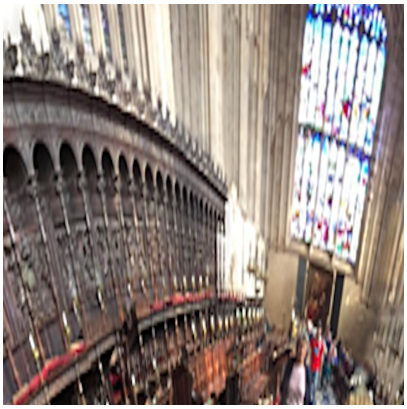


Back of shop

Description

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It happens all the time: people accidentally disclosing what should be kept private. (Iâ??m thinking of David Cameron saying out loud how relieved the Queen was when he alerted her that Scotland would stay in the UK â?? Guardian.) The relationship between the private and the public keeps us fascinated, especially when thereâ??s a breach of some kind.

The social anthropologist and former Edinburgh academic Erving Goffman developed an understanding of human behaviour in terms of the back and front regions of a stage: â??A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of courseâ?• (114).

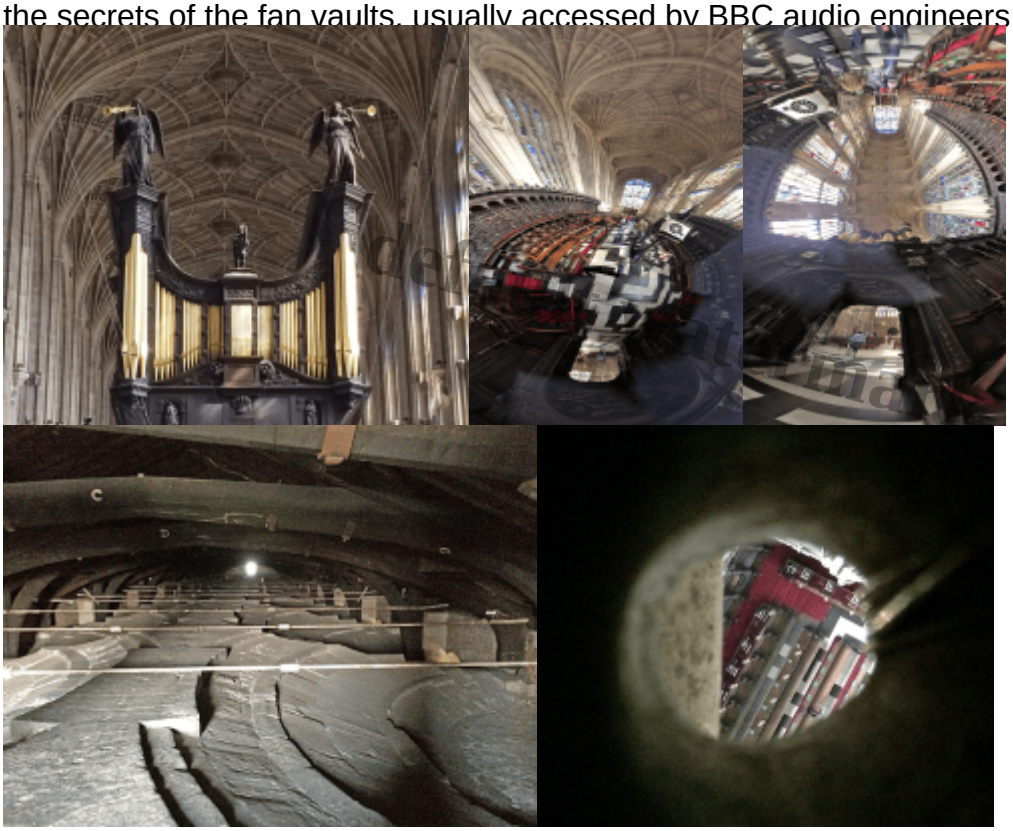
What goes on behind the scenes is often in direct contradiction to what appears in the main play, which in public and political life is often dictated by rules of decorum and protocol. The less presentable activity behind the stage keeps the facade intact. Of course Goffmanâ??s construction is a theatrical and an architectural metaphor. Hereâ??s the start of a typology of **backstage architecture** that foregrounds space as well as human behaviour.

- **Serviced and servant**. Louis Kahn famously delineated architectural spaces in terms of serviced and servant spaces. Thereâ??s the main showcase area of a museum and the back rooms where material is prepared for display, where administrators do their work, files are stored, etc. In a shop thereâ??s the customer area and the back of shop. These are fairly obviously delineations, and there are breaches between the two, as in the case of backstage and workshop tours.
- **Undifferentiated space**. On the other hand there are those spaces where there is no such delineation. A garden shed is all backstage; a pavilion in a park is all front stage.
- **Invisible and unknown**. Then there are those hidden backstage areas that few of us are likely to visit, and probably donâ??t expect to see. The famous Kingâ??s College Chapel in Cambridge has the appearance of a light and airy simple pavilion with nothing hidden.
- **Ambiguated spaces**. Sometimes designers work with the relationship between the public and the private, allowing each to break through the other, to enfold each other, dynamically and ambiguously. Curators at the Railway Museum in York have opened up the area where railway paraphernalia is tagged and shelved, but not displayed. The workshop can also be viewed from

walkways open to visitors.

- **Thereâ??s nothing there**. There are those spaces that suggest there is or ought to be a backstage, but thereâ??s nothing. Thereâ??s no content, contraption or works to the back of stage to keep the show on the road. There may not even be a space. Itâ??s a bit like exiting a circus tent to discover youâ??re just in an open field. As Goffman says, â??As countless folk tales and initiation rites show, often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this tooâ?• (76).

Hereâ??s a bit of mystery, cultivated and then revealed via privileged access to the attic space above the arborescent fan vaulting of Kingâ??s College Chapel. These are not the first images online to reveal the secrets of the fan vaults, usually accessed by BBC audio engineers recording the Festival of Nine





Notes

- Thanks to Felipe HernÃ¡ndez for taking me on the tour.
- Also see Mystery philosopher fakes own death, Enchanted places, Architectural unconscious.
- Itâ??s fair to say that photography, digital photography, photosharing, social media, online video, and even mainstream television have reconfigured the relationships between the front and back stage arenas. Itâ??s hard to keep anything entirely private now, though people really do preserve the difference between public and private. Thereâ??s no confusing the film with the outtakes, the dining area with the kitchen, The Great and Powerful Oz with the man behind the curtain.
- Today is Doors Open Day in Edinburgh: â??Every weekend in September you can explore places that are normally closed to the public.â?•

Reference

- Goffman, Erving. 1969. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin

Category

1. Architecture

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Tags

1. enchantment
2. mystery

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