



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

[Millington, Steven](#) (2019) *Blackpool Illuminations and Municipal Modernism*.  
The Modernist, 28. ISSN 2046-2905

---

**Downloaded from:** <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/622328/>

**Publisher:** The Manchester Modernist Society

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

## Blackpool Illuminations and Municipal Modernism

Blackpool is outmoded, vulgar and distasteful. For the mythical creative class, or New Labour politicians for that matter, Blackpool lacks the necessary culture, boutique hotels, or frothy coffee establishments. Instead, Blackpool brims with 'garish overabundance'. It is not cool.

Yet despite these indictments, the world's first working class holiday resort remains a site for popular cultural entertainment, cheap food and drink, fairground jollity, and bracing promenade walks. Millions return year on year, following long established traditions. Unlike professional place-makers or the liberal metropolitan elite, the multitude keenly understand the Blackpool idiom.

Blackpool heritage maybe an oxymoron, but the imperative for sturdy structure to withstand the elements ensures material features from the past linger in the present, such as the durable Victorian wrought iron ornamentation of railings, benches and shelters. Through a layering of Victorian, Edwardian, Art-Deco and Modernist styles, the resort is replete with iconic buildings, The Tower or Winter Gardens for instance. Unlike ruined castles frozen in time, Blackpool's heritage remains alive. The Empress Ballroom is still a ballroom. The Tower Circus is still a circus. Whereas many resorts have lost their piers to neglect or fire, people can still promenade along any of Blackpool's three. Blackpool also intimately connects to high modernity. It is as much a product of industrialisation, as Manchester's now gentrified textile mills. Without the working-classes, Blackpool might have remained a small dignified spa town isolated amongst the dunes of the Fylde coast. In Blackpool, a time-traveller can explore the past to visit the future, when the resort proudly proclaimed itself a centre of innovation and progress.

In 1879, a display of arc lamps attracted a crowd of 10,000s. Blackpool Corporation quickly understood the attractive qualities of electric lighting. In 1897, the publicly owned electric tramway was reinvented as a tourist attraction, with the introduction of illuminated trams. Blackpool Illuminations began life as a formal display in 1912, becoming an annual event in 1925. The Illuminations were never simply a backdrop to night-time frivolity, but a spectacular attraction in themselves. Showcasing innovations in lighting enabled Blackpool to move away from an image of Victorian freakery and fairground carnival, to become admired, like other great sites of Modernity, as a place of technological wonderment, a self-proclaimed *City of Lights* to match Paris or Chicago in terms of glamour and style. Blackpool already possessed its own version of the Eiffel Tower, so why not?

Municipal funding secured progressive extensions and improvements to the lights, which developed from simple festoon lighting displays to sequence-controlled illuminated tableaux and architectural lighting. In 1936, the design and construction of the lights was brought in-house within a newly created Illuminations Department, under the leadership of Freddie Fields and Charles Furness. Such was their pride in their technological achievements; the pair addressed the British Association of the Advancement of Science. In 1937, *Progress* formed the theme of the Illuminations, the word ignited through neon and incandescent displays on the Town Hall and trams. Throughout the 1920-30s, Blackpool Corporation sought to modernise the resort, investing in infrastructure, extending the promenade, building indoor and outdoor swimming pools and spending £250,000 on creating Stanley Park. Under the architectural leadership of JC Robinson, the borough re-invented itself through art-deco architectural stylings, through redesigned tram stops, the gigantic Derby Baths, and public buildings, including the magnificent Stanley Park Café. The reorientation of the resort toward a European modernist aesthetic is evident elsewhere in Joseph Emberton's iconic Casino, The Pleasure Beach's Grand National Station and Fun House, together with Margaret Blundell's murals and later Percy Metcalfe's murals and cubist sculptures. This emergent art-deco wonderland, however, ended with the Second World War.

In 1952, Harry Carpenter was appointed Head of Illuminations and Public Street Lighting together with a new design team including Sid Howell, Charlier Crowther, and future *Beano* illustrator, Emilio Hatjoulis. Together they set about re-inventing the Illuminations to reflect the spirit of the age. The post-war optimism generated through the Welfare State and the 1951 Festival of Britain resonate within their new designs, which foreground progress, technology and change. A telling moment is the British Transport Films promotional short *Holiday!* (1957). Replete with jazz soundtrack by Chris Barber and his band and shot in colour, the film depicts a Blackpool in which the sophisticated pre-war art deco landscape is submerged by resolutely post-war design, colour and pop-cultural stylings. Made shortly after rationing and restrictions on Hire-Purchase were lifted, the film taps into an era of hope. The shots focusing on the Illuminations, in particular, underscore these themes, depicting a reinvented landscape and the Golden Age of the Lights. Carpenter oversaw investment in new lighting infrastructure and introduced innovative design materials. Mercury vapour lights replaced tungsten bulbs. The use of crystalline and back-lit plastic panels enabled the construction of elaborate 3D models and sculptures, together with enhanced transistor sequence-controlled animated displays and elaborate themed sections, with ever larger and intricate tableaux, most famously a 120ft long New York skyline designed by Sid Howell. This changing landscape is also evident elsewhere in the resort. On the Pleasure Beach, Emberton was succeeded by John Ratcliff, the former Deputy Director of Architecture for the 1951 Festival of Britain, who added cable cars and monorail to the amusement park. The original flying contraption gondoliers swung around by Maxim's 1929 Flying Machine were replaced with rocketships in 1952.

During the 1960s, a space age theme emerged, through robots, astronauts, lunar modules, and a moon-landing tableau, alongside aliens, flying saucers, and laser displays. 1962 saw the installation of the *Roto-Sphere*, a rotating neon-lit 'sputnik' installation and the Astraland lighting display. Such displays utilised new lighting technologies, such as 1000s of blue mercury lights to recreate the eerie atmosphere of space. In 1968, a large display of an imaginary future Blackpool was unveiled, replete with Jetsons' style architecture, skyways and people movers, and a futuristic bingo hall. The post-war reinvention of the lights, however, did not necessarily lead to a complete break with past-tradition. Sometimes these traditions were tweaked, to represent both old and new. The Modern Witch tableau, depicted witches drawn in a traditional style but with their broomsticks replaced by vacuum cleaners. Illuminated trams remained a key feature of the Illuminations, but gondoliers and sailboats gave way to a modern warship, hovercraft and the iconic Rocket tram launched in 1961. The heady glamour of art-deco and 1950s rock and roll hedonism, the blend of modernist and fairground aesthetic is captured in Alfred Gregory's photographs of 1960s Blackpool.

Local architects, Tom Mellor and Partners' 1965 Masterplan proposed the removal of Blackpool Central Station, together with dilapidated housing, sideshows, stalls and other Victorian vestiges to make for a new brutalist Magistrates Court, police headquarters and multi-storey car park. From 1975, traffic was able to flow directly into the town from the newly constructed M55 motorway. On the seafront, a site was cleared for the Palatine Buildings (1975), which connected to the new public building via a system of elevated pedways and concrete gardens. In the spirit of the Buchanan Report, the pedway even stretched over the Promenade to connect to the seafront and foster a 'seamless' separation of people and traffic. Even The Victorian Facade of the historic North Pier was brutally remastered in concrete. Although never fully realised, the plan intended to extend the network of elevated pedestrian links to re-engineer Blackpool for the age of the motorcar. Recent attempts to regenerate Blackpool, however, have largely focused on removing this legacy.

The association of Blackpool and a progressive future might seem tenuous, given the resort's recent history of stag parties, deprivation and strip clubs. Kiss-me-quick, has given way to Shag-me-Slowly, and a little stick of Blackpool Rock is now available in marijuana flavour. However, Blackpool

continues to reinvent itself. Technical innovation in lighting, with the adoption of fibre optics, LEDs, computerized design and programming, and animated projections has modernised the Illuminations. The new promenade, one of Britain's biggest civil engineering schemes, not only upgrades the town's sea defences, but also has provided an opportunity to re-think public realm on a grand scale, through new public space and art-work, including Britain's biggest public art, *The Comedy Carpet*. Anywhere else, this project would be lauded as a supreme example of civic-design. But Blackpool is not cool is it.