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Boredom, Suicide and the Architecture of 1 Poultry Street, London

As the ultimate attempt to surpass the horizontality of transgression and leap into the promise of transcendence, suicide has been connected to boredom. Echoing the early warnings of Thomas Aquinas about the power of acedia to induce pervasive despair — ‘on account of the flesh utterly prevailing over the spirit’ — the intentional taking of one’s own life constitutes the definite disregard of the self and the immediate environment. In an instance of architecture and urban culture, related to the postmodern concern with space and spatiality, No 1 Poultry Street (1997) by James Stirling in London has turned into an expression of existential boredom. Throwing themselves off the public terrace in the eight floor, six deaths have been reported since the economic downturn of 2007, all committed by successful mid-career professionals working under the pressure of the City. In 2015, despite that two years prior 1.80-metre high barriers were erected, and security guards were employed to patrol anybody seen alone, a restaurant critic jumped to his death. He wrote in his last blog post, ‘When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford ... [Samuel] Johnson was right, I am not tired of London and never have been ... however I am tired of life’. In 2016, a salesman travelled from Dublin to follow the same steps. In his phone, several unsent messages were found. The first read, ‘I am bored of life and the future possibilities disinterest me’; the second, ‘I no longer try to adapt myself to others’; the third, ‘I am not made for this world’; and the last, ‘I have cracked’. In all the subsequent inquests, the architecture of the building — with its triangular plan due to its site, open atrium, rounded clock tower, projecting balconies and stripy façade, recognised as an epitome of postmodernism in need of preservation — was cleared of any blame.

Yet the structure appears to attract those affected by extreme boredom, as a magnet that frees the passing from the physical dimension to another.

To elaborate on this connection, this paper investigates these suicides in relation with the architectural features of No 1 Poultry Street and its status as an urban icon. If boredom has many intensities and depends on the offerings of the surroundings, then this case reveals its most radical phase, when alternatives can only be imagined in death.