

The Agents of Change: 'Generous Street'

"Cities should be filled with moments of generosity" The AoC

AoC are an architectural and design research agency – founded by Tom Coward, Daisy Froud, Vincent Lacovara and Geoff Shearcroft – whose ethos is characterised by inventiveness, wit and playfulness, and as the title suggests here, a civic-spiritedness and uncommon generosity.

'Generous Street' is a research project into the objects that surround us on a daily basis in the public realm – those features, fixtures, and facilities that get placed under the umbrella term of 'street furniture'. The project originated, as the group note, in "exploring the potential of a redundant piece of street furniture" by giving it an "alternative use" when objects such as phone boxes have become largely redundant at a time when there are more mobile phones in England than there are people.

In The AoC's view, what characterises England's cities in relation to continental neighbours, is their configuration and use of urban public space. In the 21st century English city, the central business district is becoming mall-space: covered, glazed, sanitised, and continually watched over on CCTV. In medium-sized cities particularly, the remaining external public spaces are littered with 'street furniture' or 'improved' with public art. What kind of intervention might architects and artists make to reinvigorate a public space without domesticating it? How can social segregation be lessened or ameliorated in civic spaces?

One of the practice's answers is to provide "somewhere to sit, somewhere to wait, somewhere to watch, somewhere to meet". Their work in 'North and South' is in essence a proposal for how our cities' spaces might be re-utilised; how both familiar spaces might be resignified, and how a familiar object might be resignified to offer a whole new raft of connotations. Their use of an iconic decommissioned K6 phone box designed by Gilbert Scott is key here; the government-sponsored website 'www.icons.org.uk' identified it as not only one of the best-loved sights on city streets, but as one of the most commonly identified visual signifiers of national identity. Like red 'Routemaster' buses, now also decommissioned, the K6 remains synonymous with England.

The AoC's use of the K6 relies upon its existing associations and universal familiarity; their radical remodelling of it accordingly calls these existing associations into doubt. The group pick up on the genesis of the K6's

and its part of a very English narrative of transformation, whose basic facts are, in the group's own words:

"Sir John Soane makes a tomb for his wife. A one-off piece of miniature, high-architecture. Representative of early 19th century English privilege.

"Soane's tomb is transformed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott into the design for a phone box. A single design is repeated across the UK. Representative of 20th century democratisation, and the provision of utilities to the masses.

"The AoC take the redundant phone box and transform it again to make 'Generous Street'. The phone box provides a super generous kit of parts. Pregnant with possibility and meaning – these parts can be reconfigured in endless ways in the public realm, as appropriate. An open-ended, bottom-up, context-responsive, pluralistic proposal. Appropriate for the 21st century...

Table and chairs, band stand, ladder, shower, see-saw, folly, eye catcher, food vendor's stool, kiosk, memorial, tomb...Lots of site-specific, inventive, generous customisations."

