



output: **Artefact**

name: **Karsten  
Huneck**

# Inhabitable Fictions

## Output Details

How can volumes of space be temporarily transformed into 'inhabitable fictions' using off-the-shelf, low-cost materials?

RESEARCHER:  
Karsten Huneck

TITLE:  
Inhabitable Fictions

TYPE OF OUTPUT:  
Artefact

DATE OF OUTPUT:  
2015, 2017



## 300 Word Statement

*Inhabitable Fictions* is an ongoing research inquiry where temporary installations are created in existing spaces in order to examine the potential of off-the-shelf materials to create immersive environments. The research specifically considers 'how can volumes of space be temporarily transformed into inhabitable fictions using off-the-shelf, low-cost materials?'. *Inside Cities* (2015) and *Un-veiled* (2017) examine the use of low-cost, off-the-shelf materials to create immersive environments which enable visitors to become physically and experientially absorbed into the spaces they create. Ceiling hung, tightly-packed rows of low cost, off-the-shelf materials (white string curtains and red scaffolding mesh respectively) were manipulated and cut by hand to create voids within the voluminous space thereby inviting visitors to explore and experience the permeable installations. *Inside Cities* was

an invited commission from Arup to develop an exhibition for the lobby of their London headquarters that unified, yet neutralised, the space providing a backdrop for very diverse pieces of art and engineering. *Un-veiled* was created to mark the launch of RIBA North, a new national architecture centre on the Liverpool Waterfront, resulting in an installation that visually and spatially addressed two integral elements of architecture – design and construction. An iterative and speculative practice-based research approach was employed in order to interrogate the research question and address project parameters and constraints which ultimately provided a theoretical framework for the research. This framework supports new forms of expression for temporary installations. The knowledge generated between the two projects provided

the ability to test approaches, materials and techniques and to generate new insights and new forms of spatial expression and experience. The research attracted significant attention within the discipline due to its innovative approach to temporary installations while providing visitors with an engaging and 'spatially familiar' experience due to the novel use of off-the-shelf materials.

## Research Process

How can volumes of space be temporarily transformed into 'inhabitable fictions' using off-the-shelf, low-cost materials?

### Research Context:

*Inhabitable Fictions* represents research directed through two projects by Karsten Huneck in his practice KHBT. KHBT is an award-winning creative studio set up in 2010 by architects Karsten Huneck and Bernd Trümpler in London and Berlin. The practice works collaboratively and often with community engagement, operating on and across the boundary of art and architecture, creating buildings, spaces, and public art installations.

KHBT are founding members of the experimental architectural

network *osa* – office for subversive architecture – which was established in 1995 and acts as a platform for spatial research that feeds into the practice. *osa* aim to develop non-traditional approaches to reinterpret architecture in the city.

The network currently numbers eight partners, based in five different cities and three different countries in Europe, who work collaboratively. Consistent with the approach of KHBT, *osa*'s projects also cross the boundaries between art and architecture

and often try to subvert common views on architecture and look behind the obvious through a truly transdisciplinary approach.

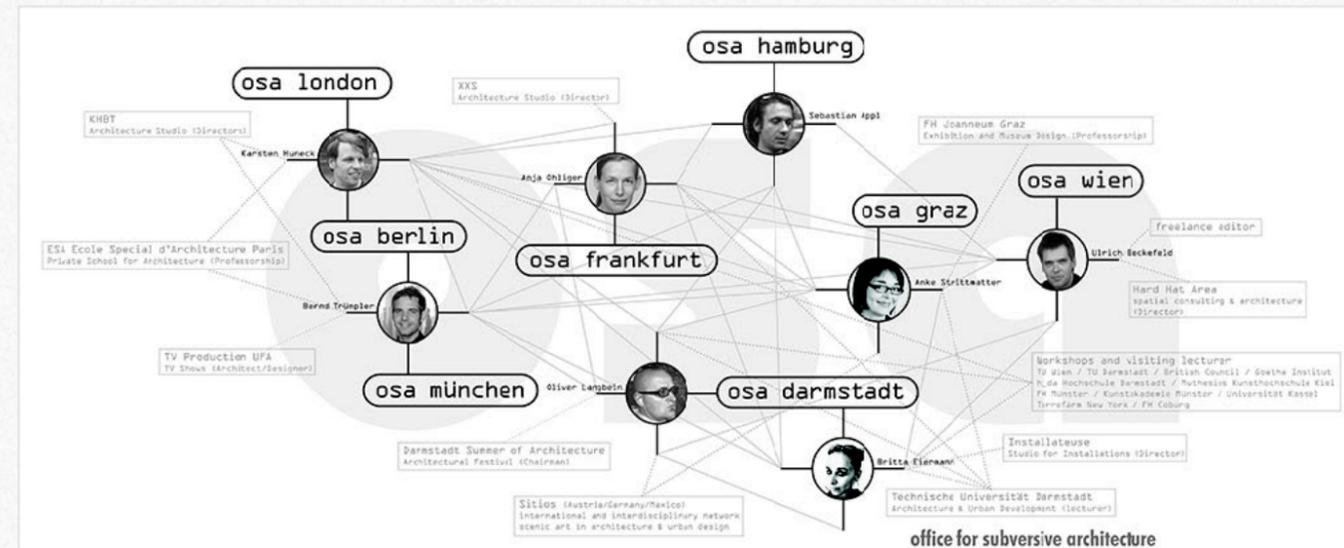


Fig 1. *osa* network 'diagram'. Link to [osa web page](#).

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## Research Objectives

The research investigates the ways in which low-cost, off-the-shelf materials can be used to create temporary installations in existing spaces. These materials are intentionally transferred from one context to another in order to create a familiarity that makes the environments more readily accessible to visitors. The research seeks to gain insights into the creation of environments in which visitors are physically and experientially absorbed into the space, becoming part of the narrative in a type of inhabitable fiction. The following objectives are addressed:

1. To test strategies to neutralise the condition of existing volumes of space.
2. To explore how experiences can then be created through inhabitable narratives, unexpected and immersive temporary environments.
3. To examine the potential of off-the-shelf materials to create softness in hard spaces.
4. To determine the opportunities and challenges of self-build in temporary architectural installations.



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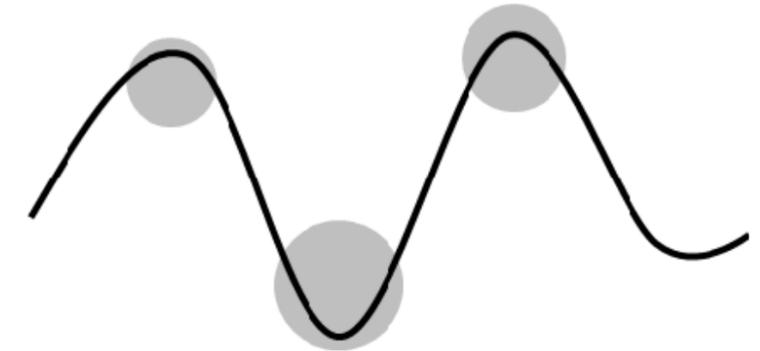
## Research Methods

The research employed an iterative and speculative practice-based approach involving numerous revisions and mock-ups. Speculative design activity was undertaken throughout each project to interrogate the research question and to explore the research objectives. By building an understanding of the particular project constraints, such as physical space, budgetary restrictions, client needs, installation restrictions, etc., a theoretical framework was developed to shape the design activity.

The research was iterative and allowed for emergent opportunities to be incorporated into subsequent ideation. Conclusions were drawn after each stage and external critique and objective criticism of the design iterations shaped the final proposals.

The opportunity to share learning between the two projects enabled a more structured cycle of speculative design activity to be undertaken in *Un-veiled* whereby user perspectives from the *Inside Cities* exhibition were incorporated in the subsequent design, development and installation. Feedback from *Inside Cities* provided invaluable to better understand the potential of off-the-shelf, low-cost materials to create immersive environments that are familiar and inviting to the visitor.

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**Project:** Art and the Built Environment Exhibition at Arup's Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 2015.

**Client:** Arup

**Curator:** Deborah Smith.

**Featured artists:** Fischli and Weiss, Damien Hirst, drmm, Something & Son, Heather and Ivan Morison, John Wood and Paul Harrison, Myvillages Company, Mark Titchner.

*Inside Cities* was an invited commission from Arup to develop an exhibition concept for the lobby of their London headquarters that unified yet neutralised the space providing a backdrop for the very diverse pieces of art and engineering.

The project resulted from an invitation Deborah Smith, the Curator of the exhibition. The brief was to spatially curate an exhibition entitled 'Art and the Built Environment' leading to a unified space that provided a backdrop for the very diverse exhibits while filling the space yet creating an inviting experience for visitors.

**Fig 2-5.**  
*Inside Cities* exhibition, Arup's Gallery, 2015.

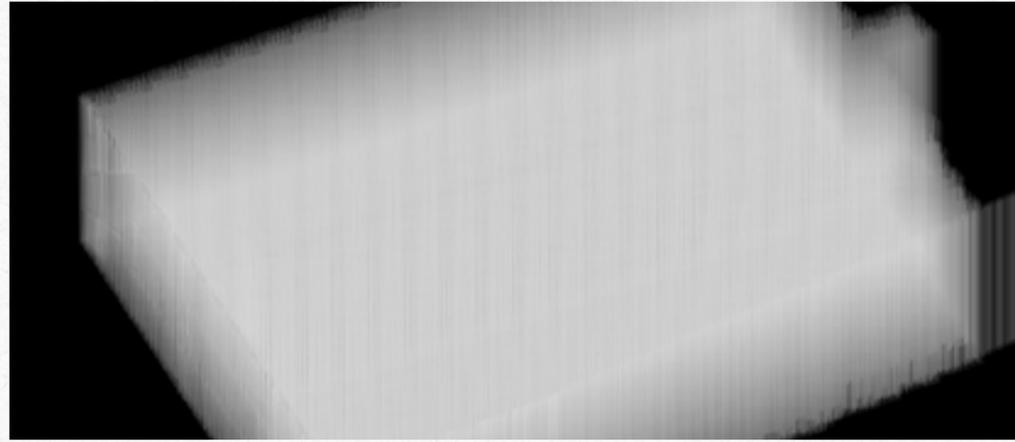
Process of discovery



INSIDE CITIES: EXHIBITION,  
ARUP GALLERY, LONDON, 2015



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To create the required unity and neutrality, the entire volume of the exhibition was filled with an off-the-shelf yet familiar material. White string curtains – a material more typically used in doorways or to obscure walls – were chosen as 1) it is cost efficient, 2) is a familiar material, and 3) is tactile.

By hanging the curtains from the ceiling in a densely packed rows, a tactile, non-threatening and permeable space was created that could be adapted to suit the wide range of exhibits. Free-hand cutting to subtract volumes and create negative space was a process of careful deliberation. It added a fluid and responsive layer to an otherwise more planned, mechanical and systematic process of installation.

The creation of these inverse 'inhabitable spaces' aimed to invite physical exploration of the exhibition thereby allowing visitors to feel comfortable touching and moving through the curtains it in order to navigate the space.

**Fig 6.**  
*(Concept) Filling in the volume of the lobby space allows more control of the space by the exhibitor.*

**Fig 7.**  
*(Concept) The artworks were placed within the space and the spaces surrounding them were hollowed up putting focus on the artwork.*

**Fig 8.**  
*Existing ceiling fixtures allows the white curtain to be installed easily without having to disrupt existing structure.*

**Fig 9.**  
*The nature of the material allows for the spaces to be cut out easily without having too much difficulty.*

Process of discovery



INSIDE CITIES: EXHIBITION,  
ARUP GALLERY, LONDON, 2015



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The resulting permeable space was conceived as a representation of the city in its entirety, whilst the exhibits acted as examples of the complexity of our built environment today. The location of each negative was carefully chosen in order to create a connection between the exhibits and visitors as they explored the space whilst leaving scope for their own exploration and interpretation.

The sense of containment but simultaneous fluidity and the freedom of movement conceptually links to the exhibition's overarching subject – *Inside Cities*. The exhibition design established a new identity for Arup's lobby space. It neutralised and unified the space. It served as a filter as well as a backdrop for the very diverse art and engineering exhibits.

**Fig 10-12.**  
*Inside Cities* exhibition, Arup's Gallery, 2015.

Process of discovery

INSIDE CITIES: EXHIBITION,  
ARUP GALLERY, LONDON, 2015



13.

**External feedback:**

"*Inside Cities* welcomed its visitors with the statement: 'The future demands your participation', as featured in Mark Titchner's eponymous artwork (2006). KHBT's exhibition de-signs can be seen as embodiments of this prompt, with the simple act of going-through becoming a physical exchange that enriches and completes the installations. 'Viewing' is transformed into a playful drama of concealing and revealing, and the sense of discovery is heightened while passing through the translucent, rippling looking-glass proxies. These works are, in some ways, a reversal of Do Ho Suh's sculptures, where parts of a building – walls, doors, staircases – are recreated from gauze-like fabric. If the Korean's art installations challenge the concreteness of architecture as boundary, the architectural projects of KHBT use artful imagination to transform our perception and engagement with inhabitable space itself."

Dr. Alexandra Stara, Kingston University.

14.

The interactive qualities of the project were particularly well received and generated great interest. The notion of accessing a dense yet tactile and permeable space with allowed direct interaction with the exhibits received positive comments from visitors and critics.

This material choice was instrumental to the success of the project in experiential terms and also in terms of the achievability of adaptive, low-tech, self-build installation process. The ability to easily modify it with scissors also allowed a very direct crafting of the space thereby.

**Fig 13.**  
*Inside Cities* exhibition, Arup's Gallery, 2015.

**Fig 14.**  
External feedback from Dr. Alexandra Stara, Kingston University.

Process of discovery



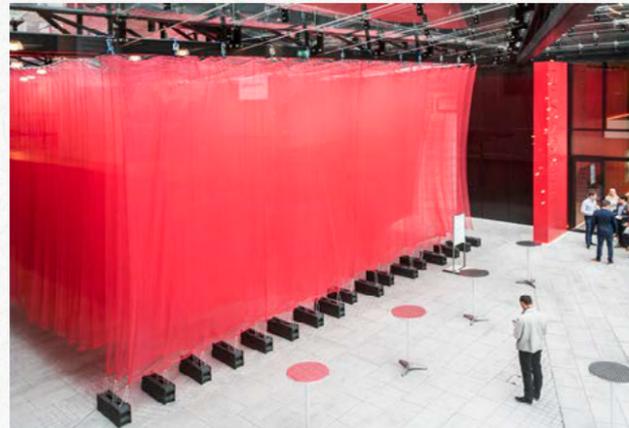
INSIDE CITIES: EXHIBITION,  
ARUP GALLERY, LONDON, 2015



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18.

**Project:** Installation for the inauguration of RIBA North in Liverpool, 2017.

**Client:** RIBA.

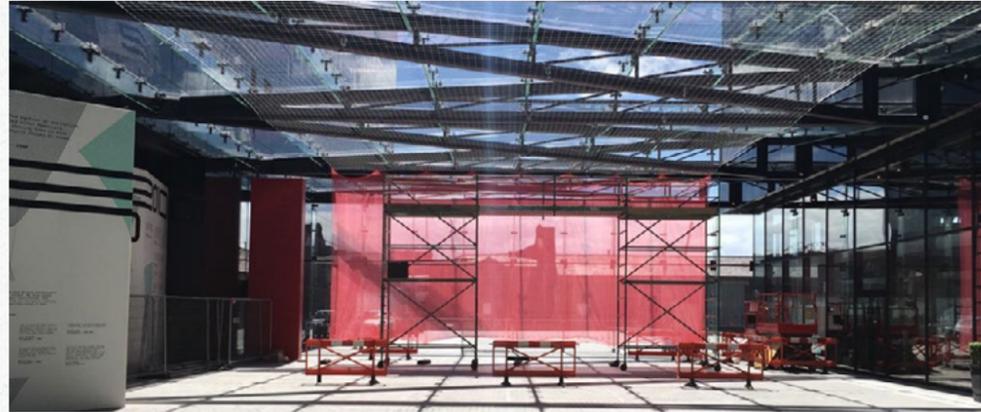
*Un-veiled* was created to mark the launch of RIBA North, a new national architecture centre on the Liverpool Waterfront, resulting in an installation that visually and spatially interpreted the two integral elements of architecture – design and construction.

Initial concept exploration identified that fundamentally architecture involved the design and construction process through which materials are assembled into a building. *Un-veiled* harnessed this notion in the speculative process, manifesting the two integral elements and utilised a typical building site material, red scaffolding mesh, to form the volume of the installation. This was partly a poetic move and also a progression of the knowledge gained through *Inside Cities* and sought to further test the possibilities of an off-the-shelf material to create an immersive experience.

**Fig 15-18.**  
*Un-veiled installed at RIBA North, 2017.*

Process of discovery

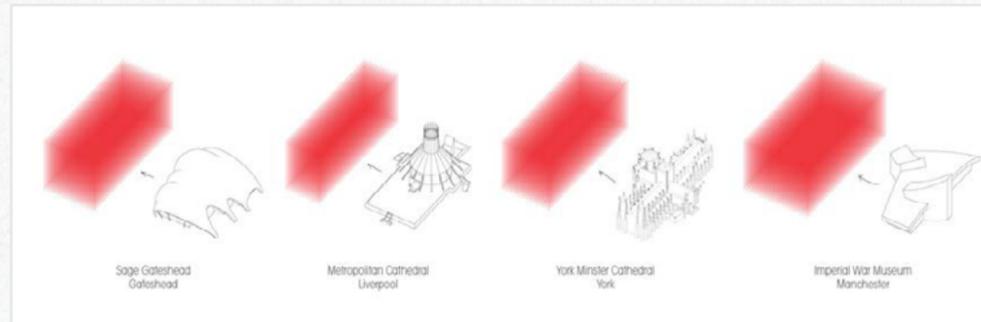
UN-VEILED: INSTALLATION,  
RIBA NORTH, LIVERPOOL, 2017



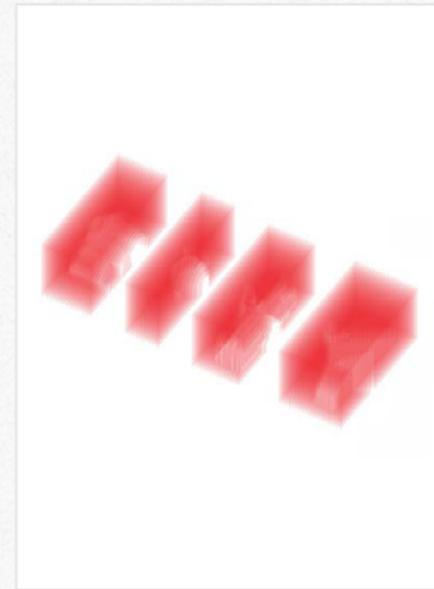
19.



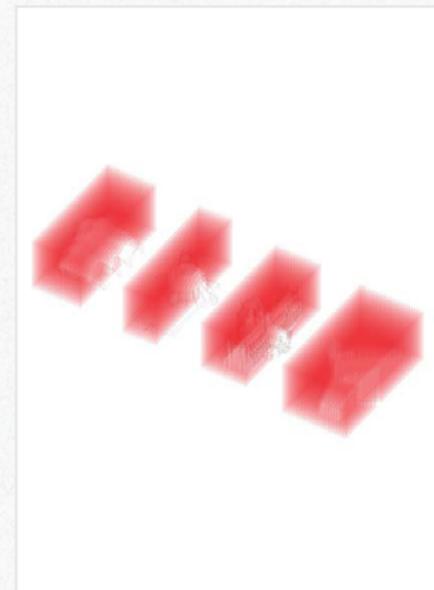
20.



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23.

The site for *Un-veiled* differed considerably in scale from that of *Inside Cities*. It was located in the atrium of the Mann Island Building – a very large, non-descript, publicly accessible space, partially open to the elements. In experiential terms, the quality of the space prompted a transformative design response that aimed to be bold and radical. There was a need to have even more visual and experiential impact than its predecessor. There were no artefacts to incorporate within this installation, thus giving a freedom for the intervention to be more visually demanding itself.

The space was filled utilising red scaffolding mesh hung from the ceiling which formed an impressive proposition while also unifying the environment. Hundreds of these large mesh sheets were hung onto the existing beams allowing the same successful spatial rhythm and rigour to be established and for the same low-tech, self-build approach to be further explored.

Cavernous volumes were created using free-hand cutting situ to create voids in the shape of iconic buildings of Liverpool and The North – a tactic that was both playful and impactful. Scale negatives of these buildings wafted in and out of focus for visitors as they walked through the space.

Link to RIBA North Facebook [short video](#) of installation set up.

**Fig 19.**  
*Constructing Un-veiled installation at RIBA North, 2017.*

**Fig 20.**  
*The nature of the material allows for the spaces to be cut out easily without having too much difficulty.*

**Fig 21-23.**  
*(Concept) The artworks were placed within the space and the spaces surrounding them were hollowed up putting focus on the artwork.*



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The learning from *Inside Cities* was critical in developing the overall approach for *Un-veiled*. Unlike *Inside Cities*, which responds to the exhibits, the carved out volumes of *Un-veiled* themselves became the artefact with which people interacted. The volumes allowed people to experience the journey within the abstraction of iconic buildings. These were now inverse spaces for people to explore and inhabit.

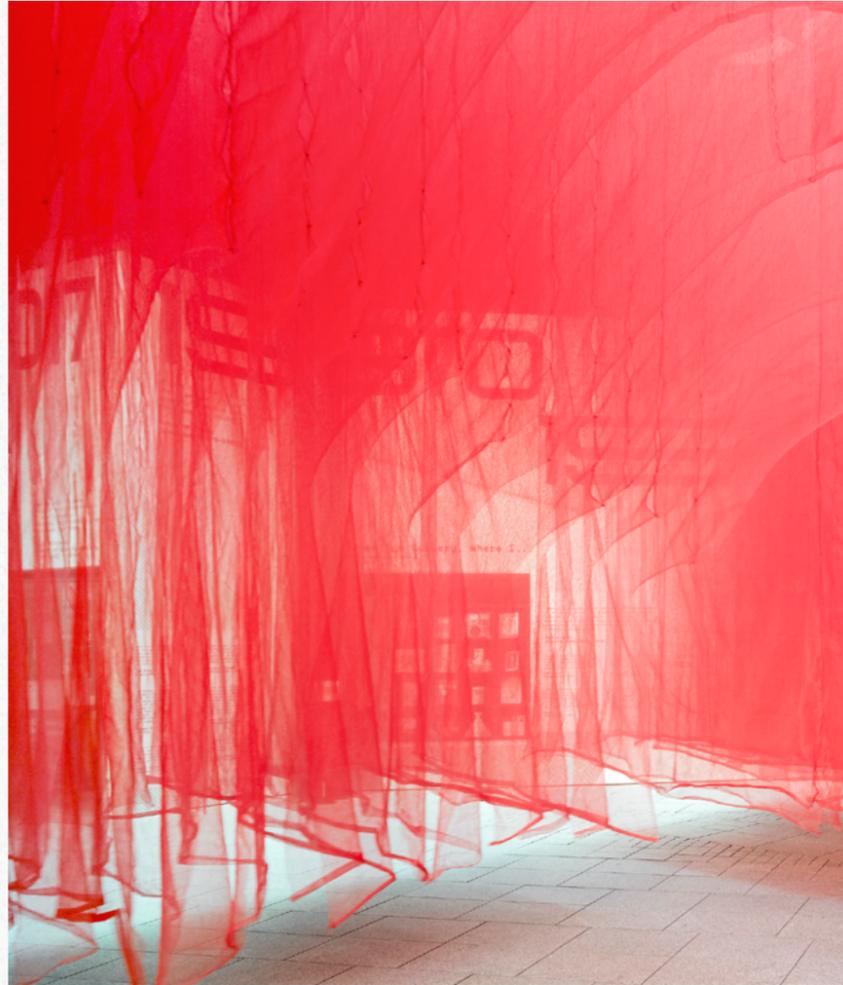
The self-build process was more challenging and controlled. Although the same low-tech approaches were taken to both utilise the existing structure for physical installation and to use free-hand cutting to craft the material, the creation of inverse scale version of buildings required a level of accuracy that made them recognisable. Recognisable sections through each building were projected onto the mesh allowing accurate representation to be created.

**Fig 24-26.**  
*Un-veiled* installed at RIBA North, 2017.

Process of discovery



UN-VEILED: INSTALLATION,  
RIBA NORTH, LIVERPOOL, 2017



27.



28.

**External feedback:**

"The pavilion is located in a place through which many people who are not strictly connected with architecture pass by. They are the usual passers-by crossing the episode from Pier Head to Tate Liverpool. They pass, often stop for a moment and observe the colorful installation with interest. The café and store at our headquarters encourage people who would never think that they can engage in a debate about architecture."

Jane Duncan, RIBA President.

29.

As the project was located in a public space it had high visibility and created enormous interest with RIBA recording 402,595 visitors. Visitors reported that the experience that it created was emotionally moving. Many also reflected on the unexpected beauty that could be created with such a mundane and pragmatic material, usually associated with something that has no aesthetic or experiential ambitions.

**Fig 27-28.**  
*Un-veiled installed at RIBA North, 2017.*

**Fig 29.**  
*Feedback on Un-veiled exhibition from Jane Duncan, RIBA President.*

## Research Insights

This research explored how volumes of space can be temporarily transformed into inhabitable fictions using off-the-shelf materials. It investigated the ways in which low-cost materials can be used to create immersive environments as temporary installations. Through two related projects, *Inside Cities* and *Unveiled*, it was possible to test approaches, materials and techniques and ultimately to develop insights that are of value to other in the profession.

The research has demonstrated the potential of low-tech crafting and self-build when creating an experiential space. Learning from *Inside Cities* directly informed and helped to refine the technique to develop a more planned, controlled and accurate way of creating the voids within the material layers.



Fig 30. *Inside Cities* exhibition, Arup's Gallery, 2015.

## Research Insights

An iterative approach allowed judgment to be exercised by the researcher, often while in-situ, as they inhabit and respond to the space and experience as it evolves. Unexpectedly, this experimental aspect also produces surprising outcomes, such as tactility of familiar materials, which can enhance the immersive experience.

In terms of the perceptual effects of inhabitable fictions, visitors were moved by the spaces and their experiences of it. This narrative approach to temporary installations invites the visitor on a personal spatial journey, exceeded expectations in both projects. The freedom to explore the installations in a free and open way was commented on by visitors to both *Inside Cities* and *Un-veiled*.



**Fig 31.** *Un-veiled* installed at RIBA North, 2017.

## Research Insights

The research explored the potential of low-cost, off-the-shelf materials to foster a direct relationship between the installation and visitors, who interact more readily with familiar, non-threatening materials. Such off-the-shelf materials are also capable of being spatially and experientially impactful even with financial restraint. The surprising choice of materials, and finding innovative ways to use them can lend ephemeral qualities and creating surprise and intrigue as people engage with the space. These materials can, as shown by the effective use of scaffolding mesh for *Un-veiled*, also create a conceptual link with the subject or theme of the work.



**Fig 32.** *Inside Cities* exhibition, Arup's Gallery, 2015.

# Dissemination

## 1. Exhibition

London, United Kingdom.

23rd June - 11th September 2015.

*Inside Cities* was exhibited at Arup's Gallery, London.



**Fig 33.** *Inside Cities* exhibition, Arup's Gallery, 2015.

## 2. Installation

Liverpool, United Kingdom.

2017.

*Un-veiled* was installed as part of the inauguration of RIBA North - National Architecture Centre in Liverpool.

As a much larger and more public project, *Un-veiled* gained particularly high exposure as it has been seen by 402,595 visitors during the period it was installed.

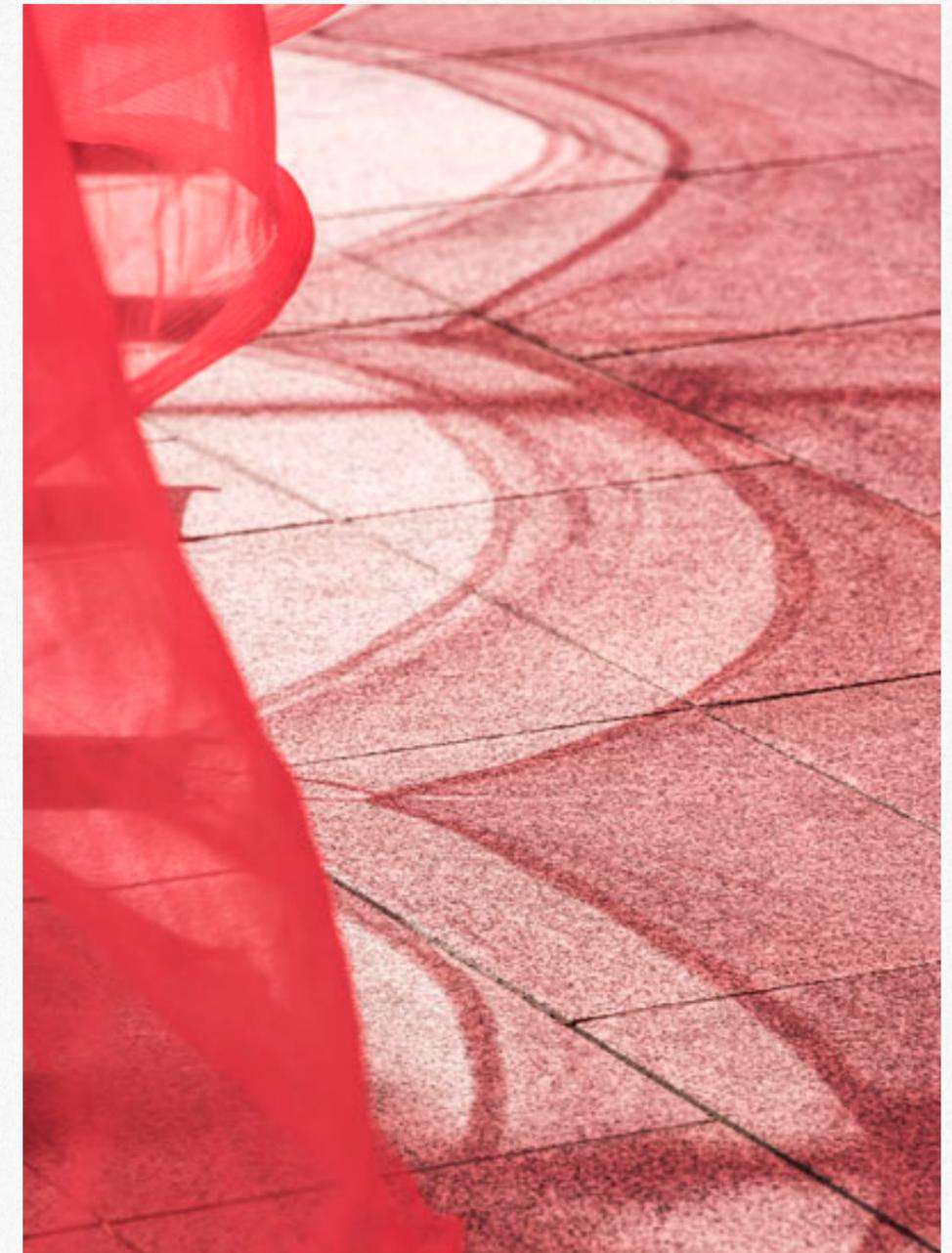


Fig 34. *Un-veiled* installed at RIBA North, 2017.

## 3. Coverage

In-print and online.

2016-2017.

### **Inside Cities:**

- *AJ Library*. Published 2016.

### **Un-veiled:**

- *RIBA Website*, Published June 2017.
- *AD*, Published July 2017.
- *Archilovers*, Published March 2018. (2,497 Visits).
- *AI Magazine*, Published August 2017.
- *Caro Communications*, Published July 2017.
- *Point of Design*, Published July 2017.
- *Wallpaper*, Published June 2017.
- *Domus*, Published June 2017.
- *Divisare*, Published October 2017.

ARCHITECTURE: Paint the town: RIBA's new hub is an architectural beacon in the North



'Un Veiled' by KHBT Architects is a pavilion made of red mesh typically used in scaffolding, cut into the shapes of iconic Liverpool buildings. *Photography: Johannes Marburg*

**Fig 35.** From *Wallpaper\** article - 20 JUN 2017 | BY HARRIET THORPE Link to [source](#)

## Image Credits

All *Un-veiled* and *Inside Cities* installation images - Photography by Johannes Marburg. Link to sources [here](#) and [here](#).

