

# PRACTICE

INTERIOR EDUCATORS CONFERENCE 2024

## ~~S H O P P I N G~~

PATRICK MACKLIN

The Glasgow School of Art

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### SUBMISSION

~~S H O P P I N G~~ is the title of a cluster of practice-led, or practice conscious, research activities undertaken by a group primarily interested in the value of interior space, its recent historical status, current significance and future potential. Written in this way, with a capitalised and double-spaced letter sequence, it is intended to be read, or sung by the inner voice, to the tune of The Pet Shop Boys 1987 recording of the same name. It is also struck-through, an embellishment in acknowledgement of the impact that recent seismic external forces have had, and will continue to have, on traditional retail activity in urban centres alongside retails interdependent neighbours in the fields of hospitality and entertainment. This negating line would ideally switch on and off, or flicker in the way that neon signs sometimes do.

What follows is an introduction, a series of framing devices used to capture aspects of this critical moment in time for urban centres and High Street retail especially. What might flourish and what might fade, and how might other possibilities emerge within what Edensor has described as 'the over-regulated character of contemporary urban space' (Edensor 2015: 94). The focus is drawn on an emblematic commercial thoroughfare, namely Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow, and 'Void Unit' a photo-journal with commercial vacancy as its subject. These Vacancy Studies (Rietveld et al, 2014) of Retail Ruins (Miller, 2023) seek to act as micro-brakes against the rush to fill such voids, preferring to take a long view, by utilising, in part, a hauntological methodology, 'reading a landscape through the ghostly presence of its past' (Coverley, 2020: 216). The street in question offers a series of distinct provocations when considering vacancy and ruin. Both familiar themes in the abundant literature criss-crossing the broad field of urban studies, however each area of study (ruin and vacancy) has tended to remain discrete, independent of each other, too frequently unable 'to adequately speak to one another' (O'Callaghan, Di Felicianantonio et al., 2023: 2). By speculatively focusing on vacancy in its current and accessible abundance, the hope is to establish fresh perspectives on sustainable and imaginative development, from the inside out, involving those closest to the advocacy of interior making—through its designing, defining, theorising and study—and to integrate those voices within the essential multi-disciplinary dialogues and actions emerging in the spaces between.

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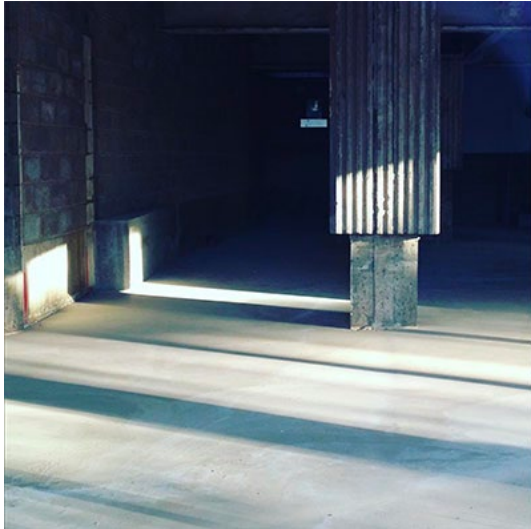


Figure 1: Glasgow, 24032018

## Preface 1

*Conical Intersect*, Gordon Matta-Clark's exhilarating incision into a pair of neighbouring empty 17th century buildings for the 1975 Paris Biennale offered a spectacular, if temporary, animation of some of the latent capacity of vacant momentary ruins. The backdrop to the film footage of its emergence on site (Public Delivery, 2024) is of a surrounding neighbourhood undergoing radical transformation. *Conical Intersect* and its 'unsettling, visceral, thereness' (Harbison 2015: 161) happens with(in) a building 'transiting from use to waste' (Cairns and Jacobs, 2014: 182). The work's creation makes a camera lucida of these interiors, by scribing lines of sight as if from a giant inverted security door-viewer onto and into its internal spaces. Rooms are revealed in unfamiliar detail, previously shrouded structure and discrete personal decorative choices are made public, drawing things to the surface, much as its expanding, exoskeletal, 'Beaubourgian' neighbour would attempt to do with its own eviscerated innards.

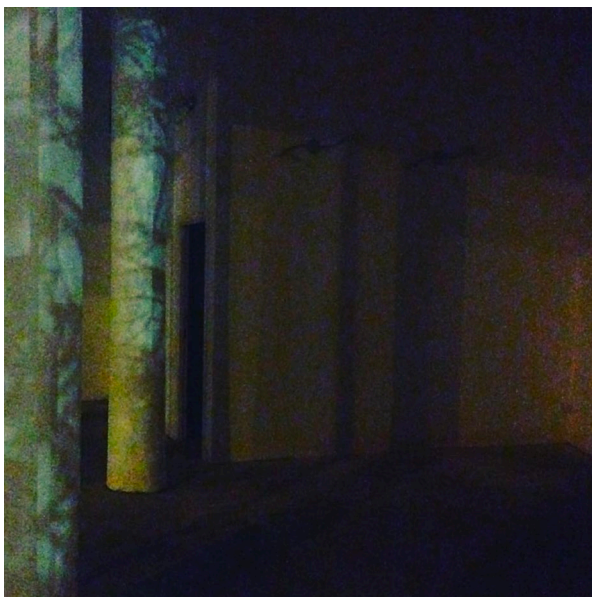


Figure 2: Glasgow, 21032017

## Trees

Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow is a 1.5-mile-long manifestation of what once was a 'trace' and is now a 'ghostly line' (Ingold, 2016: 44, 50) through the ancient willow grove that gave the place its name. The central third of this

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pre-eminent Glaswegian 'avenue' formed a key component in the cities' Victorian gridded plan. Its easternmost blocks were pedestrianised in the 1970's, and now form the truncated upper crossbar of the 'Golden Z', (Livingston and Clark, 2020: 105 and Threesixty Architecture, 2024,). The street runs along an east west axis with a significant section nestling at the foot of the steep sided drumlin of Garnethill; thus, its southern side sits almost entirely in shade while opposite, its other half faces the sun. Both sides are made up of predominantly mid-nineteenth century buildings containing a familiar combination of tenement flats, offices and commercial units. The north side even manages to encapsulate some free-standing villas pre-dating all of these, with a notable example framed spectacularly within the *Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA)*, itself partly located within Alexander Thomsons' *Grecian Chambers*. Inevitably the street has undergone periodic transformation, it is layered, its original expression interspersed with conspicuous 1930's Deco: a former hotel, bank, department stores, and cinemas from this era, and some hi-contrast mid-century modernist buildings, principally containing integrated retail and office space, some of the latter constructed to replace fire damaged theatres. A university dental hospital manages to absorb both eras. Parades of shops from various decades are sprinkled throughout and offer a commercial and visual continuity which was spectacularly ruptured further west by an eccentric intervention—memorably described by Owen Hatherley in his *Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (Hatherley, 2010)—junction 18 of the M8 motorway, (the) 'scar (that) will never heal' (see Smith, 2023). The area, including Charing Cross itself, is undergoing triage and treatment, a mere half a century later, with important and effective works undertaken to reprioritise active travel (walking and wheeling) through significant widening of pavements, the introduction of properly segregated cycle lanes and integration of a forward-looking rainwater management system of 'raingardens'.



Figure 3 (above): Great Western Rd, Glasgow, 22122015

Figure 4 (right): Sauchiehall St, Glasgow, 01112018

Over recent years this street, like many others, has been especially impacted by a series of stressors, specifically: the 2008 global financial crisis; the 2016 vote in support of the UK's withdrawal from the EU; the COVID-19 pandemic impacting in 2020; significant fires—including that of 2018 in the block containing the Mackintosh Building at The Glasgow School of Art—and perhaps most profoundly, the analogue/digital centralisation of shopping. Each of these forces felt in isolation would have been challenging to absorb, but arriving as they have, in a series of waves of different amplitude, has resulted in an extinction event for swathes of the shopping eco-system: from small specialist independents to department stores, from retail banking halls to important anchor units.

Since the momentous collapse of BHS in 2016—an event precipitated by what was described as 'the unacceptable face of capitalism'—in common with the rest of the UK High Street, around 80% of the area's large scale commercial buildings are either repurposed, demolished or empty and falling into dereliction—including one formerly occupied by BHS. The loss of this type of anchor retail, on prominent corner and central sites—especially

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on a legibly linear route, within a gridded arrangement—leaves a trail of vacancy along the street, creating a 'frontier space where different spatio-legal world-making projects collide' (Caulkins, 2023: 197).



Figure 5: Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 26112015

## Preface 2

The installation *Vacant NL*, curated by brothers Ronald and Erik Rietveld, formerly Rietveld Landscapes now RAAAF (Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances), and the accompanying *Dutch Atlas of Vacancy*, designed by Studio Joost Grootens, is an epic vacancy study. This significant contribution to the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale laid bare the vast, latent potential of the 10,000 or so vacant public and government buildings in the Netherlands, principally through a suspended gridded matrix of multiple, to-scale, Styrofoam miniatures of each building alongside a colossal inventory, the *Dutch Atlas of Vacancy* itself, printed and bound in an edition of 5, documenting in detail each building's typology and capability. Its contents included mothballed architecture of all sorts, from former lighthouses to silent airports and abandoned swimming pools, their vacancy spanning five centuries and 'collectively owned', underwritten by the Dutch taxpayer (Rietveld et al 2014: 53).

## Void

A decade ago, I began casually photographing vacant shop units with my phone. In the wake of the global financial crisis these spaces had become more numerous and were of prior interest to me through other, earlier work in my role as a designer and associate artist with a theatre company and when creating short-life spaces in which to show art multiples and design editions.

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Figure 6: George St, Edinburgh, 13092016

The method used in creating these images is necessarily simple. In many instances it is impossible to access a clear view, with some façades encased in protective OSB sheets, screened behind heavy vinyl decorative decals, or whitewashed from the shop-side. Where the vista is uninterrupted the window is swiped with a finger to remove any accumulated grime and the phone's camera is placed directly onto the glazing, usually at eye-level, and pointing, most often, at the centre of the space. The composition is scanned: are relevant components contained within the visibly accessible 'scenography'; does it minimise distracting external reflections, especially the dreaded Peppers-Ghost of the photographer—both challenges made easy in Edinburgh's George St (Fig. 6, 2016), with its winding thread of fire performance cable and shattered glazing. Then the image is grabbed, cropped to a square format and tagged for online publication, initially via social media, and subsequently on dedicated webspace (voidunit.co.uk).

The contents are mostly drawn from urban locations. Places I've travelled to in Europe, north America and Asia, for work or holidays. They are predominantly of commercial units, typically under 200sqm in size. Only one was photographed with temporary occupancy, the flower shop (Fig. 3, 2015). When taking the photographs I never attempt to access the units' interiors, they are all taken from the exterior through the fourth wall—in this case the shop window—in most cases these glazed elements are entirely exposed, in some cases I had to weave the phone through a security shutter.

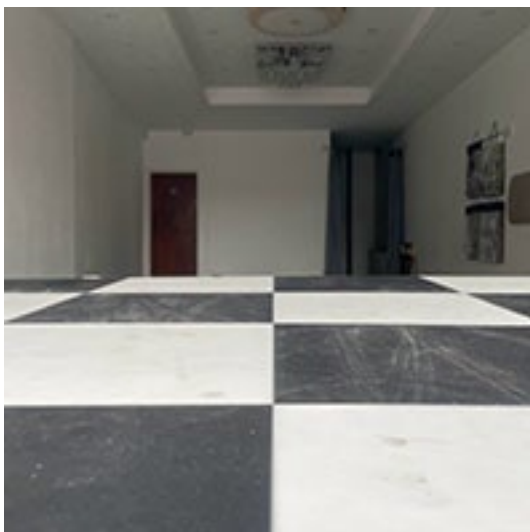


Figure 7: Great Western Rd, Glasgow, 17022024



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The positioning of the device in this mannered way, and by design, creates a partial and subjective representation of these places. Acknowledging the level of 'embodied subjectivity' (Miller, 2023: 33) and employing a 'heightened awareness of our everyday surroundings' (Miller, 2023: 33), window shopping in this way is a facilitated experience. It differs from the usual, easy and familiar passer-by relationship to these views, one that is in motion, at an oblique angle and minutely documented in studies of consumer habits. Here the view is towards the space itself, foregoing detail. As Edensor explains, in our encounters with 'objects in shop windows' (Edensor, 2005a: 312) we can experience beautifully lit, curated items, with careful attention paid to adjacency and context. The materiality of thing and space is meaningfully loaded. We accept that others 'confine things to their place' employing the spatialized 'web of techniques' which limit 'the interpretative and practical possibilities' and purify their 'meanings and purposes' (all Edensor, 2005a: 312). When faced with abundant vacancy these conditions are detuned in the way of a prepared-piano.

Over that period changes in handset hardware and upgrades in camera capacities have enabled not only better image quality and higher definition but have also helped capture more of the spaces being recorded through enhanced wide-angle lens options. Given the subject focus and the relatively compact floor areas of the subject matter, the latter advance has been transformative. More recent additional capacity has included multiple shots within a timeframe which can provides a level of bas relief through typical multi lens positions, and is useful when working in dim conditions, and finally, the sites where the shots were taken are now tagged with both time stamp and geo-location data.

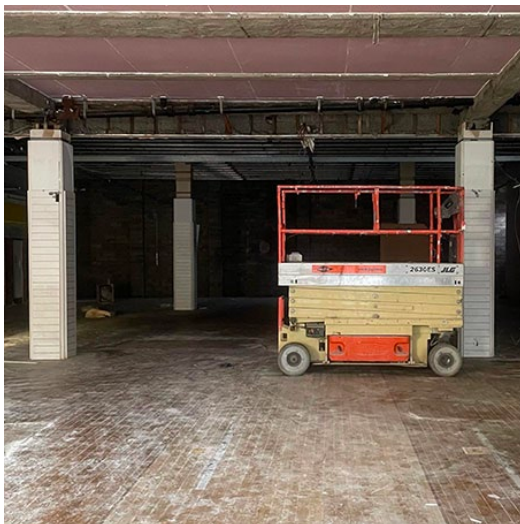


Figure 8: Partick, Glasgow, 28012023

With several of the Glasgow locations, I've been aware of the prior function of the space, and may even have experienced, from the inside, its most recent iteration, but predominantly the sites are stumbled upon and 'seem composed of cluttered and excessive stuff, things which mingle incoherently, objects whose purpose is opaque,' (Edensor, 2005b: 318) any clues as to prior occupancy are whatever remain in the mise en scène. As with Guy Debord's 'Mémoires', made from 'detritus', and 'seemingly meaningless words and pictures' (Marcus, 1989:164) these are assemblages in search of another place and time in which to be meaningful—contenders for inclusion in the poet—rather than philosopher and sociologist—Henri Lefebvre's *The Missing Pieces* (Lefebvre, 2014)—at the point of their capture they are fixed into sites where time is suspended. Unlike architecture in its raw state, they mostly enjoy almost total protection from the elements. Any disordering of their contents appears more to do with removal of stock, specialist equipment and other portable items of value, or partial resetting of the services of the space rather than conscious practical reconfiguration, plunder or interventions borne from calamity such as flood or collapse. In some instances, they have undergone partial transformation into de facto construction sites, stepladders abound amongst the other plant, materials and tools left behind (Fig 8, 2023). Sometimes they appear dressed (Fig 9, 2018), waiting for something. The embedded nature of these spaces is crucial to their provocative value. In the main they are contained within (almost always) active host buildings, super concentrated interiors, their latent potential frozen as solidly as Rachel Whiteread's work, *Ghost*.

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Figure 9 (above): Glasgow, 05042018

Figure 10 (right): E 4th St NYC (formerly Other Music), 151022

Occasionally, I have encountered a familiar site, now shuttered and where possible, have acknowledged this in parenthesis, for example in the case of the image of the former Other Music record shop. This was an erstwhile cultural fulcrum in E4th St New York City, with immaculately curated stock and enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff. Its modest premises frequently animated by live 'in-store' performances. It thrived in this site for just over ten years, the first half of which was within the gravitational orbit of the vast Tower Records across the street, but that much larger and better-known vendor faced Broadway, not E4th St. Other Music outlasted its massive neighbour but eventually succumbed to the same dramatic changes in the way music was distributed and consumed. Here I've returned a familiar place, several years after the business I knew vacated, only to find another abandoned and unfamiliar interior superimposed, where, instead of the expected empty rows of CD racks, vinyl crates and magazine stands of the likely prior occupant I found an entirely different setting (Fig. 10, 2022).

The series of images from Thessaloniki (Fig. 11, 2023) record vacancy in a street in the Delfon district in the east of the city. At the time of writing the opening of the new city metro system is approaching, albeit after many archaeologically inspired stops and starts to the required tunnelling and engineering works. The potentially catalysing impact of this addition to that cities transport network and the introduction to the neighbourhood of this infrastructure breaking ground at the new Analipsi station remains to be witnessed.

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Figure 11: Thessaloniki, 16092023

## Up

The action of focusing on the places described in the prior section, sought to look-into, or through, the glut of vacant space that haunts our city streets, fully aware of the cyclical and dynamic nature of development, and the multiple layers of the occupancy onion. As de Certeau asserts 'the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences' (de Certeau, 1984: 108). We are surrounded by physical provocations to reactivate discussion and action towards a refreshed imagining as to what such spaces might be. Constructively, Miller suggests five classifications of what might be witnessed in interiors of this nature, they are as follows (following list quoting and paraphrasing Miller, 2023: 84): 'the operators just got up and left'; 'cleared out' space—where there is no firm evidence of prior occupancy and the space is possibly primed, ready for a new, undetermined use; 'neglected' over time—starting to 'fall apart', may contain 'accumulation of debris'; 'in progress' reconstruction and finally, 'exorcised', through a new occupant or function. These classifications are useful ways to appraise the conditions one may encounter while undertaking this type of critical surveying to help capture the granularity of place. In post-crisis settings this is increasingly important, while simultaneously acknowledging that, 'the memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place' (de Certeau, 1984: 109), and to facilitate such dreaming, 'perhaps the problem regarding urban imaginaries in the present time is not necessarily that we have unattainable ideas, but that we have a lack of them'. (Dunn, 376)

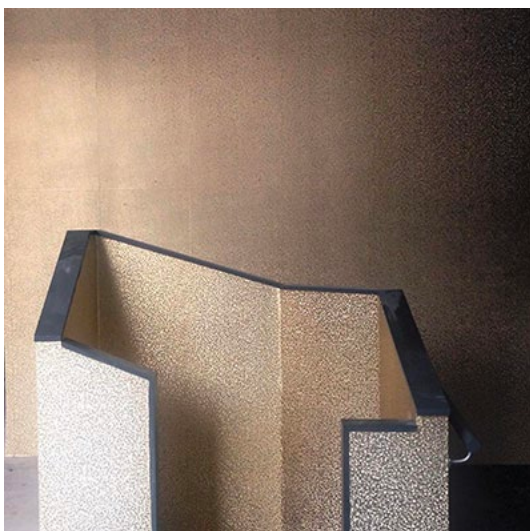


Figure 12: Unconfirmed location, 21112015



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For a significant period—the ‘hobby’ stage—the methodology used in assembling Void Unit demanded a level of objective or dispassionate detachment, avoiding asking too much about why. As the body of material increased more deliberate foraging took place. It is now at a fresh juncture, and the approach to the study requires further consideration. It is evident that pavement-level probing overlooks the vacancy, or potential vacancy, that is secreted through multi-level and layered structures, downwards as well as upwards (Graham, 2016). When reviewing the existing catalogue of scenes, many contain clear indications of worlds beyond, via distant doorways, exposed trapdoors, or suggested balustrades (Figure 12, 2015). Expanding on this possibility, through ongoing exploration of Sauchiehall St and elsewhere, there is evidence of stratified vacancy, for example, of empty offices, or former dining spaces, less burdened (in their potential) by the gravitational forces at play when the streets they currently inhabit were originally planned. Of relevance here is the emancipatory and quietly radical approach of Lacaton and Vassal at Tour Bois le Prêtre, or the painstaking, careful, analogue work undertaken by Flores and Prats at *Sala Beckett* where ‘Detritus and Residues are revived in their inner harmony without being simplified in any way’ (Casares and Flores, 2020). Where the artist Constant juxtaposed, or utilised techniques of collage to overlay ‘two utterly separate realities’ to create ‘the New Babylonian novum’, suspended, albeit in a thrilling way, above ‘the now-obsolete industrial city’ (de Zegher and Wigley 2001: 101) might our increasingly sophisticated capacity to navigate, directly or vicariously, in three dimensions, also provide novel, technologically facilitated creative capacities. An interlaced, mingled (digital and analogue) bricolage may emerge. which consciously avoids ‘derealization’ (Virilio, 2012: 36) and enhances our already spectacular views from the plane of the pavement.

## KEYWORDS

Vacancy | New Ruins | Adaptive-Reuse | Retail |

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- Fig. 1 Authors own. (2018) *Glasgow, 24032018*
- Fig. 2 Authors own. (2017) *Glasgow, 21032017*
- Fig. 3 Authors own. (2015) *Great Western Road, Glasgow (temporary flower shop), 221215*
- Fig. 4 Authors own. (2018) *Sauchiehall St, Glasgow, 01112018*
- Fig. 5 Authors own. (2015) *Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 26112015*
- Fig. 6 Authors own. (2016) *George St, Edinburgh, 13092016*
- Fig. 7 Authors own. (2024) *Great Western Rd, Glasgow, 17022024*
- Fig. 8 Authors own. (2018) *Glasgow, 05042018*
- Fig. 9 Authors own. (2015) *Unconfirmed location, 21112015*
- Fig. 10 Authors own. (2022) *E 4th St NYC (formerly 'Other Music'), 15102022*
- Fig. 11 Authors own. (2023) *Thessaloniki, 16092023*
- Fig. 12 Authors own. (2023) *Partick, Glasgow, 28012023*

## BIOGRAPHY

Patrick is Deputy Head of the School of Design and Reader in Interior Design at The Glasgow School of Art. He co-founded pop-up innovators Lapland and was associate artist and designer with the award-winning theatre company Suspect Culture. He has designed as Frozen River and in collaboration as SpaceKraft.

## AUTHOR CONTACT INFORMATION

p.macklin@gsa.ac.uk