

Flatland

Location	Context	Function	Designers	Date
SculptureCentre, New York, USA	The Happiness of Objects Exhibition	Living space for three weeks	Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley	2007



Figure 4.20 The thin, concentrated slither of a space focused the living arrangements of the six occupants for the three weeks that it was occupied.

Based on the Edwin Abbott novella, we made a building four storeys tall, twenty-four feet wide, and two-feet deep. Six of us committed to occupying the structure for three weeks with the only rule being “you can leave at any time, but thereafter you cannot re-enter”. My fantasy at the beginning of this work was that we would quickly change the building in reaction to a space that constrained us.

– Alex Schweder.⁶²

The book *Flatland, A Romance in Many Directions* by Edwin Abbott describes a two-dimensional world occupied by geometric figures. The narrator is ‘A Square’, who leads the reader through an elaborate narrative on the implications of living in a world that is completely flat. The book, a satire on the limits of perspective, inspired Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley to develop a living space, for six people, inside a gallery. It was an installation that was designed to test, to the very limits of some of the occupants, how a certain number of people could cohabit, when their environment was a severely constraining, narrow and flat space.

view to exploring the analysis of an intense, time-based function of a very particular space. The idea that six people were to co-exist in this project, in a public gallery, non-stop, and on full show for three weeks (apart from an enclosed bathroom unit, housing a toilet and shower), with food ordered online and delivered to the installation, ensured that the designers needed to carefully consider what would be needed to survive the duration of the installation. The constraints of the four storey, 18 square metre space, 7 metres wide and just 0.6 metres deep, were carefully detailed in order to allow the space to function for its occupants. As well as the analysis of the proposed function of the space, it needed to stand up and also be safe. So its form and its structure were carefully considered and detailed in order to ensure that it remained upright and structurally sound in the gallery space. As members of the public walked around it, and watched the everyday lives of the occupants unfold throughout the exhibition period, their safety needed to be carefully considered as well as ensuring that the spectacle before their eyes was permanently available for close scrutiny.

Analysis

This work can be thought of as an architectural caricature, a building that exaggerates something already occurring in and through architecture – namely, the construction of relationships between inhabitants through/by/as affected by the spaces they occupy. All too often unnoticed, these changes to our subjectivity have been habituated... If the walls allow sounds to permeate from the adjoining flat, we find ourselves changing how we use the space.⁶³

Figure 4.21 Model: The installation was specifically designed to be structurally secure and yet leave no long-lasting impact upon the fabric of the gallery once it was removed.

Flatland was initiated and produced with a



During the duration of the project, three people left *Flatland*. Over the first week, the group had split into two groups, those that favoured disordered environments, and were comfortable with some clutter and disruption, and those that preferred a much more orderly and tidy environment. Those that generated the disordered environment soon found the space too constraining, and because of their disorganised tendencies were chastised by the group favouring the ordered space, particularly as the disorder encroached on both groups' use of the space and had a significant impact on the environment. In this type of situation, a small space with significant restrictions, even the smallest disruption, such as some discarded rubbish or a misplaced object such as a book, had an enormous impact upon each of the participants. Every centimetre of space became contested as it needed to be utilised and so every scrap of space was scrutinised for its value in the everyday life of the participants. After ten

days, the group of disordered occupants abandoned the structure. The three remaining participants stayed in the installation to the end of the show, peacefully going about their daily business and remaining aware of the impact upon their fellow co-habitants of the structure.

As Alex Schweder's previous comment shows, *Flatland* set out to caricature spatial relationships between inhabitants. In the end it made a very important point, one that could be considered as fundamental to the design of interior space. When the space and the relationships between the people in it become coterminous, and both become attuned to certain sensibilities of how environments can be utilised and adapted for shared use, there is a requirement for a tacit agreement between participants as to how each other's behaviours and actions impacts upon every inhabitant of the space. How reciprocity had become a critical strategy for the successful occupation on the environment.

Strategy

Installation is a strategy where the placement of an object within a certain building will heighten awareness of the existing without compromising or overtly affecting the container it is positioned within. In other words, the installation will not necessarily be without any relationship to the host building, but it is an unwritten rule that the existing space becomes the backdrop to the installed element within it. Often the installation will be arranged or positioned in the space in order to give maximum impact to the elements, but it is generally assumed that the host space will need few, if any, minor modifications or changes to the space or building in order to successfully host the installation. This



Figure 4.22 The occupants carried on their daily business inside the installation whilst on show to the gallery visitors.

approach ensures that it is the main spectacle within the environment in which it is contained: the host plays a subsidiary role in the importance of the project.

Flatland was designed and conceived to host the six occupants for three weeks in such a way as to make them safe, and for the installation to be structurally secure, yet once the exhibition was over, it could be removed with little or no effect on the existing building. For the duration of the project, the Sculpture Centre environment became little more than a backdrop or stage for the performance of the installation. Flatland was a performance piece. It was a piece of interior architecture that was very constraining for the occupants, and a space where every move had to be carefully considered because of the impact it would have upon each of the other inhabitants. Because of these tight constraints, the four storey element became

difficult to modify or adapt, as each change had to be agreed with the other occupants of the space. These negotiations became difficult to achieve for two reasons.

Because of the narrowness of the installation, it was impossible to arrange a meeting because nobody could physically do anything other than stand in a line within the half a metre wide structure.

Secondly the breakdown in communication between the different groups ensured difficulties in reciprocating or negotiating between the occupants and the building. Ironically, what started as an experiment in providing a framework for inhabitation, in which both behaviours and the building would be adapted and modified to their needs and desires, became a constraining framework that restricted co-habitation and ultimately caused friction between differing forms of living.

Figure 4.23 The constraining framework of the installation ultimately reinforced the requirement to negotiate occupant relations during co-habitation.



Figure 4.24 The narrow space confined its inhabitants within the steel structure.



Tactics

Movement

In this project movement and its negotiation became of utmost importance. The occupants moved vertically between the four levels of the building on ladders placed internally in the structure of the space. This required subtle negotiation, not just between the participants moving between floors and agreeing how each can use the ladders (for instance, who could come down and who could move up) but also between all of the inhabitants of the structure as it physically moved as people traversed the object and moved around it. For instance, if one of the occupants was undertaking something that required focus, then a moving building was not conducive to an activity such as reading.

Openings

The open structure of the space allowed all of the occupants, as well as the elements of the installation, to be viewed from all sides of the gallery. The only enclosed space was the bathroom, itself plumbed in with hot and cold running water. Whilst the bathroom was enclosed, if anybody was using it their absence would be known, through their disappearance from view.

The lack of significant acoustic separation in the bathroom space would probably also reveal who was in the bathroom. Therefore the performance aspect of *Flatland* was permanently ongoing. As visitors entered and moved through the gallery spaces, they could view everything occurring in the structure through the open framework: a spectacle of an exhibition of everyday life.

Object

Carefully placed objects in space can provide new and innovative ways with which to view space. The four storey structure was a dominating and powerful element placed centrally within the gallery. The only relationship it had to the existing building was that it could fit within the tall existing space. The open structure of *Flatland*, exposed all of the different uses of the space, and how each occupant had ordered their own private, yet very public, spaces.