

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the organisers of this conference—Christoph, Hans and André—for giving me the opportunity to talk here today about my desires, in my designs for public spaces, to heighten people's consciousness—through the experiences of each project—of a continuously unfolding and manifold present, through which might come the possibility of meetings with others and the world; and some kinds of freedom.

This is a story about attempts to make two public places, each of which was intended to engage its publics, each wanting to affect consciousness among them, each designed to invoke interpretation and memory, each attempting to afford a place for individuals in which they could appear—in the world—among others, amidst the ideas, utterances, representations and appearances of others, from other times.

The public space is a 'space of appearances': it is not only a space in which people appear, to themselves and each other, but in a place that consents to and affords the possibility of these appearances.¹ The public space is also the place in which the utterances of others appear: in configurations, in buildings, their purposes and 'appearances', which may be approached, seen, and interpreted. There is a great variety of these spaces of appearances, but I will speak about the representation of significant public space—germane to the city—in which the idea of a town or institution is meant to be manifest, and people are to appear in a 'theatre' of representations. One cannot help but think of the medieval Italian city in this regard.

In a public space, one may be seen; one may represent oneself as oneself and with others as citizens, and as legitimate, and so may feel afforded the right to speak. This is political. The public space is political. The fact of the one's appearance in this designated space of appearances implies potential or involvement in the political, as 'agonist', as is seen most recently in protests in America, Minsk or Hong Kong. In environments in which subjectivities have been formed but the subjects are not permitted to challenge those constructs which subjugate them, this kind of appearance is deemed—rightly by oppressive regimes—to be 'dangerous'.²

One desires a condition in which the political is possible; one desires a condition in which people can assemble with purpose. One desires a condition in which people can be together without purpose (except to appear), and can be individuals among others, with their own thoughts; free: free to appear, free to follow their own purpose, free to be anonymous, free to

¹ "Action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear as other appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."
—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958) 198-199

² Chantal Mouffe (2013) *Agonistics: thinking the world politically*

associate, free to act. And the public space must accept difference, many-fold-ness, variousness, heterogeneity, otherness. Two designs for public spaces address this: the first, *La scala*, imagines something like the condition of the Italian medieval city; the second *World*, provides a field for the imagination of the individual.³

La scala

Overlooking the Welsh town of Aberystwyth, I wanted to revive a place in which the values invested in the site in the 1960s might present themselves, renewed, in the present. And that there might be a reconciliation between the present and that past, through the representational ideas proposed in the 1960s; that the place, through another investment in its life, might be repaired, and again afford the possibility of human association and individual freedom. And that this, furthermore, would be situated within not only its theatre of values and ideas, but the visible world, and the cosmos.

When Sir Percy Thomas and his office designed the Penglais campus at the University of Wales (1969), they saw an Italianate town on a hill, a three-sided square overlooking the town and Bae Caradigion. The open square was called the *Piazza*; a boiler flu tower was fitted with a bell and called the *Campanile*; around it stood the Arts Centre, the Student Union building, and the Library, while a parapet served as a continuous seat on the square's open side. A ten-metre square void punctured the *Piazza* for a stair leading down to the town and the sea.

The architects of the Penglais campus had imagined a civic space, one reminiscent of the medieval Italian city, in which significant entities were represented, and seen by the city's citizens as the preeminent figures of their societies: the Comune, the prominent family, the Church. Here, Todi, in Umbria, whose institutions wore their significance on their sleeves: in their mass, expression, and outsized affordances, so rendering a picture of civic order, and inspiring behaviour that reinforced it. The Piazza Grande at Gubbio may have also been a model, its Palazzo dei Consoli a megastructure both creating and framing the square that at once displayed its important protagonists, and set them, and all the citizens that gathered between them, on a stage that looked over the city's landscape in the valley below.

In making a work for this place, I thought it important to extend the idea that the architects had used, evoking a fragment of a civic world as the representative centre of university campus that would embrace all who used it. It was an idea that must have been shared with those who commissioned it, and the community who then used it. However, by the end of the twentieth century, this idea had been lost. The public place had become, in people's

³ See Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'; Richard Sennett, 'Interiority', Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, George Baird, *The Space of Appearances*

minds, a space disfigured, rather than configured, by 60s Brutalist architecture, an idea imposed by others who had nothing to do with what users thought of as 'us'.

I designed a monumental artefact—which I called *La scala*—that would cleave to all the figures drawn around the *Piazza*, and render the narrative that informed their gathering more visible, more palpable. *La scala* is a tribune perched on legs, slightly turned to face the sea, its undercroft forming a *loggia* facing the Student Union building and those entering the *Piazza* from above. It is a place to sit; a place to gather; a place to look at others, to see the scene, the scenery, the sea and the town; a place to shelter from the rain; and a device that would, through its presence, create other places within the *Piazza* whose possible uses had been obscured by time and habit.

I wanted the other elements of the ensemble to either regain their significance, or find their inferred uses revived: the entrance to the Student Union, the steps of the Arts Centre, and the parapet-seat of the *Piazza* and around the void of the stair leading down to the town. Like the architects of the campus, I also wanted to re-iterate the ideas that tied this arrangement to its utterance at other moments in time: from the present (2003, when *La scala* was completed) to the late 1960s when the campus was built; to the mid-1300s in towns like Gubbio or Todi, or a century later in Pienza; and still much further back, to Greece and Epidaurus, in which political life, whether at the Pnyx in Athens or the theatre at Epidaurus, took place against the setting of the world beyond.

The quasi-civic space in Aberystwyth had been made for a rather specific public of students, teachers, supporting staff, cleaners, repairmen, performing artists, and visitors to the Arts Centre: theatre- or cinema-goers, art viewers. Visitors can either ascend from the town through a broad stair through the *Piazza* or descend from another, between the Student Union and the Arts Centre into the *Piazza*, where they see the figure of *La scala*, framed by the ensemble of buildings. Or, they emerge from the Arts Centre, the Student Union or the Library. All visitors arrive at this metaphysical plain, this significant place, and here, they too, appear, as in a clearing or on a stage, significant, all of them.

The elemental character of *La scala* itself, from its rough frame to its steps—all in board-marked and precast concrete—was intended to evoke both the ruins of the ancient world and the campus's foundation myth as a civic idea, a social and urbane ideal. *La scala* was intended to re-present this ideal, and to reveal it afresh within the buildings of the campus and in each approach to the space they shared. Through this artefact, whose identity was contingent on its condition and all its figures, I hoped to allow the whole space to become, simply, a theatre for people's relations to each other and to others, to past ideals made present, to the town, the landscape around it, the sea beyond it, the horizon, and the cosmos: the world.

World

Almost as soon as *La scala* was completed, I was commissioned to design a project for the space to be surrounded by the buildings of BBC's Broadcasting House in central London.

The space had been the L-shaped termination of Langham Street in Fitzrovia, spilling into Langham Place, the meeting point of Upper Regent Street and Portland Place. As the extensions to Broadcasting House would cover a portion of Langham Street and create a long courtyard oriented toward the spire of All Souls Langham Place, designed by John Nash.⁴

Rather than proposing a discrete object for the space, I proposed a surface that would fill it, and spread across the entire site. As in Aberystwyth, as well as projects for New Delhi, Montréal, Tokyo, and London,⁵ I wanted to make a place which piece individually and among others, could see themselves 'in the world'; and very simply, I proposed that the space, addressing All Souls and slipping under the covered portion of Langham Street, was a portion of a sphere, on which one could stand and walk: an idealised landscape, a fragment of the world, hence, *World*.

The place was made ostensibly for the BBC, and so alluded to aspects of its identity and work, notably that of the World Service, which was being broadcast worldwide in over forty languages at the time. I thought about the experience of listening to the radio in the night, and the voices and stories from other places: where they lived, their lives. I thought about the imagination, and imagining other places, other lives, other histories, other times: a world of events, memories, associations.

A public place is rarely designated as such. Rather, it is taken to be public by those who use it, who then take possession of it, as citizens, and as individuals. I did not intend this place at the BBC to be a corporate plaza, regardless of the character of its 'sponsor': it was a public thoroughway, the outflow of a real street, with real people wandering through it on their ways back and forth between Fitzrovia and the West End; a shortcut deeply ingrained in common habit. It is also where people enter the BBC, from journalists to politicians; academics, scientists and economists, to celebrities, musicians and actors. It is a place where reality and a measure of fantasy mingle. It is a place for casual and contrived meetings, collisions, a place for purposes, a place for standing and waiting, a place for watching, a place for others.

I wanted, first, for people to feel as though they stood or walked across a piece of the world, a fragment that might stand for or be taken for this whole planet of people. When thinking

⁴ Richard MacCormack, MJP Architects, 2000-2013. The art commission for World came from an invited competition arranged by modus operandi art consultants in 2003.

⁵ Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, competition project, Mark Pimlott and Peter St John (1986); Place Jacques-Cartier, Montréal, competition project, Mark Pimlott and Tony Fretton (1990); Tokyo International Forum, competition project, Mark Pimlott and Peter St John (1990); A Higher Place, Roayl Docks, London, unrealized public art commission, Mark Pimlott, 1997

about a fragment of a sphere that might represent the whole world, I thought of a globe, marked by lines of longitude and latitude, and by names of places, which one might pass over while walking, which could be imagined as seen from the air, as though on a great flight. And this landscape could be thought of as inhabited, at which point one might consider the lives of others within it. I thought that this surface should be illuminated, as though the places below were alive, lit up by those who lived there. I remembered the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who, remembering Apollo 11's flight to the Moon in 1969, spoke of flying over the Sahara and seeing the fires of Bedouin nomads there, from space. I thought of the lives that were lived on our shared surface, and how names of places might cause those walking over this square to imagine them and the conditions of their existence.

I thought, too, when listening to the radio at night, of the Shipping Forecast, and the litany that accompanied the weather readings for sections of the sea surrounding Britain and Eire: their names all suggesting a concrete poetry. "Viking; North Utsire; South Utsire; Forties; Cromarty"... As one walks across the surface of this place, one might read those names in a similar litany, connecting them, and then think of those places, others, the events, ideas or worlds they embodied; and then, as one continued to walk, and read, one name following another, their sequences would yield whole realms of associations histories, and experiences would come to mind. These names were drawn from my own memory and perspective, drawn from the information filtered through western media to a white, anglophone suburban boy who went to expo67 and was affected by the ideology of 'The Family of Man', 'Terre des hommes', Glenn Gould's 'Idea of North' and Pierre Eliot Trudeau's proposition of Canada as cultural mosaic: a set of inherited narratives, fictions: Eurocentric, colonial, and not dissimilar to the perspectives held by the BBC itself. The names were variously well-known, or were places of infamy, sites of disasters, catastrophes or atrocities; of origins and beginnings; of endings; of faith; of notoriety and celebrity; of mystery and lost pasts; and of natural figures: lakes, islands, mountains, rivers, familiar and remote.

These names were scattered in clouds or constellations, tied together forever through their shared pasts, their shared fates; twinned, bound. As one stands over these names, bronze letters set in a square of granite, each stone serves as a marker for its present and its past. Occasionally, a speaker in the surface can be heard to be speaking from another place, in its language, inaudible in the day, yet just audible at night as one drifts past, as though voices raised from a living world.

I imagined a public, a public of individuals together, imagining their own interior lives; the lives of others; the circumstances of other places and other times; and in this state of reverie or reflection, feeling both humbled and comforted by this world under their feet; on their own, but not alone; free in themselves.

Thank you.