

Site and Spectacle

Mark Power's Millennium Dome

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Like some newly fabricated illustration to the latest edition of H.G. Wells, one of the most repeated photographic renditions of the Millennium Dome under construction sees its pylons, and at times the crest of its brilliant white canopy, looming over the buildings, back alleys and barren mud flats of a derelict London. The Dome intrudes on and threatens, these popular images tell us, not only the slow turning of London's history, still to be acutely felt here on the neglected wastes of the Greenwich peninsula, but also a traditional vision of London that is steeped in the past. From Hogarth to Gilbert and George, from Dickens to Peter Ackroyd, London has been represented as a place of decrepit complexity, whose pitted surfaces and dimly lit streets offer up unfathomable layers of time. In this context the recent photographs of the Dome are meant to exaggerate its incongruity, a strange temporal disjunction which, unaccountably, has set the clocks forward instead of back. Ironic but nervous, too, the photographs also register a widespread skepticism and apprehension about the nature of the Dome and what it might finally represent, and they peer with uncertainty at the future itself, suspicious of the shifting scales of power at the dawn of the new millennium.

Yet, if these pictures playfully define the Dome as some monstrous thing, then the clearer, unimpeded views, especially those looking across the river, suggest an entirely different, more benign character. Here we see the building hovering gently on its site. According to one recent commentator it has a 'lightness of being', its flat circus top profile contrasting sharply with the rising, aspirational domes of architectural history. The mood has shifted from Wellsian dystopia to the benevolence of Spielberg, for now it becomes clear, as many other images and the NMEC's main advertising campaign have reinforced, that the Dome's closest relation

is that fun-phantom of post-war popular culture the flying saucer. Seen at night, with its multi coloured lights reflecting over the river and tracking up into the atmosphere, the majestic Dome responds to the longed-for thrill of a UFO landed in our midst, which, in the collective, post-Close Encounters imagination, we enter to find a technological dream-world that is also a twenty-first-century spiritual heaven. Satisfying dreams is a tricky business, especially when matched against the cost of basic human needs, but, for better or for worse, this is what the Millennium Dome has set out to do.

In this way, from drawing board to completed building, the Dome's image has been open to interpretation, and is still highly contested. In fact its construction involved two parallel processes, two Domes taking shape in two separate dimensions. One was built in the virtual spaces of the media, a shimmering image difficult to pin down, while the other emerged from the mud at Greenwich, where the extraordinary physical effort of the real construction process unfolded. In both places the Dome became an important test site for New Labour's modern vision. Here, finally, was some tangible thing on a grand scale, a building against which their central idea of 'the modern' might be easily calibrated by a mass audience. As such the Dome's function has come to signify a break with the past and another gesture of dismissal for the Conservatives' continual reliance on the past to underpin and justify the ideological present. And yet the Dome is essentially a temporary structure for which the civic ambitions are fairly short term. Although its future use and life span has yet to be finalised, it may not even survive as a landmark. Instead the Dome seems already defined as a passing show, an experience rather than a monument.

As if to provide something lasting, to insert the weight of history against this transitory image, photographer Mark Power was commissioned by NMEC to record the building of the Dome from bare patch of wasteland to completion. In one sense this can be seen as simply another way of celebrating the Dome, of reflecting its aspirations and confirming its cultural status. But Power was given an open brief, something which freed him from the creative constraints of the promotional exercise and allowed him

to reflect some of the irony and ambiguity of the Dome's real and virtual presence. His final series of photographs, collected here for the first time, find a delicate balance between the physical resonance of the growing building and its status as an event imbued with political and social tension. What his photographs suggest is that through all the speculations, criticisms and the emerging images of its final form, the real sense of achievement and enterprise that the Dome represents – its dignity – may well lay in the spectacular process of its construction. This is what Power set out to record and this is what he interprets as a haunting blend of grandeur and fantasy.

It is nothing new in architectural practice to make a photographic record of a building as it is constructed. But Mark Power's commission instigated a dialogue between camera and building that, from the outset, was bound to produce a more complex language than a functional record or visual chronology. As well as setting down the facts he appears to approach the Dome as an open question. What is it, he seems to ask in his work, to create a building that reflects and embraces a new millennium in an era of liberated signs and meanings, of fractured, reflected images and simulations, when a building might be anything than just a building. In a way this multi-faceted, prising open of the building process became a product of Power's investigation of the site as it changed. As his first commission of this kind, his approach evolved as a form of discovery, through many days spent searching, poking around, assessing angles and distances, light levels and patterns, interpreting the site as it offered, revealed and reconstituted itself.

And there was also another, less practical context to consider. Given the high public profile of the Dome and its marking of a symbolic moment in history, Power was aware of the historical dimension his work would take on. Not only would his pictures preserve for posterity the structural details of a very public drama, but as an artistic statement they would add to a larger body of photographs that have recorded the construction of significant buildings since the mid-nineteenth century. These series have provided some of the most important photographs and dynamic social documents of the modern period, and in completing his own substantial photographic

survey Mark Power would enshrine the building of the Dome within this visual tradition, the latest in a line of epic encounters between photography and architecture.

The idea that the construction of a building might warrant and benefit from photographic attention came as part of photography's expansion into all areas of society during the 1850s. While perhaps not as startling for the nineteenth-century imagination as capturing a wave breaking on a shore or fixing the orderly chaos of a city street, recording the growth of a building – seeing architecture as a process, one of significant moments that could be reconstructed into a narrative – found a logic through photography. In an industrial culture driven by technological invention photography and architecture forged a special alliance. The two disciplines both expressed altered patterns of time and space: just as the new building materials and methods spawned by industrialisation created grids of iron frame and reinforced concrete, carving up space into new geometries with new perspectives, so the camera segmented and reordered time.

Images from the early negotiations between architecture and photography still retain the vigour and immediacy of a new aesthetic in embryo, of new fields of perception being opened up. These negotiations begin most emphatically with Phillip Henry Delamotte's celebrated album of 1855 that comprehensively documents the rebuilding of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham from 1852 to 1854. Delamotte's images match the unprecedented modernity of that building's design and construction, and show, even at this early stage in its history, photography working in tandem with its architectural subject, perfectly responsive to the new visual spectacle of light and space that the building opened up. Although Delamotte's album caught the heroic, momentous qualities of the Crystal Palace, it also managed to convey its 'lightness', the sense of fragility and impermanence that was part of its 'fairyland' fantasy.

In emphasising 'process' and spectacle over permanence, and reflecting the fact that its construction and demolition were often carried out with great speed, exhibition

architecture continued to inspire some of the most potent series of architectural photographs of the late nineteenth century. The great Parisian exhibitions for example, especially the building of the Eiffel Tower and the Palais des Machines for the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889, were heavily documented and the resulting images became highly influential. Durandelle and Chevojon's photographs of the Eiffel Tower under construction and their extraordinary interior images of the Palais des Machines before the exhibits were installed, 'prompted architectural historians such as Pevsner and Hitchcock to interpret the buildings in terms of the Modern Movement.' Their pictures also lay the foundation for the 'new vision' of modernist photography that was to develop in Europe thirty to forty years later.

In America too, the spectacle of construction synchronised with the dynamic tempo and upward thrust of modern cities. In New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Flat Iron building (built in 1903) became the malleable subject for a range of contrasting photographic styles. While later, in the 1930s, the Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Centre were the focus for two of the century's most celebrated photographic accounts of architecture under construction. Both Berenice Abbott's series on the building of the Rockefeller Centre, that abstracted its steel frame grids in the manner of nineteenth-century European examples, and Lewis Hine's well known photographs of dignified construction workers perched high on the exposed girders of the Empire State, provided positive images of American progress. But, perhaps more importantly, they proposed the sturdy resilience of the American economic machine and its workforce during a time of uncertainty at the onset of the Depression.

What many of these pioneering series achieve, and what is interesting for Power looking back at them, is that they literally 'monumentalise' the process of construction. In each photograph the building assumes a distinct identity; structures change, spatial relationships and volumes are redefined and light is redirected. What the images come to represent is a series of different buildings, or a series of 'monuments' to the final building. In this they also appropriated the popular image of

the ruin, accepting a certain ambiguity, as if the confident modern city could also envision its own romantic decline. But essentially images of construction sites and skeletal buildings were symbols of time pressing forward; they looked to the future and spoke of an accelerated sense of change. Charged with the inevitability of progress they celebrated the dynamic imperative of society's unfinished business.

In Britain such vital photographic series are conspicuous by their absence; none, as yet, have surfaced from the archives of twentieth-century British architecture. Hundreds of government publicity photographs were taken during the Festival of Britain in 1951 and they show the South Bank site in great detail; no part of the exhibition complex was left unrecorded. In particular, photographs of the Dome of Discovery and the Skylon under construction – structures so important to the form of the Millennium Dome – remind us of the public impact of what Brian Aldiss aptly called a 'monument to the future', which finally proved that modern currents developing in our architecture since the 1930s could be acceptable to popular English taste. Sadly, apart from these 'official' images, no coherent, interpretive series of photographs of the Festival or any of its buildings survives.

Some of the most telling images of the Festival of Britain show the site being enjoyed by some of its eight and a half million visitors. As the crowds stroll through its public spaces and past architectural lines so alien to drab post-war austerity, the photographs demonstrate how exhibition architecture might be explained as a continuous 'event' experienced through time, in which construction, celebration and interaction are phases in an animated existence that also includes demolition. More than one observer has noted that, as a structure, the Millennium Dome manages to epitomise this living, forever unfinished state. Even one of its sharpest critics, the writer Iain Sinclair, has said that the saving grace of the Dome is that it will remain a 'work-in-progress' until the day it is dismantled. In this the Dome appropriately reflects the ideas of 'flexibility' and 'indeterminacy' that have shaped the more permanent, but fluid, buildings of the Richard Rogers Partnership, the Pompidou Centre in Paris or the Lloyds Building in London for example. With their openness to

change, as working machines, these buildings in turn reflect that sense of movement and organic growth revealed and celebrated uniquely by historic photographs of modern architecture under construction.

Mark Power's photographs then, do not simply explore the building of the Millennium Dome, they express its vital aesthetic. They show the building growing and living as an event over time; as an accumulative scene or narrative, which, despite that one symbolic calendar moment, has no natural ending. And, like their modernist antecedents, Power's pictures also anticipate the returning echo of the building in decline, they foretell its history and accommodate his narrative played in reverse. Throughout the series, the language of building materials and unfinished structures is ambiguous: is this a construction site or a ruin? What is so compelling about the pictures as we work through this book from back to front, is that as well as bringing a sense of transcendence to the building process they can be read as elegiac, the last glimpses of some irrecoverable architectural masterpiece being systematically pulled apart.

But to begin at the beginning. In the first instance, and largely through the black and white imagery of the social war-zone, Power's photographs consider the transmutation of the Greenwich site from toxic dump to a place fit for work and the triumphal symbolism of millennial celebration. This first phase of the building was an immense exercise in itself, with its own battlefield landscape of mud pools, twisted iron, earth-wounds and scars. Under grim winter daylight, and with the occasional glistening nocturne of arc-lights showing off the pin-pricked silhouette of Canary Wharf (a kind of parental presence overlooking the building of the Dome and a constant marker in Power's work), the unholy ground is churned and flattened-out. History as well as the muddy site is being excavated here, and Power's images suggest that it is the often dark secrets of a social, human history that inevitably rise to the surface. Through this early sequence his photographs repeatedly carry an unspecified but insistent sense of human cost. In one image a group of bloodied, severed gloves is scattered around a sacrificial block while in others the pylons once

again loom over a sinister, grave-like pit or the shattered and charred remains of some rubbish tip nursery.

Emerging from what could be taken as the site of some catastrophe, a thing reported on, a place of clues and evidence, Power begins to celebrate the fabulous mechanics of the building, an orchestration of human endeavour that gradually changes pitch as the elements of a giant three-dimensional jigsaw are locked into place. By any measure this was and is still an epic event, one that demands distance and a calculated response. But in the face of its sheer scale, the overwhelming, almost cartoon size of the architectural components, in whose presence one has a tingle of nervous excitement, Power's work does not fall sterile or become overly analytical. He delights in the soaring pylons, in the delicate tracery of wires and steel cables, and on the site floor he is distracted by the brute form and endless repetition of building materials and equipment. The entire theatrical process of such a huge space being systematically delineated and contained is met, in Power's work, by photographs that blend wide-eyed wonder with the precision and discipline of architects' drawings. In his sectioned images, full of bold, exquisite symmetries, fine lines and overlapping squares and circles, it is as though Power's camera had become part of the building, integrated into the architectural performance.

As the building edges nearer towards its final form and the interior space becomes more cluttered, so the distanced view with its epic proportions is more difficult to establish and less representative of the site. Gradually, under these conditions, the nature of Power's project changes from an attempt to grasp and represent the Dome as one entity, where all the major and minor incidents of construction refer to the whole, to a more roving report on the appearance of a fabulous enclosed city, increasingly disjointed and baroque in character.

Now Power leads us into smaller spaces primed with another atmosphere and a different aesthetic. If scale and space dictated the terms of the earlier photographs, now colour dominates the vocabulary: from pale cellophane washes to primary acid

glare. In these half-built rooms and soon-to-be public areas not only does colour define space but it nurtures a certain tension too. Power often pictures these rooms as carefully laid traps, glowing with a sinister yet alluring energy and light. Here strange configurations of objects, lights, equipment and building site detritus have their own alien logic, electricity seems dangerously exposed, not yet diverted through walls and ducts. As the Dome prepares to process its audience, these wild, techno-spaces suggest a building charging-up, coming to life, yet one that is wilfully inhospitable. This is the pre-calmed, pre-textured Dome, raw and undecorated, exotic and dangerous, unfit for human use.

In his later images Power's search for continuity and space on an increasingly chaotic site, draws him into the central arena - a kind of Dome within a Dome - where the circular, segmented canopy still imposes a sense of harmony and where the delicate lines of precision engineering on a grand scale are given a reprise. Elsewhere the visual rhythms are more robust and abrasive, and here instead of using the photographic frame as a stabilising and ordering device, to bring the building together, Power uses it to cut through sharp, discordant angles, occasionally looking for the most giddy perspectives from which to suggest the urgency of construction against the clock.

Against this visual cacophony, Power offers moments of rest by continuing to find small details and quiet corners of the site that act as links, steadying the momentum and pulling the whole narrative together. In these photographs water imagery often appropriately expresses the calming effect. In one, a beautiful tidal wave of plastic sheeting is about to break over an abandoned tarpaulin beach, while elsewhere another plastic sea, bronzed by the late evening light, is creased and parted by a junction of pipes. Light itself also tranquillises space: whether a cool white light bleaching through a temporary window frame, or a seductive orange light that lulls a family of live wires to sleep.

It is perhaps these images, and others like them, which most strongly capture the essence of Mark Power's love affair with the construction of the Millennium Dome. He delights in their poetic uncertainty, in their sense of time suspended, a fragile moment when, as Bill Brandt once said, familiar things might be seen as new and strange. For Power the discovery of these eternally temporary, unresolved spaces is more enthralling than the almost complete zone interiors that he finally sees towards the end of his work. The zones offer up their own fantasies and in doing so quell Power's particular photographic invention.

Under Power's gaze, as some great flying ship emerging from a high-tech mud swamp, the Millennium Dome holds on to its structural beauty, and expresses a release of human energy and ingenuity moving forward at a relentless pace. If the end result is a bright, overwhelming assault on the senses, then Mark Power's Dome is a place of subtle light and colour transitions that, without the irritant of building noise, has a gentle, spectral silence. This dense network of chambers, wire grids, steel, plate glass and piles of factory fresh materials is indeed a site to marvel at. Here construction itself is the millennial spectacle, the condition of a magical space.
(1999)

