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# ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN BLOG

WITH OLIVER WAINWRIGHT



## Richard Wentworth's Black Maria theatre breathes life into King's Cross

Designed with young Swiss architecture practice Gruppe, the temporary structure is part public stage, part meeting house



'It's a great big doormat' ... Black Maria by Richard Wentworth and Gruppe. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

"People have forgotten how to gather," says Richard Wentworth, as we sit in a cafe in Central Saint Martins' King's Cross campus, a few metres away from his latest project – which is an attempt to remedy this situation. It seems a strange comment to make in a context where we are surrounded by a lively throng of people who don't look particularly incapable of gathering.

"We have a funny habit of anointing specific spaces in the city as 'places people come'," he explains. In this landscape of defined places of congregation, we have forgotten how to use the undesignated realm, the in-between, loosely civic spaces of our cities.

The new King's Cross, which is very much being transformed into a "place people come" at a cost of £2bn by developer Argent, is full of such spaces – ambiguous swathes of the privately owned "public realm" of squares, pavements, lobbies – dutifully patrolled by branded wardens. And it is in one such vague zone, in the open lobby between the developer's marketing suite and the gated world of the art college, that Wentworth's project intervenes.

The sculptor has lived in the area for almost 50 years and has watched the place evolve from what he describes as the no-man's land of "north London's naughty boys' club" to its present status as one of the city's biggest development opportunities. Ten years ago, as the neighbourhood was undergoing a momentous shift from seedy red-light district to gateway to Europe, with the arrival of the Eurostar terminal, Wentworth was commissioned by Artangel to respond to the moment of flux.

His project, An Area of Outstanding Unnatural Beauty, took over a vacant plumbing store on York Way, which played host to an eccentric concoction of maps and texts, ping pong tables and a viewing periscope, allowing you to see "King's Cross before the bomb fell".

The development bomb has since fallen, and Wentworth has swapped his plumbing shop for the lobby of the brand spanking new art college – the creative anchor tenant of Argent's mixed-use vision. Commissioned by Relay, a nine-year public arts programme for the area, his installation, named Black Maria, attempts to "magnetise" this oversized atrium with a new gathering space that is part billboard, part public stage.

"It is a fabulously ambiguous space," says Wentworth, standing in the soaring entrance where Stanton Williams' new college studio building meets the old Victorian granary. "It's like a station concourse, where you have the right to sell kebabs, fall in love, walk across for three years as an undergraduate. It's a great big doormat."

But it is also a strangely dead space, stifled by its vast height and lack of purpose, optimistically named "The Crossing" in the hope that it might become a place of encounter and exchange – which is precisely what Wentworth's scheme intends to provoke.



A village hall for Kings

Cross ... Black Maria hosting a Skip Garden kitchen workshop. Photograph: Oliver Wainwright

Designed in collaboration with young Swiss architecture practice Gruppe, the structure is inspired by its namesake, the Black Maria film studio built by Thomas Edison in 1893, a series of lopsided sheds knocked up in the grounds of his New Jersey laboratories. Its London descendant, constructed over the last four weeks by the architects themselves, takes the form of a raked auditorium beneath a mono-pitched roof, supported by a complex arrangement of buttress-like truss structures. This intriguing assembly has a quasi-medieval quality, with its provisional timber lattices and exposed studwork panelling; it extends at a jaunty angle behind a three-storey billboard, in which a big proscenium opening has been cut. The arrangement creates a double-sided stage, housing an audience within, as well as allowing people to watch events from outside.

"We thought it would be interesting to have two audiences watching the same film or discussion from two different sides," says Wentworth. "It replicates the experience of the city, where everybody is watching everybody else, and everybody is someone else's walk-on part."

A series of talks and events is being programmed, with an ad hoc approach that fits the building's aesthetic, though both Wentworth and Gruppe hope the structure will take on a life of its own.

"It's like a village hall," they tell me. "We hope people will instigate things themselves and bring their own audiences. The most interesting bit is seeing what will happen next." The day I visit, it has been taken over by children on a workshop from the nearby Skip Garden, who appear thrilled to be rampaging in, around, through and under the nooks and crannies of the structure, like the best new adventure playground. It may only be here for the next three weeks, but Black Maria brings a welcome dose of anarchic community spirit to an area that often feels suffocated by its own patrolled newness.



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