

Pandora's Telephone Boxes

by [Robert Gear](#) (February 2024)



by Pete Rumney

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.
—G. K. Chesterton.

Some things march on regardless, as in the case of the telecommunications revolution. Progress in this field has led to diminished use of traditional telephone boxes (kiosks, to

give them their correct name). I mean diminished in terms of their original purpose.

According to online searches there exist in the region of twenty thousand telephone boxes in the UK. Of these, perhaps 7,000 are the traditional iconic K6 boxes designed in 1935 by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott to commemorate the silver jubilee of King George V. Previous standardized models—that is K1 through K5—are, as far as I can determine, consigned to museums. Many interesting facts adhere to these early models. For example, Eastbourne local authority insisted that the K1s be ornamented with thatched roofs. And did you know that apparently some early pre-standardized kiosks required payment for entry, and some also boasted attendants, just as lifts/elevators did until the blink-of-an-eye ago?

Many of the remaining K6s have been repurposed with innovative aplomb. These include their adoption as locations for defibrillators (of which apparently well over six thousand have been installed in kiosks around the country), community book exchanges, floral displays, or simply tourist attractions. One has allegedly been turned into an aquarium, and another *mirabile dictu* into a mobile phone repair shop. It is much to be welcomed that such innovation has been flourishing in the face of the relentless modernization and often, uglification of Britain's cities.

I recently made a visit to the UK, and one of the cities I strolled around is considered a great seat of learning, although judging by the antics of many of those privileged youths who reside there part-time, *understanding* the world is not necessarily a priority. What did I observe of this iconic piece of Anglicana, or later models such as the K7, K8 or KX100 range?

I did not come across many being put to the innovative uses mentioned above. That is not to say they don't exist, of course, and it may be that I was just in the wrong part of the

country or just not attuned to the welcome repurposing of these fixtures. But, and it is a big but, at least three or four of those boxes that I initially thought might be braving the public's criticism of contemporary art installations were actually being used as trash receptacles. Some of the detritus of our contemporary world had an accumulation almost knee deep (I exaggerate only slightly) of a startling variety of discarded rubbish. They *could* have been art installations, and for a moment I was unsure, but on closer examination I felt confident that they had been repurposed as giant litter bins.

Curiously, in one case, an authentic corporation litter bin/garbage can was sighted only yards away, and so I was perplexed about why the kiosk had preempted it. Then I looked closer and saw that the receptacle itself was volcanically overflowing with discarded fast-food wrappers and other 'testimony of summer nights'; nothing more could have been stuffed into it without great effort. Perhaps there had been a strike of council workers. I do not know. Then again, perhaps those who had made use of the kiosk to deposit their throwaway litter were in fact civic-minded and rather than just spreading their cast-offs around the streets, they had deposited them in a place where they would stay safe from the vagaries of nature and pedestrian feet. I may be wrong in this conjecture, since the pavements round about were spotted with spat-out, dried-blob chewing gum. Clearly the agents of such vulgarity were not civic minded in the least. I also noted that the nearer one approached to the edifices of great learning the discarded gum increased in intensity to an almost pointillist level of ornamentation. Could it be that there is a *positive* relationship between casual gum-disposal and level of credential-seeking?

One of the more distressing abuses of telephone boxes is their apparent use as unofficial public toilets. That is possibly not a new practice. In some parts of the urban scene this may always have been the case, although it could be that

demographic changes have encouraged a more frequent observance of what was once only seen in more benighted areas of the planet.

Many of the kiosks that were used as garbage receptacles are also noted for the extensive display of ads for services and products. One or two were advertising the wares of what are now known as 'sex workers.' Others sported multicolored flags denoting territory marked by 'communities,' reminiscent of cats and inner-city juvenile gangs marking areas of control. One kiosk was ornamented with one of the newer 'Progress Pride Flags,' a vexillological disaster, inducing a twang of nausea. This surely must be the most startlingly hideous flag ever concocted. Maybe that is the idea—humiliation rather than persuasion. The most glaring ones were promoting, at least indirectly, 'the cause' of genocide against Jews, and this was before the October 7th atrocity. What else can the expressions 'Free Gaza' and 'From the River to the Sea' imply? Like the discarded chewing-gum pointillism, these gained in frequency the nearer one approached to the great seat of learning.

In the interests of changing the past (as is regularly done, for example, by climate statistic-tamperers amongst others) I have some other suggestions which I sincerely hope will be taken as satire only.

Given that the K6, and earlier models, are often perceived as part of traditional British culture, isn't it about time that the puritanical wokerati visionaries invested time and effort into decolonizing the remaining examples? Each remaining box could be renamed and repurposed as a mini 'safe space.' In this way, young people whose minds have been coddled can quickly enter and recuperate if and when they perceive something that could offend them. Come to think of it perhaps urban street corners (especially those in the vicinity of any institution of tertiary education) should be resupplied with a newly-manufactured box, well padded of course, and intersectionally labelled, welcoming those in need of

psychiatric dosing and massage. Like the early non-standardized models they could be guarded by a trained attendant sensitive to the feelings of victims of offensiveness.

Another suggestion comes to mind; local authorities could consign one or two remaining specimens to a “museum of unwanted artifacts.” Of course, appropriate labels will be necessary to ensure the museum-going public are aware of any sexist, racist or, perish the thought, transphobic elements associated with their design. Remember they may make university “students” feel unsafe since Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was a white man and the telephone box was apparently inspired by the tomb of Sir John Soane. He in turn had designed buildings for rich white men who someone has claimed may have been quite friendly with other white men who may have been related to others who were involved in manufacturing the sailcloths that could have been used to propel slave ships. Surely that clinches it.

[Table of Contents](#)

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