

Hidden Doors Days 2023 – Outer Spaces on Henderson Row

The annual Doors Open Days offer public access to buildings which are not usually accessible. It can be a great treat to explore places that you are aware of but have never actually been inside.

These are, In Donald Rumsfeld's term, the 'known unknowns'. The event can also make you aware of buildings or institutions you had no knowledge of; the 'unknown unknowns'.

For me, this was the case with the building at 57 Henderson Row, recently vacated by Royal London Insurance. It's a building I often wander past or round the back of but rarely pay much attention to it. Parts of the façade of the building derive from the Tram Depot which stood here before, so it's a reminder of the industrial heritage of the Silvermills area. The modern 'iteration' of this building (from 1988) reeks of late 1980s / early 1990s corporate pastiche and first housed Scottish Life Assurance.



57 Henderson Row featuring the façade of the old tram depot. Something more creative is now going on within its bland walls. Like the nearby WASPS gallery and studios at Patriothall, what is going on inside is in line with the artistic tradition of the area. 57 Henderson Row has been taken over by the arts organisation [OuterSpaces](#) which makes use of vacant buildings, turning them into hubs of temporary studio and project spaces. Offering low cost art spaces is a way of moderating some of the effects of gentrification which often drives out artists from such areas of the city. At present over 30 artists are based there, their creative activities juxtaposing with the corporate blandness of the space.



Radical Uncertainty

Entering the building on Saturday was an adventure. It reminded me of the radical uncertainty often involved in attending Free Fringe shows (where is the room? Is the show on today? Will it be any good, or am I in for 50 minutes of 'Fringe cringe?'). The ground floor had a Mary Celeste feel, feel with empty corridors and darkened rooms. In the largely unlit spaces, strange lights and sounds made the visitor uneasy. There was a pervasive sense that the visitor had taken the wrong turn and shouldn't be in this place. One section is still 'off limits': Royal London data is still being removed from these 'forbidden zones'. In one room, a flickering video played on a loop, featuring leaves and other flora flickering in the wind. It all added to a chilling, disturbing atmosphere – as I'm sure was the intention.



Having survived the post-apocalyptic ground floor, the other parts of the building were filled with the welcome sounds of human voices and human activity. Here visitors encountered a myriad of temporary studios and creative spaces, with artists on hand; keen to discuss their work and their experience of working in this space. Sophia Bharmal, who has been based at Outer Spaces since April, typified the enthusiasm shown by many of the artists. For her, moving to Edinburgh had been a personal and creative release after the “claustrophobia” of London. Her work centres on natural environments, which she finds in great abundance in Edinburgh. She hopes to be based in the building “semi – longish”.

Hidden Doors Open

The second floor has been taken over by the [Hidden Door](#) organisation. The building is a manifestation of their desire to see unused spaces in the city come alive through creative activity. Interim Festival Director of Hidden Door, Hazel Johnson, was clearly delighted that the organisation has a base as spacious as this. Having a large space also allows the

organisation to store materials, ensuring that as much as possible could be reused. This is all in line with the organisation's core philosophy of creative reuse.



Johnson feels that the evolution of Hidden Door is one of “deepening” rather than growth in scale. She is keen that Hidden Door retains its grassroots aspect and provides access to all (for example allowing free access to the venues during the daytime). Reflecting on the range of buildings that Hidden Door has used in recent years, Johnson was proud that Hidden Door had helped reinvigorate old (Leith Theatre) and neo-classical buildings (the old Royal High School) but also ‘modernist’ mid/late 20th century buildings, which often receive a lot of flak. Hidden Door certainly helped to show off the qualities of the Scottish Widows building – [the sprawling location of their event this year](#). Though within the architectural fraternity, such buildings are now being re-evaluated, they are still often considered monstrosities by

many people. Johnson wanted to show that such buildings were “not an eyesore but an opportunity”.

Johnson related that discussions were still ongoing as to the venue of the 2024 Hidden Door, but wouldn't be drawn on which places were being considered. My own view would be that the area of Edinburgh crying out for an injection of Hidden Door's cultural energy is right in the heart of the city: Princes Street. It's currently in a transitional stage, still seeking a new purpose. Fundamental changes in shopping habits have raised questions about the viability of the high street . As the [FT put it recently](#), ‘the high street is dead and the country is awash with defunct shopping space thanks to the unstoppable digital juggernauts.’ A number of those vacant department stores (such as Debenhams) would surely be a fantastic setting for Hidden Door. Such an event could perhaps counteract the declinist narratives that pervade public discussion of the city centre (‘it's dead’, ‘it used to be so great’ etc): that change is not necessarily decline.

Abstract(s) Art

The temporary signage in the building was the responsibility of the ‘independent curator, producer and writer’ [Iain Irving](#). The retired college lecturer, who has been involved with a wide variety of cultural institutions (including Fruitmarket), has taken up one of the spaces in the building. He's found it a energising place to work. Here he turns the cultural themes of his essays into posters and T-Shirts. These lists of thinkers, creatives (and the evocative terms they use to describe trends in culture and society) are intriguing. The contents of these essays stem from the themes he has heard discussed publicly by creatives: he regularly attends cultural talks and presentations. Before you read the essay, these ‘abstracts’ offer you clues as to the themes he will discuss. It's an interesting way of illustrating the inherent creativity of the writing process; that it should not be considered distinct from the visual arts.



It's hard not to contrast what is happening at 57 Henderson Row with the vast demolition site around the corner at the former RBS building on Dundas Street/ Fettes Row. Could those buildings not have been creatively reused? Instead, it's currently a vast space of dust and destruction. In contrast, the vitality and creativity on show at 57 Henderson Row offers a powerful restatement of Hidden Door's philosophy of the concealed potential of the buildings we overlook.

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