open and organic. Dundas House became a locus for the project, a rhizome of sorts whose roots extended across the invisible networks developing between participants, propelled by their curiosity and extending out into their own unique universes of thoughts and influences. Where the project takes them, individually and collectively, is yet to be seen but whatever unknown routes it takes, I'm convinced it will be somewhere enriched by the collaborative approach to thinking and making.

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