

mind's eye



Peter Randall-Page possesses a rare facility — the ability to investigate fresh subject areas and combine them intelligently with his own interests and preoccupations. He rises to the challenge of melding his own interrogations with those of others. *Mind's Eye* for the University of Cardiff's Department of Psychology is a recent case in point.

When he responded to an open commission opportunity, it was for a site that was a classic in terms of the complexities of urban design. Situated on a main route into Cardiff, the Department of Psychology wished to create a visual marker. More interestingly it wanted to invite artists to respond, and in some way reflect, on the study of psychology. The Department sought a work that would communicate an 'enthusiasm and commitment to understanding the human mind'. The visibility of the site meant that the work would be available not only to the University but also to the wider community. Yet it would need a bold intervention to successfully interrupt the busy streetscape.

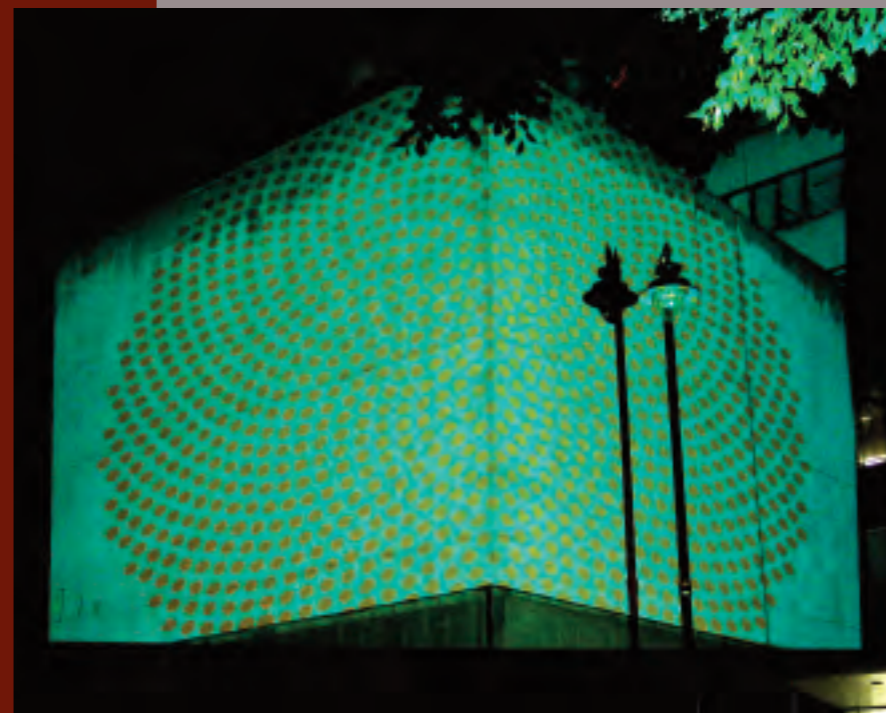
Upon selection Peter Randall-Page was invited to spend time getting to know the Department and the research areas of its staff and students. As one of the best in the UK it is committed to the study of psychology from the scientific perspective, and its research activities range across biological, cognition and social psychology. Separately, in recent work for the Eden Project, the University of Oxford and other projects, Randall-Page had been pursuing his own interests for growth patterns found in nature. The spiral phyllotaxis, as seen clearly in the seeds of a sunflower head, with its relationship to both the Fibonacci sequence and to the golden proportion, fascinated him. In his work he had begun to draw upon how the spiral phyllotaxis combines organised patterns and random shifts in those patterns. When rationalised as dots the mind finds linear alignments in those patterns, even though all the dots are almost equidistant from one another. The eye and mind sees them as opposing spirals intersecting one another.

Thus this relation between the visual and the cognitive reading of what is seen, formed the starting point for Randall-Page's proposal for the Department. 'I wanted to make a work that explores cognition in some way; something to make the viewer conscious of the cognitive process at work, rendering the working of the mind apparent and explicit. Visual ambiguity makes us conscious of the cognitive process happening within us and I began to explore various visual illusions as a starting point.'

'Mind's Eye' incorporates a number of different kinds of cognitive illusions in one work. Using the site of the Psychology Department's lecture theatre building which juts out onto the street, Randall-Page has been able to introduce symmetry by using two of its walls which lie at right angles to each other. The spiral phyllotaxis pattern is mirrored on both walls, Rorschach style. Interestingly the spiral alignments are preserved even though the original pattern has no bilateral symmetry at all. This means that the work comes into full effect when both wall surfaces can be seen simultaneously; the entire pattern becomes apparent when standing outside the Department's entrance. It also means that the viewer can enjoy moving up and down the street to play with the work's illusory qualities.



The work's relationship to perspective is also intriguing. In order to lay out the pattern and position the dots onto the two surfaces, an image would need to be projected, centring on the 90° corner. In actuality the dots would become terracotta tiles and be hung on to the Portland stone walls. When the dots were projected Randall-Page knew they would become stretched and elongated.



Yet this distortion is fundamental to how the work is read and the dots only become fully coherent when viewed from a particular place. From some angles their true shape is apparent, in others they appear as circular dots.

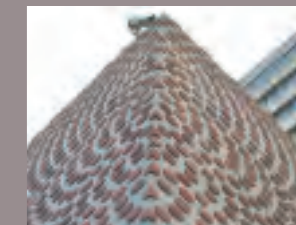
The number of cognitive illusions continue. Even the manufacture of the tiles contributes to how the entire pattern and work is seen. Made by hand from oval slabs of clay, pairs of tiles were created by cutting each slab in two, and then firing them face to face with its pair. With each tile having its own symmetrical mirror image, particularly in colour range, they were then each placed in

corresponding positions on the two walls. At the corner right angle tiles, shaped almost like ridge tiles, provide the physical and visual link to synchronise the spiral alignments.

'Mind's Eye' and Peter Randall-Page's approach to the commission brings together his ongoing interests as an artist with his curiosity and innovation in how he brings projects to fruition. He has utilised the unusual context of psychology to further his own investigations and bring interaction and enjoyment to others. He has also developed, with his studio of skilled workers, an approach which uses different materials and techniques from usual. (For the piece he especially built a kiln to accommodate the firing of over 1,000 tiles.) While he is known internationally as stone carver of consummate skill, in recent years he has pushed his practice into areas which are both unfamiliar and challenging. The fluency of his work belies the level of physical skill as well as intellectual depth which are required. 'Mind's Eye' achieves strong visual presence while

maintaining a subtlety of image and approach. It leaves behind its complex and cluttered site. The original intentions of the University of Cardiff's School of Psychology have been thoroughly realised and the artist has produced a work which is both the product of the rest of his practice, and yet is separate from it.

Tessa Jackson
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