

One-Day Symposium – Call for Papers

LIMINAL LONDON

Real and Unreal Spaces of the 20th Century Metropolis

Friday 21 February 2020, Keynes Library, Birkbeck School of Arts

9.30am – 5.45pm, followed by a drinks reception and short performance

Convenors: Jo Cottrell, PhD candidate, History of Art, Birkbeck

Alistair Cartwright, PhD candidate, History of Art, Birkbeck

Supported by the Architecture Space and Society Centre (ASSC), Birkbeck



In his book *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher discusses a short story from 1911 by HG Wells, 'The Door in the Wall'. The door of the title is a passage, a threshold between two worlds: between the 'low class streets' of a certain part of West Kensington, and a place of strange beatitude and languor, a garden of sorts, where objects and beings are clothed in an atmosphere of 'translucent unreality'. It is this sense of unreality that haunts the main character of the story and which leads Fisher to propose that 'the Real does not *feel* real'. Perhaps just as interesting, however, is the inverse proposition: that the unreal carries its own banal impressions of reality. The door in the wall is a passage *beyond*, but it is also utterly grounded in the reality of the unreal. It is ultimately no more than an opening in a building site hoarding, which shields behind it the deep excavation into which Wells's protagonist, in a state of supposed delirium, will eventually fall. Through its pivoting between between actual and virtual spaces, between the reality of the unreal, and the unreality of the real, the door in the wall becomes an example of that extremely broad yet special category of spaces that Foucault called 'heterotopias'. From train carriages, to cemeteries, libraries, and fairgrounds, heterotopias, for Foucault, are 'enacted utopia[s] in which [...] all the other real sites within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.' Such spaces, it will be suggested, while they often mix oppressive features with emancipatory ones, have been essential crucibles of modernity in the capital, acting as condensers, catalysts, suspension chambers, and mirrors of twentieth century London society.

Liminal London invites 250 word proposals for cross-disciplinary papers of 20 minutes from (but not limited to) history of art, architectural history, urban history, historical geography, visual culture, film studies and literature that consider the existence of heterotopic sites and other spaces straddling the real and the unreal throughout London in the twentieth century. Papers might examine spaces that exist between the public and the private, and the heteroclitic communities that have gathered there, considering how such spaces have fostered modes of cosmopolitan life, and helped overcome – or alternatively reinforced – inequalities of race, class, gender and sexuality.

Themes for investigation might include:

- London clubs, whether bourgeois, working class or more eclectic in their clientele
- Frequently marginalised domestic spaces, such as boarding houses, residential hotels, and other forms of multiple occupancy housing.

- The dual nature of facades, thresholds, doorways and other surfaces of 'translucent unreality'
- 'Hidden' and subterranean spaces
- Spaces of display and consumption
- The problematics of the 'exotic' and the influence of empire in constructing heterotopias within the capital
- Avant-garde performance spaces and gatherings that incubated utopian, dystopian and heterotopian visions of society and the city
- Queer spaces and spaces of black safety/celebration – for example blues clubs in Notting Hill in the 1950s-60s
- 'Underground' spaces in the history of political radicalism, whether these be people's homes, squatted spaces, community centres or the network of informal meeting places used for organising
- The real and unreal nature of property and the financialisation of the built environment

All paper proposals should be sent to liminallondon2020@gmail.com

Deadline for proposals: Thursday 9th January 2020

Liminal London aims to foster inclusivity and diversity. We are especially concerned to encourage and enhance representation and participation from under-represented groups, and to develop an environment rooted in belief of equal respect for all persons.