

Journal of Boredom Studies (ISSN 2990-2525)

Issue 4, 2026, pp. 1-3

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18173208>

<https://www.boredomsociety.com/jbs>



Where One Is: Between Boredom and Architecture

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How to cite this paper: Parreno, C. (2026). Where One Is: Between Boredom and Architecture. *Journal of Boredom Studies*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18173208>

* This essay is part of a special autobiographical section and has not been subject to peer review.

Abstract: *Where One Is: Between Boredom and Architecture* reflects on a formative encounter with boredom in the context of architectural practice. Recounted through an episode in central London, the essay approaches boredom not simply as repetition or disinterest, but as a mood that destabilises notions of value, orientation and purpose. Rather than a pathology to be remedied, boredom emerges as a diffuse and ambiguous thread—entangled with time, attention and desire—through which architecture can be thought critically.

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Received 14 November 2025; Accepted 14 December 2025.

Through the lens of boredom, architecture appears less as a realm of buildings than as a field of events, experiences and intangible dimensions. Boredom is contingent upon the specificity of the environment that elicits it, though ambiguously, without a discernible order or pattern of action. It may begin in the superficial and move toward the profound; it constitutes a symptom of malaise while carrying possibilities of relief; it is felt individually yet shared collectively. Boredom unsettles fixed valuations. Neither wholly negative nor reliably productive, it slips between judgement and potential. Its elliptical complexity raises questions about where one is, how one forges meaningful connections with the world and, more importantly, where one wants to be.

It was in the centre of London, between Covent Garden and Bloomsbury, that I first encountered boredom as an enduring mood. I had been working as an architect on a large-scale project in the Middle East for a couple of years when, one early afternoon in 2006, my supervisor stopped me on the stairs as I was heading out for a pause. He asked whether I might oversee the construction details of the high-tech façade; the task, repetitious rather than creative or intellectual, would occupy me for another two years. His words were intended to be encouraging, laden with the possibility of a promotion. Yet the thought of devoting such an extended period to a mechanical dimension of architectural production, confined to a bare studio for ten or more hours a day while the sounds of a bustling city filtered through the high windows, became at once oppressive. By the end of the brief exchange, we both understood, without needing to say so, that I would not be taking on the assignment.

Walking aimlessly toward Bedford Square, thinking a quick workout at the YMCA might clarify my reaction, I concluded—perhaps decided—that I was not depressed, anxious or particularly unhappy. There was no urgency and no impetus for movement; the sensation resembled descriptions of limbo: an isotropic horizon, without here or there, suspended in time. My sombre disposition resisted the distractions of the gym, and I instead continued north, toward the library of the Architectural Association, where I had studied some time before. Next to a window on the second floor, overlooking one of the leafiest garden squares in the area, I came across Lars Svendsen’s *A Philosophy of Boredom*, lying in a reshelfing trolley.

The book had the marks of having been partially read. The spine was creased, bent back violently to hold it open up to the halfway point, and a few pages bore pencil annotations in the margins, mostly on passages related to leisure. The connection between boredom and certain typologies of architecture seemed evident—at that moment, too direct to offer any existential orientation. I sensed that the built environment alone could not trigger spatial exhaustion, but its tectonic suggestions could shape relationships vulnerable to tedium and dullness. Boredom and architecture surfaced as unstable, unresolved and resistant to precision. Attuned to this conundrum, motivated by this indeterminacy, I wondered whether the built environment could be studied through a philosophy of boredom, and whether someone else had already done so.

The interrogations did not dissipate the original unsettling. They rather composed a filter through which boredom turned into an intellectual and emotional thread—formless and

obstinate—with the capacity to explain many, if not all, surrounding phenomena. I became aware of its ubiquity and how modern everyday life is organised as a series of efforts to evade it. In the routines of a transnational firm of architecture, it was palpable in daily work—long hours of drafting and drawing, modelling and checking data—as well as in the obsession with producing new forms, treating the past as an outmoded repository of patterns that must be overcome. The logic of boredom mirrored the professional one: novelty and repetition oscillated, feeding each other; boredom is not merely a by-product of certain architectural practices, but it is embedded in the very spatial and temporal regimes they produce. Furthermore, as an inescapable presence in personal dynamics, the spatiality of boredom is entangled with time and vague outlines of desire and transgression, inducing the inhabitation of diverse environments.

As the effects of the financial crisis of 2007 remained palpable in London, continually threatening architectural employment, I began, in 2010, to consider undertaking a doctoral degree on the relationship between boredom and architecture. With the same diffuseness encountered between Covent Garden and Bloomsbury, the reasons were unclear. It was partly a want to leave a stagnant situation, partly the search for intellectual validation, partly the need to solve the riddle of the condition that had initiated that earlier unease. An initial approach to a professor, working at the intersection of architecture and philosophy, came to nothing; the proposal was dismissed without comment. I let it rest for some months, though not without the realisation that inaction itself had become an activity, as my firm entered yet another round of redundancies. Through a chain of tentative enquiries rather than any firm strategy, I was eventually put in contact with Iain Borden at the Bartlett School of Architecture. His response was prompt. Within days, I received an informal offer to join the PhD programme, which I accepted in the autumn of 2011, still uncertain how the following years would be sustained.

Although the first year at the Bartlett was intellectually expansive, it was marked by financial instability. My savings would barely cover two years of study; as an Ecuadorian student, fees were high and sources of support limited. Applications for scholarships and bursaries became a parallel occupation. One of them was to a call for doctoral projects at the Institute of Form, Theory and History at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, then directed by Mari Lending. I never received a formal acceptance. Instead, months later, a contract arrived, accompanied by a brief message stating that I was expected to move to Oslo in early September 2012.¹

Boredom has not offered answers, only a persistent way of attending to architecture as an inexact condition, perpetually in formation.

¹ The official presentation of the doctoral project in Oslo included Lars Svendsen among the invited critics. The coincidence was noted at the time, but it did not clarify the project's direction. It merely confirmed that boredom, as a condition rather than a concept, recurs without offering explanation.