

# The Millennium Dome and Its Time

## *Unsettling Symbolism*

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*“We will celebrate the millennium with a new dynamism in our country. The Millennium Dome symbolizes this dynamism. It is fittingly sited by the prime meridian at Greenwich—the ‘home of time’. Its breathtaking design has captured the imagination throughout the world. Its exhibits will provide a powerful and fascinating presentation of life in the United Kingdom at the end of the second millennium—who we are, what we do, and what the future may have in store for us.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Millennium Dome was predetermined to have a very short lifespan even before its completion, which is paradoxical given its vast scale.<sup>2</sup> According to the written answers from the House of Commons, the structural steelwork of the dome has a lifespan of 60 years, while the roofing material 25 years.<sup>3</sup> The driving force behind humanity setting this deadline is another, the millennium deadline.<sup>4</sup> This is a form of “self-disciplining power”,<sup>5</sup> derived from the Western imagination of the millennium. The Dome was born out of the urgency of the millennium countdown.<sup>6</sup> The impending millennium, along with the two distinct time manifested on the dome—its time of construction and its lifespan—together form an endpoint. The reason we cannot place the time of the millennium on a higher level is that, in terms of the significance of *events*, a plan and a building are equal.<sup>7</sup> When considering the expectation of the millennium, which “conjured this turning point as they<sup>8</sup> manipulate and peel away the normal indicators of normal time”,<sup>9</sup> it is also necessary to consider that the construction of the dome produced the same outcome.

In fact, no single action can directly lead to an end. Setting an endpoint is a depiction of the future, a resolution, a declaration that things have entered a state of control. What we call “the

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Wilhide, *The Millennium Dome*. (London: Harpercollinsillustrated, 2000), 6. Foreword by Tony Blair.

<sup>2</sup> Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, “Millennium Dome Job Sheets,” 2023, [https://rshp.com/assets/uploads/2611\\_MillenniumDome\\_JS\\_en\\_1.pdf](https://rshp.com/assets/uploads/2611_MillenniumDome_JS_en_1.pdf), “Providing 100,000 metres square of enclosed space (2.2 million cubic metres), the structure is 365m in diameter, with a circumference of one kilometre and a maximum height of 50 metres. The Dome is suspended from a series of twelve 100 metres steel masts, held in place by more than 70 km of high-strength steel cable which in turn support the Teflon-coated glass fibre roof.”

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons, Hansard, “Millennium Dome (Life-span),” Written Answers, *HC Deb*, vol. 324, c. 457W, (01 February 1999). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1999/feb/01/millennium-dome-life-span.z>.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhide, *The Millennium Dome*, 18, “The millennium, as a deadline, has proved a powerful creative force, serving to concentrate the mind wonderfully.”

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Lightfoot and Simon Lilley, “Moments, Monuments and Explication: The Standing of the Millennium Dome,” *Culture and Organization* 8, no. 3 (January 2002), 242, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759550215670>.

“Humans draw the deadline, a Western deadline whose scale and self-disciplining power determine it as the millennial moment. Western selves have conjured this turning point as they manipulate and peel away the normal indicators of normal time.”

<sup>6</sup> Wilhide, *The Millennium Dome*, 11, “Time, which informs the theme of the Millennium Experience itself, has been the Dome’s greatest obstacle.”

<sup>7</sup> Since the construction of a building is an event, and the millennium, as a historical node driven by planning, is also an event, the two are equal in the significance of being events.

<sup>8</sup> In the original text, “they” refers to “Western selves”.

<sup>9</sup> Geoff & Simon, *Moments, Monuments and Explication: The Standing of the Millennium Dome*, 242.

end” is actually constructed in the difference between two temporal representations: on one hand, the imagined future projected when an endpoint is presupposed, and on the other, the actual traces left after future actions are completed. Therefore, we must distinguish between artificially set endpoints and true endings (or turnings).<sup>10</sup> By actively setting endpoints for events, plans, and architecture, people are clearing a space in the imminent future to welcome it. Beyond marking a pause in the present moment, the significance of this space is also temporary in its accommodation of the future. Thus, it allows us to witness the demise of the future through observation and documentation of it. This is also why Rogers refused to acknowledge the monumentality of modern architecture:

*“It no longer requires the use of monumental, heavy materials. The Dome is a highly flexible envelope, it’s an enclosure rather than a building. With the speed of technology, it’s increasingly typical to build before you have a defined brief, for structures to be put up very fast and to change their use very quickly.”*<sup>11</sup>

We can now comprehend and accept the Millennium Dome's failure in the secular sense, a failure that permeates its existence both before and after construction. The first layer of failure lies in its connection to site. The justifications for situating the Dome in its current location were tenuous at best. The most prominent rationale invoked Greenwich's implied temporal associations—a supposed resonance with the “Millennium” in its name. Yet in reality, the prime meridian doesn't traverse the Greenwich Peninsula where the Dome stands; the penguins of Queen Maud Land<sup>12</sup> in Antarctica could more legitimately claim their homeland's connection to temporal measurement. Thus the Dome stands as a modern myth, embodying what we might call “the precariousness of the arbitrariness and conventionality of this association.”<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, unlike the royal heritage surrounding Greenwich Observatory, the Dome occupies a post-industrial wasteland—what decision-makers perceived as cultural void requiring no contextual response. The site possessed no inherent conditions to translate into the Dome's architectural language. Instead, the Dome itself became the peninsula's primary condition. London councillors envisioned it as a catalyst for future community development, consequently planning railways, constructing subway lines, and facilitating surrounding commercial and residential districts. These ostensibly successful peripheral structures and facilities mask the fundamental precariousness between Dome and site—much like the Dome's tensile fabric cloaks the structural awkwardness of its imposition upon the Greenwich Peninsula's terrain. The supple membrane softens what remains, at its core, an alien structure violently rooted in unyielding ground.

This is precisely why, when the second layer of failure manifested itself, firefighter Chris Kamara said that the Dome looked “quite dramatic.”<sup>14</sup> Before reaching its intended lifespan,

<sup>10</sup> “True ending” and “turning” refer to objectively occurring terminations and shifts with structural impact, while “endpoint” carries only symbolic significance.

<sup>11</sup> Wilhite, *The Millennium Dome*, 183, quoting Richard Rogers.

<sup>12</sup> The prime meridian passes through Queen Maud Land in Antarctica.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff & Simon, *Moments, Monuments and Explication: The Standing of the Millennium Dome*, 241

<sup>14</sup> Richard Waite, “Arena Roof Ripped off and Laban Centre Battered by Storm Eunice,” *The Architects’ Journal*, Feb. 18, 2022, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/rogers-millennium-dome-roof-ripped-off-by-storm-eunice>, quoting Chris Kamara

the 2022 storm tore through part of its roof. Visually, never had people so directly perceived the fundamental softness of the roofing fabric as a material. The storm not only exposed the Dome's internal structure but, more crucially, laid bare the inherent vulnerability of its membrane. The shredded roof, its tension lost, hung limply from the steel framework—the advanced PTFE material now reduced to primitive tatters. Simultaneously, the predetermined endpoint collapsed before everyone's eyes, marking the moment when events slipped beyond control. The storm forcibly terminated this project ahead of schedule, creating a reality where the future had crumbled into ruins before it could even materialize. History recorded how this tempest shattered our attempts to carve time into neat, commemorative segments.

People began questioning that endpoint, yet their voices were swiftly drowned out by a new consensus, which repeating the old narrative of preserving a post-millennium legacy even as the context had fundamentally shifted. The storm provided the perfect pretext to reset the endpoint, and we can already foresee the endless cycles this will entail. Originally conceived as a temporary structure, the Dome will now undergo indefinite maintenance. In this sense, maintenance has replaced construction. By perpetually deferring the endpoint, it has become a new mode of spatial production.

The third layer of failure stems from the building's operation betraying its original promise. It amplifies and shares the characteristics of the second layer of failure, using the notion of an endpoint to ignite collective enthusiasm, yet when reaching its supposed endpoint, it demoted the sacred time that had legitimized its existence. The building's inaugural experience, the very purpose of its construction, was the “Millennium Experience” exhibition. Throughout 2000, the dome was filled with installations from this exhibition—an event that could have been housed in any sufficiently large venue worldwide. But here, we could find the same familiar fragile connection, which is about *time* once again.

*“By the end of the year, the Dome had attracted 5.5 million paying visitors compared with the 12 million on which the Company's business plan was based. The resulting shortfall in income is the main reason for the financial difficulties of the project.”<sup>15</sup>*

Beyond its financial shortcomings, the content was widely criticized: “The contents... were described as underwhelming, compromised, communicating nothing in particular.”<sup>16</sup> It was a political spectacle. It is evident that the public's dissatisfaction stemmed from the exhibition's failure to reflect their imagined vision of millennial life. On this crucial point, the visitors' expectations and the authorities' expectations failed to align. After the exhibition ended and its installations were dismantled, the last tenuous relationship between the interior and the building's meaning vanished entirely. The dome was sold to Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), an American entertainment company. Following AEG's redesign of the interior, the dome was handed over to O2 for management, and it also received a new name, which has lost any trace of the millennium in its signifier. Only those nostalgic for the millennium experience resisted this new identity.

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<sup>15</sup> House of Commons, “Select Committee on Public Accounts Fourteenth Report: The Millennium Dome (Continued),” Parliament.uk, February 1, 2002, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmpubacc/516/51605.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Rowan Moore, “The Millennium Dome 20 Years On... Revisiting a Very British Fiasco,” The Guardian, December 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/dec/01/millennium-dome-20-years-on-new-labour>.

Although the dome was touted as adaptable, since AEG assumed control, it has remained functionally static for years. Today, it offers a purely commercial experience—most ironically, anchored by an outlet store occupying a prominent position within the dome. The outlet, a space dedicated to selling outdated goods, now inhabits a building whose original ambition was to open itself to the future. At this point, the Millennium Dome, or the O2, can no longer even be called symbolic architecture, because it no longer symbolizes what it was meant to symbolize. I would describe it as the residue of symbolism. We realize that it is not the passage of time that has made the symbols produced by the dome a lack; rather, it is these lacks that were already hidden within the ambition of setting an endpoint.<sup>17</sup>

These three layers of failure ultimately evoke an unsettling sense towards symbolic architecture, particularly towards this extreme type where interior and facade are disconnected. Benjamin's observation of the interiorization<sup>18</sup> in Parisian arcades had already foreshadowed what Rogers later acknowledged as the concept of "dome as an enclosure."<sup>19</sup> Enclosure superficially appears as an inward-oriented order, yet in reality, it is first and foremost an outward-directed act of appropriation. It seizes originally open public spaces, encloses them, while simultaneously claiming its interior possesses openness and inclusivity. It operates control by providing a sense of shelter. Visitors' behaviors and experiences are incorporated into the domain of enclosure, becoming part of its control logic. More dangerously, the concept of enclosure legitimizes architecture that refuses to appear as a whole. This wholeness is multilayered—not merely the unity of interior and facade, but also the continuity of past and future. Venturi's referenced "Long Island duck" architecture<sup>20</sup> serves as an example of architectural wholeness. Its powerful symbolism directly corresponds to its interior function, as the building literally housed a duck meat shop.

But the Millennium Dome rejected this wholeness, it is a true empty shell. It was forced to become an empty shell precisely as humans increasingly densely arranged endpoints. Born from a context of arbitrariness and conventionality, its representation inevitably became saturated with arbitrariness and conventionality. The Millennium Dome adopted such exaggerated scale and facade because humanity's awe toward the sky had long been seeded by the domes of classical architecture. There exists a universal *a priori* knowledge in human experience: the moment one sees a dome, one begins imagining what it symbolizes. For the Millennium Dome, this imagination slid toward fantasies of the millennium.

Even though the concept of the "millennium" offers less imaginable material than any religion, even though the dome's site and form lack any logic of continuity, even though the O2 effortlessly captured its interior with capital, it still managed to construct a certain kind of identification. This is the modernity specific to the Millennium Dome.

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<sup>17</sup> Lacanian "lack" is not attrition caused by time. In this context, it refers to the primordial void in the symbolic order—an inherent gap exposed by the very act of establishing an endpoint, which the system of signs can never fill.

<sup>18</sup> Ross Adams, "Invisible Machines: Toward a Theory of Interiorization," presented at *12th AHRA International Conference*, 2015, "For both Benjamin and Sloterdijk, the notion of 'interior' remains allegorical, deploying architectural paradigms to describe another set of tendencies"

<sup>19</sup> Wilhite, *The Millennium Dome*, 183, quoting Richard Rogers.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas : The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press, 1977).

The Millennium Dome cleverly exploited humanity's past experiences to deprive us of other experiences in the present. As a piece of symbolic architecture, it ended up deceiving symbolism itself. Its subversiveness lies in maintaining the ambiguity between signifier and signified, leaving both without clear boundaries, suspended in an indeterminate state of mutual interaction. For the dome, what it symbolizes is unimportant—what matters is creating a desire for symbolism. If today someone claims they clearly perceive the dome's symbolic direction, they have unquestionably fallen into its temporal bias trap. We have always assumed that symbolism, which must establish something powerful, must either align logically with its projected origin or preserve differences that we can suture through thought. The Millennium Dome's symbolism, however, operates differently: the meaning it provokes is not associative or expansive, but collapsed.

Though its dome and steel structure are physically dynamic, reaching skyward, the chaos introduced by *endpoints* folds all its symbolic potential inward, causing it to implode onto the millennial boundary. All that remains on people's lips is a repetitive incantation: It is a product of the millennium. What sustains the dome now has nothing to do with architectural materials or structure, but rather with the tension between artificial endpoints, imposed time, and real time. This tension neutralizes humanity's infinitely growing desire to flaunt technological progress and its infinitely shrinking capacity for experience. The Millennium Dome emerged from a kind of agony of compulsory commemoration. It's an agony initially shouldered by exhibits, then abandoned through the repurposing of interior. After humanity's failed attempt to control and define time through it, the colossal dome ultimately became a trauma on the Greenwich Peninsula.

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