

Give me shelter

Ellie Duffy reports on an exhibition on shelter that falls short on solutions

The artfully arranged cardboard boxes and other scrap materials sitting incongruously in the Architectural Association's refined ground floor exhibition space are products of a seven-month long collaboration between students of the school and Japanese artist Tadashai Kawamata.

As part of a project that takes a decidedly back-to-basics approach to architectural education (making Laugier's primitive hut look like a palace in comparison), students were encouraged by the artist to abandon studio-based work. Instead they took to the streets of London and Tokyo, constructing small-scale shelters from found materials and inhabiting them for 48-hour periods. The last in this series of inhabitations was staged as a public event to coincide with the exhibition opening, taking place at pre-publicised sites across London over the period of a weekend.

The shelters exhibited inside the AA are captioned in the manner of an estate agent's details, listing floor area, facilities and price (£0.00 in most cases) along with a brief satirical description ('Boxes, polythene sheeting and traffic cones. An unusual property in this part of town'). This theme is continued, if not laboured, in an exhibition guide made to look and read like an agent's sales brochure, and also in a website and 'marketing suite' – a Portakabin located on the pavement opposite 36 Bedford Square. Here 'property details' are displayed and monitors show video footage of projects undertaken in Tokyo in an exchange with students of the city's National University of Fine Arts.

The artist has worked with the subject matter of buildings and cities on site-specific projects since 1980. Early works involved splintered-looking temporary structures constructed from scrap timber crashing through existing buildings as if in freeze frame, the engineering principle akin to a game of Spilikins in reverse.

But it is the inherent experiential aspects of Kawamata's work that really define the projects – the politics of persuasion (negotiation with property owners and planning authorities), the experience of designing while constructing, the spiritual dimension to hard work, the act of inhabitation followed by the process of dismantling. Later projects are enlarged in scale and increasingly function as a commentary on social structures.

In collaboration with the inhabitants of a Dutch drug rehabilitation centre, for instance, Kawamata has constructed a three-kilometre long boardwalk across marshy flatlands, edging metre-by-metre over a three year period away from the centre and towards the cityscape visible on the horizon.

But the clarity of political and social commentary apparent in Kawamata's own work somehow becomes lost in the translation from art to architecture. On the surface this is due to a gulf between the actual concerns of the exercise and the marketing of it (a lot of money appears to have been thrown at publicity that promises a political radicalism that never materialises), but perhaps has its roots in more fundamental issues: it is the traditional privilege of the artist to comment on any aspect of society from a position on the edge of it (and since Damian Hirst et al graduated from Goldsmith's College in the late eighties the art world has also very publicly come to terms with its own place within commercial society). The position of the architect, however, is less removed, being inextricably linked to the system of commerce that includes developers, construction companies and even the agents satirised in this project. This situation by no means precludes radicalism in architecture, but it does at least demand a bespoke and relevant version of it.

Pushing aside the questionable political wisdom of parading students, who will inevitably be perceived as the international jet-set, as they rough it on the city streets (fairly disastrous in terms of a public relations exercise although it would be churlish to dismiss the personal development aspirations of the individuals involved), the project fails to communicate its validity to the wider audience it has sought.

The problem with these projects is that they touch upon the serious and politically fraught issues of homelessness and poverty in a very public way with no apparent attempt to conclude anything. Neither is there any attempt to investigate architecture's fascinatingly confused relationship with commerce (as the agent-style literature and Portakabin marketing suite might promise).

Just as it is a regrettable fact that a basic form of housing is a cardboard box, it is a fact that when architectural students engage in an issue like homelessness the expectation will invariably be a solution.