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Learning from Blackpool Promenade: re-enchanting sterile streets

Introduction

Blackpool emerged as a popular seaside resort in Victorian times, as increasing numbers of workers from the Lancashire cotton towns made day trips and later booked weekly holidays. Though suffering declining popularity over the past sixty decades, the world's first working class holiday resort continues to attract around 17million annual visitors to experience the funfairs, beach, Tower, Winter Gardens and amusement arcades, many staying in the town's abundant cheap accommodation. Consequently, Blackpool remains Britain's most visited seaside destination. Though much derided for lacking taste and sophistication, the town continues to host numerous cultural events and popular cultural entertainments. Yet despite its relatively cheap leisure offerings and reputation as 'tacky' and vulgar, in this paper we focus on how the particularly sophisticated, inventive and sensitive recent redesign and reconstruction of Blackpool's Promenade might serve as an exemplar through which to critically inform street design and place-making practices elsewhere.

We suggest that the Promenade is an exemplary linear space possessing distinctive social and spatial qualities that contrast with the malign qualities of many contemporary urban streets. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, a progressive preoccupation to over-regulate aesthetics, movement and function has culminated in the production of

unsensual, single-purpose, placeless and asocial streets, that have tended to become functional spaces for maximising consumption and facilitating transit.

These desires for functionalism and rigorous sensory control chime with the contentions of modernist doyen, Le Corbusier, who claimed that plentiful light and space, and clean air, would encourage the rational development of the individual, whose eyes, noses and ears would be uncluttered by sensory rubbish. This is dramatically exemplified in his demand to 'kill the street' in favour of linear spaces of pure transportation. Le Corbusier (1933) asserted that 'there ought not to be such a thing as streets; we have to create something to replace them'. Smooth streets, devoid of cafes and other species of 'the fungus that eats up the pavements' (ibid), with clear vistas would be 'as well equipped as a factory' (cited in Berman, 1982: 167) and facilitate 'productive' movement, leisure, work and thought.

The post-war reconstruction of many British towns reflect such modernist principles, and Blackpool was no exception. Local architects, Tom Mellor and Partners' 1965 Masterplan, advocated a Le Corbusian makeover of the resort (Brodie and Whitfield, 2014; Brook, forthcoming) that entailed the redevelopment of the former Central Station to accommodate a new brutalist Magistrates Court, police headquarters and multi-storey car park. Traffic began to directly flow into the town centre from a new motorway and dilapidated housing, sideshows, stalls and other Victorian vestiges were demolished to make way for large entertainment complexes connected at first floor level by a system of elevated pedways and concrete gardens. The pedway stretched over the Promenade to connect to the seafront and foster a 'seamless' separation of people and traffic, and although never fully realised, the plan intended to extend a network of

elevated pedestrian links to re-engineer Blackpool for the age of the motorcar. Recent regeneration attempts have focused on removing this concrete legacy.

In contradistinction to these modernist schemes, concerns about the 'death of the street' preoccupy contemporary urban design practitioners and *new urbanists*, who appear to have rediscovered the writings of Kevin Lynch (1960; 1981), Jane Jacobs (1961) and W. H. Whyte (1980). Building on Jacobs' criticism of modernist planning and the negative impacts of cars on sociality, Gehl and Gemzoe (1996) lay the groundwork for a movement of planning advocates, such the National Complete Streets Coalition or Tactical Urbanists. He calls for a return to traditional street designs that prioritise pedestrians and produce enhanced safety, walkability, community cohesion, social encounters, vitality and a sense of belonging.

Reiterations of such principles are articulated in numerous professionally driven prescriptive guidance for good street design, such as *The Lexicon of New Urbanism* (Duany et al) and the Urban Design Alliance 's *Designing Streets for People, Returning Roads to Residents*. In the UK, the most notable best practice guide is 2007 *Manual for Streets* and its 2010 successor *Manual for Streets 2*. Moreover, students of urban design might apply similar analytical tools and street audits in textbooks by Mantho (2015) or Kasprisin (2011). These guiding texts proffer technocratic, prescriptive solutions, reproducible and measurable criteria. *Manual for Streets*, calls for a decluttering of streets through the removal of obstacles and signage, together with 'appropriate' lighting and design, in suggesting that smoother, more regulated environments are conducive to positive social outcomes.

The design codes and international standards of the 'new urbanism', though often inspired by notions of vibrant street life, threaten to throttle the messy, chaotic diversity of urban street culture. Uncomfortably, Edward Robbins (2013) points out the similarities between New Urbanism and the modernist movement: both offer a prescriptive re-ordering of streets, and technical guidance towards achieving this vision

'the irony is that the New Urbanism is in many ways a resurrection of modernism but cloaked in the dress of the pre-modern era' (2013, 315)

A standardisation has eventuated in which generic streetscapes and shared tastes are articulated and 'aesthetic consent' produced (Julier, 2005: 874), reiterating similar designs in regeneration projects across diverse urban settings. In such realms, there are rarely any signifiers of the local, peculiar and arresting sights or effusions of vernacular culture. Moreover, tendencies to commodify and foreground venerable structures often results in generic attempts to cleanse industrial patinas, paint antiquated ironwork red or green or install information boards that peddle selective interpretations of heritage. Despite their often utopian influences, such regulatory, serial designs neglect the possibilities for social interaction recognised by Jane Jacobs (1961) who contrastingly understood the street as a sociable and tolerant milieu.

Accordingly, the design of contemporary urban streets are all too often over-functional, unimaginative, unsensuous, untethered to place and offer little scope for play, as though streets are solely conduits for movement and pleasure takes place elsewhere. Indeed, Richard Sennett (1994, 15) argues that urban streets have frequently become 'a mere function of motion'; wherein speedy progress trumps pedestrian access and anything that distracts from this imperative is erased. He further contends that for drivers, a

'tactile sterility' is promoted which 'pacifies the body' as their movement is typified by rapid transit without arousal, producing desensitised somatic experience. This unstimulating condition is paralleled for walkers in what Trevor Boddy (1992) calls 'new urban prosthetics', characterised by a system of smooth and sealed walkways, escalators, bridges, people-conveyors and tunnels. Also devised to maximise efficient transport linking work, recreational and commercial spaces, such spaces are sensually typified by 'mechanical breezes', 'vaguely reassuring icons', 'trickling fountains', and low murmurings. Visually, there is an exclusion of 'extraneous chaotic elements [reducing] visual and functional forms to a few key images' (Rojek, 1995, 62).

The propensity to create clean, ordered and safe public realms also connects to wider neoliberal strategies of surveillance, control and regulation that serve the interests of local political elites and business owners (Katz, 1998). The expansion of CCTV and numerous bye-laws discourage drinking, playing and protest. Everyday material furnishings take on additional functions in interdictory spaces (Davis, 1990), with benches and spikes devised to deter rough sleepers or skateboarders, and planters are strategically placed to minimise the potential for loitering crowds. Such regeneration interventions often target 'unruly' others, the homeless, street-traders, and younger people (Minton, 2009), implying both a physical and bodily decluttering of the street that is inevitably linked to gentrification and social cleansing.

Despite these dominant tendencies, Monica Degen (2008) shows that residents and visitors can continuously contest such ordering strategies. Other examples, such as the streets of urban India can serve as a critical point of contrast in foregrounding the rich sensory experiences, multiple social activities, inclusivity and every-changing scenes

that play out in contradistinction to over-regulated, sterile streets (Anjaria, 2012; Edensor, 2000).

The reconfigured Blackpool Promenade also stands outside these normative street designs, yet is neither small-scale, community led project nor a site for tactical urbanism or situationist reinterpretation. It is not a venue for temporary practices like skateboarding, graffiti writing or parkour that briefly reclaim the street, but remains a linear space that is conventionally managed and organised. Yet as we elaborate, in its redesigned form, it acknowledges the resort's rich cultural histories, without over-regulating the movement of bodies, or attempting to gentrify the space. It does not attempt to make the resort fashionable along conventional lines (Blackpool is never cool) but accommodates the effusions of popular culture; it does not sterilise and delimit space, but encourages multiplicity and inclusion. Perhaps this is possible because the town has entered a new phase of municipal urbanism in which the local authority has extended its control by purchasing The Tower, Winter Gardens and airport from private owners.

Blackpool and its promenade

Blackpool's diverse attractions include Britain's most visited holiday attraction, the Pleasure Beach, the nineteenth century Tower with its opulent ballroom, the Winter Gardens complex of ballrooms, theaters and bars, huge amusement arcades and three piers, as well as the beach. Though not comparable to the vast crowds attracted in the first half of the 20th century, the world's first working class holiday resort remains a site for popular cultural entertainment, cheap food and drink, and carnivalesque jollity. Visitors tend to return year on year, steeped in family traditions and annual routines

(Edensor and Millington, 2013). Blackpool thus retains its function as a site of 'industrial saturnalia' (Cross and Walton, 2005) and is characterized by what Laura Feigel (2009: 631) describes as the 'art of excess' and a 'garish overabundance'. This chimes with media discourses that the resort veers away from fashionable design and that negatively stereotype the resort as vulgar, 'tacky' and devoid of good taste. The town is thus widely presumed to lack sophisticated artistic and cultural provision, multicultural diversity or high-end restaurants and coffee bars (although there is a prominent and longstanding gay scene in the town). Yet as we discuss, the redesigned promenade does not conform to these assignments.

Blackpool's promenade remains the longest in the UK. Running from Starr Gate to Bispham, it connects the Pleasure Beach, Golden Mile, Tower and piers, while running parallel to numerous hotels and boarding houses, souvenir shops, pubs, cheap restaurants, confectioners, amusement arcades and fairground stalls.

The word 'promenade' describe both a thing and an action:

'Promenade: *n.* A leisurely walk for pleasure, particularly up and down. *v.* To do this.' (Cowan, 2005: 309).

In the UK, promenades are commonly associated with the seaside, wide pedestrian paved pathways nestling between beach and town. Adopting a longer historical perspective, Witold Rybczynski (1995) charts the development of processional routes, promenades and boulevards that include the tree-lined streets of 16th century France along which kings, queens and courtiers strolled. Rather differently, Miguel Torres (2016) draws attention to the Hispanic alamedas that persist throughout southern

Europe, broad paths bounded either side by roads, most famously exemplified by Las Ramblas, Barcelona. The promenade also features in 19th century attempts to address the challenges of overcrowded industrial urbanism, prevalent in Haussmann's redesigned Paris and in the reconstruction of American cities such as Washington as part of the City Beautiful Movement. An especially inclusive space, Blackpool's promenade was constructed between 1856 and 1870 after the first railways reached the resort, and offered opportunities for leisurely walking and purer sea air away from the overcrowded, unsanitary towns of Manchester and Bolton. The pre-existing sand-dunes that provided protection from tidal flooding were removed to be replaced by the Victorian promenade and subsequently, a 30-foot-high seawall. Despite Blackpool's early pretensions as a dignified spa town, the Prom quickly become thronged by the working class masses.

This wall has progressively been subject to over-topping, the storms surges towards the end of the 20th century causing considerable damage to the promenade. Accordingly, a £200million , six year project of promenade renovation and sea defence measures has thus far replaced 3.2km of the old coastal defences between Starr Gate and the North Pier. The Central Area Coast Protection Scheme (Hill et al, 2006), Blackpool's largest ever civil engineering project has deployed biomimicry by constructing artificial headlands and gently sloping steps that imitate sand dunes by dissipating tidal energy (Streeter, 2013). The horizontal, linear barrier that formerly bordered sea and land has been replaced by a more uneven boundary. When storms do breach these defences, seawater is confined by a stepped low wall on the promenade that also serves as seating for holiday-makers. The scheme won the Brunel Medal from the Institution of

Civil Engineers for its innovative design and construction techniques. As well as reducing flooding risks, it has totally redesigned the promenade, the subject to which we now turn.

We consider how the qualities it expresses might address urban street design in more imaginative, multi-sensory, playful, inclusive and place-specific ways. We firstly focus on how the remodelled promenade is characterised by nuanced design aesthetic that honours the resort's vernacular and popular traditions, acknowledges its potent heritage, and includes many innovative and imaginative features. Secondly, we explore how the promenade has been reproduced as a space of pleasure, designed to foster playful interactions, conviviality and lingering. Thirdly, we focus on the multi-sensual qualities that the redesign offers, enhancing the visual, tactile and sonic experience of visitors.

The nuanced aesthetics of Blackpool's promenade

The redesign of the promenade has been guided by an ethos that prioritises site specificity. Instead of presenting abstract, universal forms, recent installations honour the town in which they are situated, alluding to the resort's vernacular forms, popular cultural practices and environmental attributes. In addition, many sites lying adjacent to the promenade constitute part of a heritage that has never been reified but continues to serve visitors in time-honoured ways.

These situational contexts are evident in Bruce Williams' *Water Wings*, created in 2001, a sculpture consisting of an 8 metre-long curved mesh screen forged from stainless

steel and laser cut to form an image. The work, lying parallel to the seafront and best viewed with the sea behind, offers a panoramic view of a swimming child viewed from below the waterline that takes shape as it is passed. The immersive sense of the sea that is conjured provoke a sensory empathy, especially amongst those who have regularly swum here.

Three other works connote different characteristics of the resort's cultural history. The enigmatic *Frankenstein Project* by Tony Stallard, installed in 2001, resembles a tubular, submersible craft that has been dredged to the surface and positioned as an exhibit. Portholes provide the strange view of a whale's skull illuminated by pulsing blue neon, a vision that recalls the carnivalesque freak shows that once constituted an integral part of the Golden Mile. *Desire*, by Chris Knight, also from 2001, is created from two 8 metre-tall slabs of rusting corten steel that join each other in the shape of a V. Looked at from directly behind or in front, a large heart-shaped cut out lined with sharp steel spikes emerges. The work is intended to conjure up the romantic and sexual encounters that have historically been part of a holiday in Blackpool. The powerful emotions or broken heart that may result from such an encounter, or perhaps the resort's fetish scene, are suggested by the sculpture's harsh teeth. More romantic connotations are presented by the world's largest mirror ball, created by Michael Trainor, and installed in 2002, discussed in more detail in the next section. Labelled *They Shoot Horses Don't They* with reference to the marathon dance competitions in 1950s America, the work also alludes to Blackpool's vast Tower and Empress Ballrooms that have staged romantic encounters for decades. Indeed, as one passer-by commented, 'It's a bit like a Blackpool ballroom, maybe that's why they designed it?' (Edensor and Millington, 2013).



Figure 1: place-based designs

These references to Blackpool's popular culture proliferate along the promenade. Colourful stalls are adorned with giant plastic ice cream cones, vibrant illuminations are affixed to the roadside lampposts and strung above the road, posters advertise tribute acts, a plastic life size figure of Elvis Presley and a lurid children's' roundabout lie in wait. The juxtapositions of these unlikely objects and images produces a vernacular surrealism, a trait particularly exemplified by the box belonging to the *Theatre d'Amour*, a simulation of a Victorian theatre created by celebrity designer Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen and illuminated at night. The box hosts comedian Ken Dodd replete with tickling sticks, *Coronation Street* actor Thelma Barlow (who played the role of Mavis Riley / Wilton in the long-running soap opera), and pop star Robbie Williams. Such aggregations of popular cultural motifs, models and images constitute a key dimension of the disorderly carnivalesque aesthetics of the British seaside, echoing the bawdy and absurd texts of the *Comedy Carpet*, discussed below.



Figure 2: Vernacular surrealism

These random juxtapositions contrast with current tendencies to design space according to coherent, pervasive themes (Gottdiener, 1997). They affirm the cheerful vernacular aesthetics of fairground stalls, amusement arcades, souvenir shops and illuminations, and also appear at the entrances to the three piers where lurid advertisements broadcast shows featuring singers, comedians, magicians and other popular entertainers. The designers of the promenade thus honour Blackpool's traditions of celebrating the vital qualities of British popular culture and vernacular tastes, with little concern for taming the excessive, expressive visual effusions and light-hearted pleasures that erupt along the seafront, and indeed honour these in the sculptures discussed above. By contrast, elsewhere, designers pay little heed to popular culture in plans to redevelop streets, though its dynamic and protean nature, especially where it is entangled with local identities, are we claim, worthy of celebrating (Edensor et al 2009).

Many of these features echo another key dimension of the promenade's redesign: the honouring of Blackpool's heritage. Like the Victorian piers, Tower complex and Winter Gardens, they have not been subject to aesthetic recoding or regulatory preservation orders, and are not signified as heritage objects or narrated via information boards. Though its entrance was refashioned in the 1970s, the North Pier, originally built in the 1860s, retains the original ironwork as well as amusement arcades, fairground stalls, children's rides, theatre space, bars and outdoor dancehall space complete with Wurlitzer organ, but is not subject to stringent attempts to conserve it; rather it continues to serve as a contemporary site for entertainment and leisure. North of the pier lie several Edwardian promenade shelters and artificial cliffs engineered in the early 20th century. The Pleasure Beach is also part of this unprecious heritage. Edwardian in origin and subject to a modernist makeover in the 1930s, it forms a palimpsest of popular culture with older attractions like the inter-war Noah's Ark and Big Dipper rubbing shoulders with the Big One roller-coaster of 1994. Similarly, the long parallel streets of Victorian boarding-houses, the Edwardian private hotels of the North Shore and South Shore 1930s developments, are visible from the promenade. These constitute a unique landscape (Walton and Wood, 2009) yet continue to serve as venues for gaming, eating, drinking, strolling, dancing and playing. Yet despite this cultural and material heritage, Blackpool's 2011 bid to attain UNESCO World Heritage status was unsuccessful, since Tourist and Heritage Minister, John Penrose, chose not to shortlist it. However, we contend that this unprecious, uncurated and emerging heritage offers a livelier relationship to the past than is found in many heritage districts

and streets where much of the material fabric is protected, enclosed and assiduously preserved.

David Atkinson claims that in contradistinction to an obsession with grand, iconic sites and stories, heritage is becoming pluralised and decentred from traditional, authoritative curation as people are increasingly shifting their gaze to produce 'commonplace social, industrial and cultural histories (in) mundane, ordinary places' (2008: 381). These are often sites to which they are deeply connected, grounded in repetitive family visits over many years to familiar settings that provoke affective, sensory and shared social memories that emerge and re-emerge during visits. The designers of the promenade seem to understand these shared sentiments and instead of installing homogeneous designs or sealing off antiquated features, they have installed place-specific artworks that resonate with them.

Though the redesign of the promenade resonates with vernacular forms and references to the past, a plenitude of contemporary features and inventive designs also contribute to a distinctive design aesthetic. Street furnishings, lighting fixtures, a blend of hard smooth materialities and grass areas supplement the cutting edge sea defences. New rectilinear wind shelters, sculptural in form, have supplanted their austere post-war antecedents and the renovated Manchester Square pumping station has been furnished with six futuristic, elegant, curved stainless steel tubes on grass embankments either side of the facility.

Moreover, Festival House, completed in 2011 and housing a registry office, cafe and tourist information centre, presents a shifting structure of multiple angles and materials, and was innovatively forged out of cross-laminated timber and exterior bricks, and

incorporates recycled fragments of glass that reflect sunlight. In 2012, the energy-efficient building was included on the long list for the Stirling Prize awarded by the Royal Institute of British Architects for the best building in the UK. Furthermore, the futuristic sleek purple and white trams that began operating in 2012 alongside the promenade are complemented by the vintage trams deployed to convey wedding parties and the brilliantly coloured old trams designed in the shapes of rocket and boat that ply along the seafront during the Illuminations. These heritage features co-exist with the modish and cutting-edge along the Promenade.

The Promenade has long been connected to iconic features that defamiliarise space, most notably the piers that disrupt the promenade's linearity, enabling visitors to go on an extended walk above the sea and offer a unique vantage point that looks back towards the seafront. Similarly, the Tower affords opportunities to view the town from above, the recent addition of a glazed floor offering a sense of standing out in mid-air above the street below. Along the promenade itself, the annual Illuminations transform everyday space, imbuing it with spectacle, vernacular motifs and surreal designs. The redesign of the promenade has introduced other strange elements into the apprehension of the scene by daylight. Particularly notable are the 30-metre high Dune Grass Sculptures installed in 2011 and designed by Eva MacNamara. Referring to the vanished sand dunes of yesteryear, these giant flexible sculptures sway in the breeze, further augmenting the surreal dimensions of the promenade experience.

In breaking habitual ways of sensing, attending and conceiving place in this way, such designs can serve as counter spectacle, producing 'poetic space' that 'breaks with the

imposed order of the original design to become something completely different' (Vilaseca, 2014: 217).



Figure 3: Cutting edge designs

Interactivity, playfulness and conviviality

One of the key dimensions of the promenade redesign is that in keeping with the seafront's identity as a site for enjoyable leisure and sociability, it promotes diverse ways of engaging playfully with particular features and encourages social gathering and conviviality. We have already intimated that the multi-sensory stimulations provoked by the innovative installations along the promenade arrests and diverts attention away from

instrumental objectives. Accordingly, walking down the promenade is unlikely to be a seamless, uninterrupted journey. Such attributes, we contend, need not be confined to dedicated sites of leisure such as Blackpool but could be far more widely installed in streets to instantiate a more profound sense of belonging and move away from over-functional understandings about what streets are *for*.

The most extraordinary and innovative installation on the promenade, one that engenders shared laughter in propoundly referencing Blackpool's history of entertainment, is the 2200 square metre *Comedy Carpet*, commissioned by Blackpool Council and situated on the promenade immediately in front of the Tower. A collaboration between artist Gordon Young and Why Not Associates, the carpet comprises an inclusive compendium of Britain's best-known jokes and catchphrases from different eras. These are transcribed onto 160,000 individually crafted granite letters in a range of typescripts and embedded into 320 multi-coloured, concrete panels.

In order to read this vast compilation, visitors must walk upon the carpet and look down to read the jokes, moving from panel to panel. The phrases solicit reflection, conjuring up forgotten memories of British popular cultural moments and celebrities, as well as laughter and animated conversation. While many jokes are familiar, their reiteration provokes an intense connection between people, who beckon family-members and friends over to read particular slabs and share in the amusement or nostalgia. On most days, gaggles of people move slowly and in all directions across the installation, chuckling and chatting, collectively contributing to a giddy atmosphere that intensifies and fades.

A further incentive to linger and play is provided by the aforementioned *They Shoot Horses Don't They*. At night, colourful lights are beamed onto its rotating form to create a swirling storm of lights, and during bright days, sunlight similarly casts a hypnotic shimmer on the paved surface below. The installation dramatically transforms the environment by both day and night, inviting interactive play and dancing. After dark, children try to catch or stamp on the shifting points of light, couples waltz and family groups gather underneath (Edensor, 2012). Similarly, during the day people linger underneath the mirrorball, following the mesmerising patterns caused by sunlight. *They Shoot Horses* thus encourages 'fluid, continuous, adaptive' qualities of play (Stevens, 2007: 200) as visitors engage in their own site-specific dance, which, as we discuss above, is entangled with the 'the social and cultural histories of the site' (Barbour and Hitchmough, 2014: 5).

Elsewhere, other sculptures promote a closer engagement from pedestrians, discussed in more detail below, and they can enjoy the playful pursuits of others, on the adjacent beach go-kart track and Pleasure Beach rides. Yet invitations to engage with promenade space and linger are not only constituted by curious and striking installations but also by the multiple gathering points that extend along its length. The *Swivelling Wind shelters*, as well as the several other rectilinear shelters, are sites of rest and recuperation, and repeated visits identify that they also serve as venues for family picnics. The pebble forms at the North shore (see fig 5), the low walls, and the steps down to the beach also prove popular fixtures upon which to sit. This provision of multiple sites at which people may linger diverges from those streets in which linear movement is preferred and fears about loitering lead to the regulation of bodies that

stay too long. The pier entrances offer further entreaties to move out towards the sea. On the promenade, the scattered presence of numerous resting people adds to the sense of belonging to a convivial and inclusive public space.

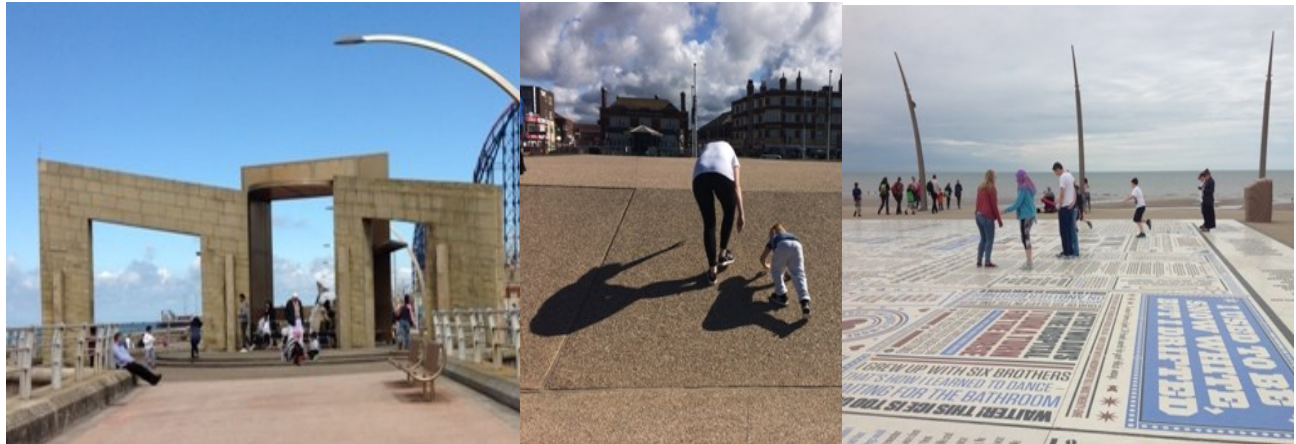


Figure 4: Play and interaction

Nearly 40 years ago, David Seamon (1979) recommended that streets should be designed to facilitate face-to-face interaction, creating ‘stage settings’ that could bring together different people and encourage mingling. Failure to attend to these imperatives threatens vitality, interaction and communality, characteristics epitomised in the pavement ballets described by Jane Jacobs (1961). Such designs foster community participation and the reaffirming of bonds as people of various ages and backgrounds occupy what Hawkins and Ryan (2013) call ‘third places’, socially inclusive, relaxed and unscripted public spaces beyond workplace and home. Such realms provide a vital role in advancing what Buonfino and Mulgan (2009: 16) call a ‘learned grammar of sociability’ in which people enjoy sharing space with strangers to form convivial micropublics (Amin, 2002).

This temporary *communitas* (Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014), evident along the promenade on busy days as groups interactively shape space affectively, creatively and expressively, cultivates the topophilia (Tuan, 1974) forged through familiarity and repeated visits. Crucially though, we also foreground the ludic qualities of the promenade, in particular those micro-spaces that foreground interactive practices. Here we endorse Tanya Woodyer's depiction of play as a 'prioritising of the non-cognitive and more-than-rational' that enhances affective belonging (2012: 319) and unleashes improvisational and spontaneous movement across space. The playful and theatrical installations and designs of the promenade seem to furnish 'an array of resources useful for the realisation of specific experiences, ambitions and capacities' (Duff, 2010: 882). These skilfully wrought features are integral to producing the affective and sociable qualities that consolidate a sense of belonging and ownership.

Multi-sensory engagements

The promenade has long been a multi-sensory space: the sea breeze, rain or summer sun assails faces; the smells of fish and chips, candy floss, sun cream, cheap perfume and the sea pervade the air; the sounds of the tide, the screams from white-knuckle rides at the Pleasure Beach, the shouts of the bingo callers and stall holders, the cries of the seagulls, the animated buzz of chatter on busy days and the smooth rumblings of the trams; the vast sense of space and the extending horizon of the sea; and a host of visual enticements from the colourful architecture and advertisements, the oft-changing North-West skies and the grey and blue tones of the sea, the spectacles of tower and pier, and other visitors in their summer wear.

The redesign has augmented these sensations, particularly the visual mix and the tactile experience of moving along the promenade. This is a linear space but one that also consists of a variety of surfaces, textures and gradients that solicit a more somatic engagement, replete with potential distractions that divert pedestrians from purely following a rapid, purposive, straight movement. Various slopes and steps lure bodies into transversal as well as linear movement, encouraging a broader interaction with spatial affordances and a more extensive sensory experience. There are several ways to move along the promenade – along grassy or concrete stretches, upon low walls, on raised plateaux, negotiating curved sections, along the beach and up and down inclines. On a slope adjacent to the main path that leads to a raised grassy expanse, a mother challenged her toddler to ascend the slope with her – ‘Are you ready to climb the mountainside?’ and she completed the movement with exaggerated effort (Fig 4). Cyclists, runners and pedestrians similarly move across these different realms, also enjoying the divergent textures of sand, grass, concrete and stone, though the separate cycle path allows rapid progress if so desired. Smooth passage for mobility scooters and pushchairs is also accommodated

The removal of the seawall has also provided opportunities to generate a more porous and invigorating relationship between land and sea. Numerous steps descend to the beach along the promenade, enabling people to get close to the sea even at high tide, and these steps are also popular fixtures on which to sit, producing a liminal realm between promenade and beach. On quiet days, visitors sit alone, reading or observing the shore, or cluster in small groups, and on busier occasions, multiple collectivities sociably assemble across the steps, sun-bathing, drinking and eating.

A host of other installations also encourage tactile encounters. The large sea-pebbles, large smooth rounded stone seating that cluster at the Promenade's north end, are akin to tide-washed pebbles on the beach. These small, sculptural aggregations entice individuals and groups to sit or clamber, also soliciting the sense of touch as hands run across their smooth surfaces. The same applies to the smooth illuminated stones at the southern end, *Glamrock*, designed by Peter Freeman to resonate with the natural foreshore environment. Made of concrete and studded with fibre-optic light points, they attract children who climb and play across them and provide a diverting visual experience as daylight fades.

Other sculptural installations along the promenade enhance sensory appreciation of the elemental forces that swirl around seaside space. The innovative *Swivelling Wind shelters* devised by McChesney Architects and installed in 2006 are composed out of stainless steel and wood. Standing 8 metres high, they resemble the tail of a giant fish as it plunges into watery depths and this tailfin acts as a weathervane to turn the structure along a circular track so that it shields the occupants of the shelter from the wind, while signalling its direction. *The Sound of Wind Looks Like This*, created by Steven Hurrell in 2003, also provides a unique visual illustration of the current direction and speed of the wind. Two small wind turbines collect the energy produced by the wind and an anemometer captures its velocity and direction, information immediately transmitted and visually represented by the changing levels and colours of the pulsating lights that play up and down six poles arranged in a semi-circular formation.

Bringing attention to a different elemental force is the *High Tide Organ*, a 15-metre tall sculpture suggestive of a huge musical note or giant tentacle constructed out of

concrete, steel, zinc and copper sheet, installed in 2002 and designed by Liam Curtin and John Gooding. The organ, described as a 'musical manifestation of the sea', is operated by the surges of the tide to produce harmonic sounds that resonate through the 18 pipes that emerge from within the sculpture. The sound is initially produced by waves that push air into and up into the eight pipes attached to the seawall below. The melodious and harmonious quality of the music thus depends upon the force of the tide, and this is especially loud on stormy occasions.



Figure 5: Multi-sensory qualities

These three installations extend the range of the human sensorium, creating site-specific works that respond to the endlessly dynamic, changing energies of wind and tide that ceaselessly (re)constitute place. In foregrounding these elemental agencies, they explicitly reveal the ways in which the dynamic coastal landscape has been and will continue to be shaped by non-human forces that emerge elsewhere and pass through vast expanses of space.

As Constance Classen has emphasized, 'we not only think *about* our senses, we think *through* them' (1993: 9). By deepening a sense of place and by deploying techniques to

defamiliarise familiar spaces, these installations have the potential to engender what Jane Bennett (2001, 5) calls 're-enchantment', through which the senses are heightened and we 'notice new colours, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify.' Following the ideas of Jacques Rancière, this site specific distribution of the sensible 'revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (2009: 13). In creating 'new modes of sense perception' (ibid: 9), these works deepen the experience and understanding of place, augmenting sensory experience and defamiliarising familiar environments, in this case, by foregrounding the implacable forces of tide and wind in ways that 'provoke, intervene, and disrupt the established regime of the sensible' (Berberich et al, 2013: 318).

Concluding points: Learning From Blackpool

We have argued that all too often, the regulatory imperatives that guide the design of urban streets influence timid public spaces that lack diversity, invention and place specificity. Where this latter quality is acknowledged, the tendency is to produce separately preserved heritage districts and over-coded spaces replete with information boards and zealously scrubbed historic buildings. An overwhelming concern with commerce, rapid automobility, safety and surveillance come at the expense of lively social interactions and improvisational play. Popular culture is neglected while reified yet somewhat homogeneous notions of 'good design' proliferate, underpinned by authoritative, over-prescriptive guidance, and above all, an unsensuous

sterility often predominates, as diverse smells, sights, sounds and textures are erased to facilitate seamless movement and minimise distraction.

While over the 20th century, Blackpool has been subject to poor planning and design that has left spatial vacuums, awkward frontages, redundant pedways and ugly buildings, we contend that the renovated and redesigned promenade offers an exemplary space from which to consider how public spaces and streets might be designed more sympathetically and imaginatively. We have asserted that the sophisticated redesign of the promenade that has accompanied the large scale engineering of the seafront to increase the efficacy of flood defences is remarkable in combining place-specific aesthetics, interactive spaces and facilities at which visitors may linger or play, and a multisensual linear realm that continuously stimulates the bodies of visitors. Such designs, we insist, could be deployed more broadly to re-enchant the streets of cities, making them more sensuous, sociable and homely.

We are emphatically not arguing that all streets should be more akin to the promenade, which is clearly a distinctive kind of linear space that cannot be replicated across urban space. Moreover, although there is much to celebrate about Blackpool's regenerated promenade, amongst the arresting visually and sensory delights, there are conspicuous breaks and inconsistencies, with sections of the pathway are broken, unfinished or displaying signs of deterioration. Promenaders can often be seen traipsing across muddy verges, or scrambling down awkward slopes to re-join family and friends who have taken a smoother path. Clumsily placed concrete slabs appear at certain points, perhaps to deter skateboarders from utilising the edges of the undulating landscape. The Southernmost point of the Promenade is a dead-end, forcing visitors to double-

back several hundred metres around the conspicuously placed new tram depot at Starr Gate. At South Pier, the Promenade becomes fragmented as it negotiates around an open car-park and the even more conspicuous Sand Castle water-park complex. A large section The Comedy Carpet was unceremoniously shaved-off in 2012 to make way for widened tram track, an act of 'civic vandalism' according to the artist, and the new shelters also clearly harbour other social activities, notably drinking and drug-taking.

However, what is critical in its redesign is the attention paid to producing a highly place-specific range of artworks and features. We thus maintain that attending to this place-specificity might counter the clone-town appearance of much of urban Britain and encourage more innovative and idiosyncratic street design. The reiteration of spatial routines and practices, are generative of deep sedimented and experiential attachments to places and generate a communal consistent way of seeing the world. At Blackpool, regular visitors gravitate to the Promenade at which they have accumulated a host of reference points that provide the basis for shared discursive, pleasurable and practical habits. Routine, memory and nostalgia are clearly important; place-making must thus speak to such collective experiences rather than imposing abstract designs from elsewhere.

The publication of Venturi et al's *Learning From Las Vegas* in 1972 served as an audacious stimulus to rethinking about how cities and streets might be transformed. Drawing upon a very particular street, the Las Vegas Strip, the authors asserted that modern architects, designers and planners had hitherto neglected the vibrant appeal of popular and commercial culture. Pointing to the huge popularity of the simulacra of

iconic sites, commercial signage and playful architecture, they called for such elements to be incorporated into urban design. Our argument similarly draws upon a highly popular linear space of leisure, but one that is less dominated by giant commercial concerns. Steeped in an altogether older popular cultural tradition and aesthetic of working class seaside holidays, fairgrounds and carnival attractions, Blackpool Promenade is characterized by smaller scale commercial outlets but also by municipal planning and design. Public spaces of beach, piers and promenade make the promenade less circumscribed by commercial strategies to lure visitors into halls of gambling, shopping and entertainment. As with Las Vegas, Blackpool is frequently considered to be tacky, tasteless and lowbrow, yet as we have contended throughout this paper, there is much to learn from the resort.

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