

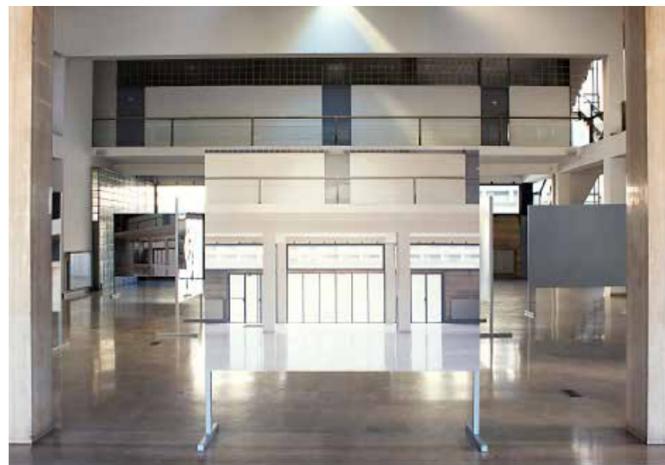
Artists View Space and image

Annalisa Sonzogni's installations challenge our perceptions of buildings. Christopher Heighes met her

Walking towards the old Lilian Baylis School, Lambeth – the location for artist Annalisa Sonzogni's most recent project, *Identikit II* – it soon becomes clear that the relationship between architecture and photography is still often a compromised and unsatisfactory one. Large hoardings and marketing banners surround the site, loudly promoting its residential redevelopment. Panoramic images of the new apartments in full sunshine are set against a blue sky and vibrant green landscaping. Relaxed 'ideal' couples chat, and children skip through the ubiquitous water feature. These are images that use a familiar yet oddly alienating visual language of surface perfection and aesthetic cleanliness – a sterile, commercial styling often seen in today's architectural press and on many design websites. While highly seductive, such imagery often fails to capture a building's proper connection to its location, or convey the physical experience of place and the true nature of what happens there.

Fortunately, Sonzogni's work seeks to explore the relationship between image and space in a far more imaginative and sophisticated way. Using large-scale photographic views of a building's interior, mounted on purpose-built mobile structures, she creates evocative site-specific installations that reveal and reflect on the physical nature, atmosphere and culture of a space.

Her precisely arranged staging transforms carefully-composed photographs into dynamic tools that stimulate and challenge a spectator's perception of a building. Her images reconfigure the spaces where they are presented, erasing the threshold between inside and outside, challenging notions of how we see and experience a two-dimensional surface, as the photographs seemingly take on greater depth. As we walk and gaze, our understanding of real space shifts and spreads in our mind, prompting a peculiar sense of 'coming and going' between what we know, feel and see. The building and the reproductions of it cross each other time and again, creating a very textured spatial



Above and left: reflecting on the identity of place – Sonzogni's *Passeggeri* (Passengers) at the Casa del Fascio, Como, Italy

dialogue that not only exposes powerful architectural ideas, but also reveals less tangible things: memory traces, object relationships and the residue of multiple human presences.

Sonzogni, Italian-born and London-based, has always been interested in the ideas and critical debate around modernist architecture, especially the way it constructs a subjective experience of space through design and choice of materials, shaping emotions and behaviour. Her first work to explore these notions of translation through site-specific photographic installation was *Passeggeri* (Passengers), a 2010 work displayed in the main atrium of Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como, Italy. While working on the project with the architect Christian Galli, she conceived the idea of mobile display structures, basing them precisely on the proportions of the building, and adding plain grey and mirrored versions to provide moments of visual punctuation and 'mental pause'. The reflections and shadows of the spectators subtly immersed themselves in the Casa's perfect, ethereally pale, modernist interior, revealing, says Sonzogni, 'glimpses of humanity that were already present in his (Terragni's) plans'.

'Designing for people was a characteristic of post-war British architecture too,' says Sonzogni, and it was an interest in the progressive ideals and 'generosity' of that period that led her to the former Lilian Baylis School. Built in 1960-64 for the London County Council, the school was one of many educational establishments built by Architects Co-Partnership (ACP), an idealistic practice formed by eleven alumni of the Architectural Association in 1939. Dark brick classroom blocks, each with distinctive glazed ends, exposed grey concrete floor plates, contrasting brown window timbering and glazed linking corridors at first floor level combine to give the building a sense of dramatic energy. The building was listed Grade II in 2000, with the support of C20. Sonzogni first documented it in 2013, and

then a year later experimented with the character of its spaces in a gallery/workshop setting (*Identikit I*). This year, an extended residency has given her the opportunity to continue her play on the term 'identikit', with its dual concepts of 'identity' and 'kit' (tools): the process of reconstructing the facial features of an unknown individual according to witness statements suggests layered ways of engaging with the exhibition site to create an environment rich with embedded narratives and unique traces of memory.

The structures for *Identikit II* occupied the assembly hall of the former school, a unique square space made octagonal by a surrounding gallery and specifically designed to facilitate gatherings and performance. 'As soon as you walk in,' Sonzogni says, 'you become an actor, and a witness.' Here, she chose to reinstall full-length red curtains which allowed interesting spatial divisions, creating a sense of permeability and discovery (inspired, she says, by Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich's 1927 'Velvet and Silk Café' in Berlin). Encountered in the dark recesses of the hall, images of the boldly-coloured abandoned classrooms, with their distressed and over-painted surfaces, took on a new intensity (some even wittily echoing a stray Malevich painting). An image showing a milky-white window elevation and two chairs, placed alone on the school stage, seemed to morph into a nervous spot-lit 'personality'.

Sonzogni insists that the work should not function as nostalgia, but as a moment of collective memory experienced in the present, unburdened with what she describes as repetitive socio-political arguments. The site specific interventions, and her additional 'new composites' – photographs of the public encountering the installation – create mechanisms that allow the spectator not only to witness the process of a building's transformation, but also to subtly inscribe themselves into that process, adding further visual narratives, and eloquently bridging the gap between the past and the present.



**Above right and right:
staging the building –
Identikit II at the
former Lilian Baylis
School, Lambeth**

