

Dome and Domer - all the things I didn't know about fulldomes until now

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I've come back from Leicester a changed woman.

I'm sure that's a regular occurrence for everyone who visits Leicester, but in this case it was very specifically an experience I had at the National Space Centre that did it, because while I was there I saw the future - and the future is most definitely dome-shaped.

At the weekend I was a delegate at FullDome UK - a gathering of dome enthusiasts and representative from the dome industry from the UK and beyond. The setting was the dome in the NSC, where we saw a series of short films, demos and presentations in a format that beats any regular screen 360 times over when it comes to immersion.

Despite the fact that Lisa and I went to SXSW last year with the concept of streaming festivals across the world to big screen events - and had included 360 screens as a possibility - I was yet to experience seeing anything in a dome screen until my visit to FullDome UK.

Having sat and watched the many different and astoundingly creative ways people have created artistic - not scientific - content for these incredible screens, I came away very excited about the many possibilities for these screens which are, sadly, currently assigned to planetariums for the most part, with very little art content being regularly shown.

We saw interactive content, 360 filmed content, stop animation content, CGI content and mad, dizzying abstract content.

Breaking down the walls

Being in the dome was, of course, a great experience, but the real breakthrough of the entire conference for me took place in the perfectly angular confines of the Shuttle Suite next door, during a talk called 'The Future of Immersion'.

It was here that a panel of dome industry experts vented their frustration at the art world failing to see the potential of the dome as a delivery method for mind-blowing content with artistic merit. They also discussed dome content falling through the gap between BFI funding and Arts Council funding - being neither film nor live experience, and yet somehow both.

If the dome industry is knocking at the door from one side, Live Cinema is knocking from the other. We were there precisely because of the tremendous potential this form of exhibition has for the live cinema genre, having first experienced it in micro at SXSW last year in their VR exhibition area.

Panellists and audience members alike talked about their reluctance to accept that VR has to mean being isolated from other people, wearing a headset - the exact thing we've been trying to break away from as more and more events are livestreaming in 360 online. Our project began with the will to take this content and turn it into a social experience, and this is precisely the way it can be done.

Disappearing the dome

One of the key things that needs to be done, I think, is to forget the dome itself. So much focus is placed on the dome as a structure, how it looks, how different from a cinema screen, how it sits in the landscape as an object. In fact, the beauty of the dome is that when it's in use, it completely disappears.

The dome becomes potentially infinite space, or whatever landscape an artist decides to turn it into. It completely ceases to be a dome, because you can't see its shape or judge its distance from your eyes as you can with a traditional cinema screen. That's what makes it so exciting for immersive events, and why we at Live Cinema are so keen to push more creative use of full domes.

Pushing the boundaries

What we call a dome is, most of the time, not a 100% immersive screen, because the projectors sit underneath it and there's a significant gap between the ground and the bottom of the screen.

However, a truly full dome can be achieved, as the SAT dome in Montreal proves. One of the most exciting things about this dome is that reaches to the floor, placing the audience in the most immersive environment it's possible to be in.

The second exciting thing about the SAT dome is that it was created specifically with the arts in mind, and runs a programme of arts content for audiences in a way that encourages socialising and entertainment over overt messages about learning.

I'm not aware of any of these types of domes in the UK. This could be the most incredible and in-demand conference and digital arts space, and it's something that I sincerely hope pops up here very soon.

Dome technology continues to develop at an alarming rate, too. I picked up a brochure as soon as I arrived which promoted an 8k dome. Now, I've only ever seen 8k screenings twice in my life - once was at the National Media Museum when it was one of only a handful of places in the world to show the Olympics in this super high quality resolution. It completely blew my mind, and the closing ceremony was the inspiration for our festival screening project in the first place.

The second time I saw 8k was at SXSW, when a Japanese company showed a 10-minute demonstration of an 8k, 3D, surround sound system they'd developed (sadly only on a flat screen rather than 360, but you can't have everything).

The idea that there's now an 8k dome - a completely immersive and incredibly high quality resolution screen - is exhilarating beyond words, and I don't understand why everyone isn't creating and screening and watching content in that format all over the world right now.

Welcome dome!

Now we've seen this, there's no going back. Our heads are in the dome, and we want to work with anyone who wants to create, show or produce content for this format, or who has dome technology to showcase.

