



**Artist's View** Enclosed with this issue of C20 is a work by the artists Ewan Forster and Christopher Heighes. Catherine Croft introduces them and their projects

# The lives of buildings

Ewan Forster and Christopher Heighes describe themselves as site-specific performance and installation artists. They met as undergraduates at Dartington College of Arts, a small college with an excellent reputation for innovative performance arts which was founded on the Dartington Estate in Devon in 1961. By the time they arrived, in the 1980s, it was linked to Plymouth University.

The Society has visited Dartington to see High Cross House and other buildings built there for the school set up in the 1920s by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst. These were designed by the Swiss-born American architect William Lescaze (most famous for the pioneering Philadelphia Savings Fund Society skyscraper of 1932), but there are 14th century buildings there too. Walter Gropius worked on the theatre, Arts & Crafts architect William Weir restored the Great Hall, and many famous people visited or were associated with the school. It is just the

sort of multi-layered site which Forster and Heighes' work has since explored.

The two have been working in partnership since 1993, and see the research they do into buildings and architects as a critical part of each project. How they gather and record information, and how they share ideas and responses, has gradually evolved and led to some quite diverse work.

I first came across them when they presented *Middle English*, described as 'a performance lecture' at the Art Workers' Guild in 2002. This was an exploration of Whitelands College, Putney, designed by Giles Gilbert Scott in 1930, but with an Arts & Crafts pre-history. The performance pulled together smocking, Schoenberg and Ruskin, as well as building a boat and constructing a timber hurdle. While architectural historians from Mark Girouard onwards have opened up the field by, for example, looking at spaces for servants as well as formal rooms, Forster and Heighes are interested in how buildings

are experienced by everybody from the chief executive to the cleaner and the passer-by.

Ten years ago, *Trans Mittere* placed a multi-level installation in the tower of Liverpool Anglican Cathedral (also by Giles Gilbert Scott) to mark its centenary. It referenced (among many other things) the building's construction between the two world wars, and linked Ruskin's writings on the effects of industrialisation in *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* to modern preoccupations with climate change. Since then, their projects have included performances for Bruno Taut's Hufeisen Siedlung in Berlin, an installation at Somerset House using biological research equipment from abandoned laboratories in Herne Hill, and an exploration of the post-industrial coastal landscape of the abandoned hovercraft port in Pegwell Bay.

They are now investigating 22 Kingsway, recently occupied by King's College, London. At first sight this seems a bland and



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unexceptional commercial block, especially compared with the complex brick geometry of the London School of Economics Saw Swee Hock Student Centre (by the Dublin practice O'Donnell + Tuomey and shortlisted for this year's Stirling Prize) which lies right behind it. But it turns out to have a far from boring history. So far, Forster and Heighes have written a TV 'shooting-script' for an episode of *This is Your Life* starring the building, which once contained the studio where Eamonn Andrews' celebrity show was recorded in the 1970s and 80s. It's this script, complete with the famous red book, footnotes and annotated comments, that is included in full with this issue. But the site has also in the past accommodated an Opera House and even a dolphinarium revue bar (the dolphins were trained to nibble the bikinis off their co-stars).

The 22 Kingsway project was commissioned by Alan Read, Professor of Theatre at King's College, who they have

worked with for many years. They spent a year with the Rotherhithe Theatre Workshop (which Read was director of) and living in council flats across the gentrifying London Docklands, while still studying at Dartington. Their work is politically engaged but aims to avoid cultural do-gooding, inspired by psychogeography and the work of Iain Sinclair, as well as Situationist theory and an antipathy to Thatcherism.

The script is an artwork in its own right but also a work in progress. The annotations capture what Ewan describes as 'lots of the speculative stuff which gets lost and never comes to fruition', as well as revealing to each other the associations they have made. It witnesses the pair's increasing fascination with the 'anodyne 60s buildings' that they (and I) grew up with: now seen as out of date and lacking showy features, these buildings are rapidly disappearing.

Accessing a building's history is increasingly a tactic of regeneration

professionals and developers, so it's interesting to share a viewpoint which is not just about constructing a set of marketable feel-good associations. They cite Battersea Power Station as a site where commercial pressures seem to have eroded much of the texture of history, questioning whether the many Londoners with an emotional investment in its long-drawn-out history will feel short-changed by the end result.

At 22 Kingsway, it's great to see a building owner prepared to invest in a deeper understanding of its intangible heritage as well as its physical plumbing and wiring. In *Theatre & Everyday Life*, Alan Read writes that 'The best places, like people, in any locality are ones where accretion has taken place [which can both] surprise and provoke pleasure.' I don't totally agree – sometimes scraping off the accretions can be the best thing to do – but the process of metaphorical unpicking in Forster and Heighes' work is hugely enjoyable.

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In Biog say that F and H teach/run an MA  
in Performance and Creative Research, for  
International mid career creative  
practitioners, including dancers and artists,  
at Roehampton University