

Science Fiction in Pennine Lancashire

Panopticons: Halo by John Kennedy / LandLab

Christian Barnes



In a very real sense Halo has a direct purchase on the realities of living in East Lancashire today where different communities lead parallel lives and sometimes view each other with suspicion



1

MAIN IMAGE *Halo. Installation Shot, 2007*
 Photo: Christian Barnes
 VistaProjects (UK) Ltd

1 *Halo Opening, 2007*
 Photo: Michael Barham
 CC Vision

2 *Halo Cone, 2007*
 Photo: Christian Barnes,
 VistaProjects (UK) Ltd.



2

Over the last twenty years we have seen the rapid proliferation of highly visible telecommunications, broadcast and camera infrastructure which has broken into the public realm on the back of a revolution in mobile telephony and CCTV. When, in 2003, *Panopticons* was proposed as an architectural competition offering multiple briefs and sites for folly structures and viewpoints in the Lancashire districts, John Kennedy first considered a creative response to the brief in celebration of the architectural language of these structures.

Unloved and unregarded, the ad hoc arrangement of these constructions has crept over every landscape, roofline, roadside and hilltop. Our environment is awash with aerials and cameras as our pockets and glove trays fill with gadgets receiving and transmitting a mixture of terrestrial and satellite broadcast signals. We have almost, without knowing it, come to occupy an electronic and virtual habitat unknown a generation ago.

Our society is more networked, connected and subject to camera surveillance than has ever been the case in the past. Driving down any motorway one is greeted with one galvanised iron structure after another bearing cameras, transmitters and all kinds of equipment whose purpose, despite their ubiquity, is rarely made known to the general public. This has been a discreetly managed revolution but the density of this material has now reached a point where it is as much a part of the built environment and landscape as church spires, horse troughs and rustic bridges once were.

The *Panopticons* website offers a definition of the word as an 'all seeing structure'. It says that they are "to be a series of 21st century landmarks, symbols of East Lancashire's emergence from economic decline, they are to be visually stunning gateway pieces".

Although these statements are as firmly rooted in the picturesque tradition of follies situated as an object in landscape in the optimistic language of regeneration – *Panopticons* 'lite' perhaps? – the received meaning of the word panopticon is as a specific type of prison. The invention of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1785, the panopticon was an architectural device to allow a single individual to observe all the inmates of the prison without the prisoners being able to tell whether they were being watched.

Panopticons, the competition, was broadly interpreted by the other winners as an opportunity to create a panoramic viewpoint, and while Kennedy's treatment permits this lighter reading, it also has darker roots. His *Panopticon* is an architectural structure with metaphorical content. It draws on Foucault's concept of disciplinary surveillance based on the panopticon as a "theatre of punishment" and "theatrical forum", which signifies that as well as watching we are being watched. Bentham himself described the panopticon as "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind in a quantity hitherto without example".

To this interpretation of the brief, Kennedy has added another dimension; again one which, while admitting humour, nonetheless explores a uniquely local paranoia because this area of East Lancashire has the distinction of having the most sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO's) anywhere in the United Kingdom. Although Kennedy has, with increasing desperation throughout the commissioning process, stubbornly maintained that "IT IS NOT A FLYING SAUCER!", as a science fiction fan, he has willingly explored the range of this fantasy and its hyperbole with a sure and ironic touch, the concept is intended to be part sublime and part ridiculous.

Landmark science fiction such as H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* introduced a tradition of characterisation in projecting the unknown nature of an alien world as hostile, superior or inferior. Subsequently, the image of the flying saucer has become a symbol of a parallel world





beyond our everyday experience, which gathered particular resonance in the 1950's during the McCarthy era and the Cold War. In a very real sense *Halo* has a direct purchase on the realities of living in East Lancashire today where different communities lead parallel lives and sometimes view each other with suspicion. By some miracle of faith in humanity Kennedy's *Panopticon* remains simultaneously fake and fun. Sci-Fi's most memorable structures have nearly all been architectural in form and dedicated to control, from the supposedly impregnable Death Star in *Star Wars*, to the suspicion expressed in the claustrophobic negotiations between Hal – *the computer* – and Dave Bowman – *the astronaut* – in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The Rossendale valley has been dubbed *UFO alley* in the local press, which has reported a high incidence of UFO sightings as a quick visit to www.ufoinfo.com using the keyword Lancashire will attest! This is perhaps due in no small part to the efforts of Bacup born Jenny Randles,³ co-writer of the TV series *Strange but True*, and author of *UFO's and how to see them*.⁴ Prior to this there has been a continuous engagement with a stream of UFO reports originating in the area around the Rossendale Fells in Lancashire, the Yorkshire Dales and the High Peaks of North Derbyshire. As if to confirm this, as the *Halo* was being installed it was watched by a few spectators who claimed without irony that there used to be UFO's coming through here all the time "*until they built the by-pass*".

This is another way of saying that this was the future we were going to have. A future that now belongs to the past. It was this future that is perfectly expressed in the Pennine Tower, constructed in 1965, at Forton motorway services between Junctions 32 and 33 of the M6, which Kennedy has photographed a number of times, finding it to be inspirational. Forton, landmark of Britain's first motorway, the Preston bypass, was built at a time when the Prime Minister could muse on the impact of the "*white heat of technology*" in releasing us from the need to work and which now seems a far cry from the present reality of a future in which the sustainability agenda challenges us to manage decline. If Kennedy's *Panopticon* is a portal to another world it is partly a portal to the past. My past, for as a child in the early 70's I recall being

driven to the motorway service station to dine in the Pennine Tower Restaurant, now closed to the public, with its panoramic views of the area to the south of Lancaster. I believed as I sat there that it would not be long before earth had a colony on the moon.

It is fair to say that the *Halo* commission was a high wire act from the start and that it has been delivered only with the steadfast support of clients Mid Pennine Arts whose determination to succeed and ability to work with partners has been a key factor in its delivery. Architecture needs good clients above all else and, despite their inexperience at the start, Mid Pennine Arts in partnership with Rossendale Council and many others have demonstrated a will to succeed which other organisations must envy.

The big risk about the *Panopticons* competition was that the winners would be appointed on the basis of their submissions without the judges knowing who the applicants were. Competition applicants could select which district and site brief they wanted to respond to, while Mid Pennine Arts drew together and sustained a partnership of the Lancashire District Authorities co-ordinated by Nick Hunt and Linda Newton in an initiative aligned with the establishment of East Lancashire as a Regional Park – Pennine Lancashire. At first advised by Emma Walker and Ian Banks, then public art officer at Arts Council North West, who first proposed the name, the project was unique amongst iconic art commissions of the period in so far as it championed a route to creative expertise in which chance was a significant factor. In doing so it built upon the success of Blackpool Council's *Wind Shelters* competition of 2002, which had surprised the organisers by attracting 82 entries of exceptional calibre. The first phase of *Panopticons* was organised through the Royal Institute of British Architects Competitions Office in Leeds and publicised in summer 2003. Mid Pennine Arts received a total of 230 entrants – an astonishing level of response.

It is almost inconceivable that Kennedy could have won the commission by any other route. An unknown landscape architect, living only a few miles away from the site, with no project to which he could put his name, though crucially not lacking in professional experience. Kennedy



4



5



6

3 Halo Opening, 2007
Photo: Steve Chettle

4 Halo

5 Kilmainham Jail
(Victorian wing)
Photo: Sean Munson

6 Pennine Tower at
Forton Motorway
Services, 2008
Photo: Christian Barnes
VistaProjects (UK)

had recently given up a dead end job with a simple mission in mind. Using his trading identity, LandLab, he planned to enter competitions until he won one or went broke! *Panopticons* was his first attempt.

When I was appointed in 2003 to act as a project manager the *Halo* was a doubtful project as the site initially considered for the structure by Kennedy in Accrington was never offered to him. The local council leader had voiced concern that it would make the town a laughing stock, "*Hyndburn is just not ready for a space ship on the coppice*"³ he had said, raising the terrifying prospect of an interstellar parking ticket tussle.

Mid Pennine Arts recognised that there was no realistic proposition of obtaining planning permission or support from Hyndburn so although Kennedy had won the competition with a commendation from the judges there was no immediate intention of delivering the project there. In the interim, at my suggestion, Kennedy was encouraged and funded to work up dramatic photomontages and visualisations of the image to support Mid Pennine Arts' efforts to find another site. In this process Kennedy broke new ground as a landscape architect, fully realising the potential of the structure to deliver a narrative landscape treatment.

The project was given new life by its incorporation into the refurbishment of Top o' Slate, a Remade[®] site above Haslingden owned by Rossendale Borough Council. The adoption of the project into the Top o' Slate Scheme helped establish a higher status for the refurbishment project and secure £500,000 of investment into the landscaping of the site. Top o' Slate is a magnificent landscape setting – an old hilltop quarry with dramatic views overlooking the Rossendale valley. From it there are prospects of the local landmarks which *Halo* has now joined: the Jubilee Tower, the Peel Tower and Winter Hill Mast. From the east one can see Bury and Manchester and beyond that the Derbyshire Pennines. Work eventually began on the project in January 2007.⁴

Rossendale Borough Council's decision to support the project in the face of some local opposition has been vindicated by *Halo's* recent victory in the local Pride of Place award. In addition the project attracted the

attention and support of the Northern Way initiative who agreed to fund the installation of a bespoke glowing lighting system. Foundations and an off-grid renewable power supply were generously funded through Lancashire County Council's Remade scheme.

At the opening event – we learned not to say launch! – Kennedy was surprised and delighted to see people milling around the structure in an event involving over a thousand people and orchestrated by WildWorks.⁸ Throughout the last four years he had not imagined or understood the capacity *Halo* would have for drawing people to the site, but these days Top o' Slate is something of a destination visit.

Christian Barnes has a background in Fine Art, Curation and commissioning in the public realm. He is a founding director of Vista Projects (UK) Ltd. based in Cumbria.

www.vistaprojects.co.uk.

Notes:

1 Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, (Gallimard English Edition 1977).

2 Bentham, Jeremy., *The Panopticon Writings*. Ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995).

3 <http://www.ufoevidence.org/Researchers/Detail40.htm>

4 Randles, Jenny., *UFOs and How to See Them*, (Caxton Editions, London. 1993)

5 Accrington Observer. 17, July 2003.

http://www.acringtonobserver.co.uk/news/s/348483_coppice_ufo_design_chosen

6 REMADE, which stands for REclamation and MAnagement of DErelict land, has been set up by Lancashire County Council in partnership with the Northwest Regional Development Agency as part of the Agency's commitment to tackling the region's derelict land problem. A quarter of all derelict land in England is located in the North West and it is a blight on people's lives, harms the image of the area and deters investment.

7 As the project developed Kennedy led an increasingly collaborative team in the detailed design of the project in which it is fair to credit Barry Jefcoate of Rossendale based Structural Engineers, Booth King and Michael Barham of CC Vision, designer of the lighting installation as both can claim a share in the authorship of the project. It is also a pleasure to credit the excellent work and input of Bacup based steelwork contractors A. D. Morton, and Garry Barnes.

8 www.wildworks.biz Journey to the Halo. Halo launch event. 20th September 2007. A celebratory event led by Wildworks, a theatre company based in Cornwall. Wildworks led a procession to Top o'Slate and Halo bearing flags and banners, accompanied by local musicians and bearing memory boxes and other treasures found during their residency in Haslingden. Then climax of the event was the lighting of the Halo.