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# LEARNING FROM BLACKPOOL: RE-ENCHANTING STERILE STREETS

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Hi everyone! We were discussing yesterday with the colleagues here at Tomsk State University working on an idea about the transformation of university campus in the digital age. And my focus is very much on the physical spaces of the campus; how we might bring about interventions in public space to create new and distinct places; and then they should carry a message about a place and attract people, and retain people to those places.

I was in Tomsk last year and I spoke about a project in Manchester, the Corridor Project, where Manchester-Oxford Road connects two cities, two main universities together in the attempt to enliven those streets. And it hasn't really worked. So I thought about this: well, if you want to rethink the spaces of universities – the last place to look at is examples from other universities. We might need to think about looking at other spaces, and it happens so. I've done research with Tim Edensor, and you can access this research in the *Sociological Review* (the full paper). It is looking at a place called Blackpool, which is a seaside resort in Northern England for working class; it attracts 10 million people a year, 3 million people each year to look at the lovely Blackpool illuminations of the world's biggest light display.
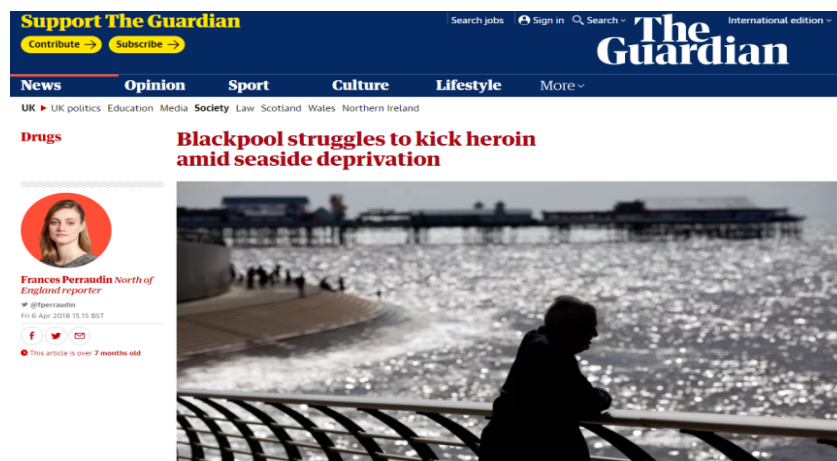

And the reason for this is that Blackpool has an image problem around drugs deprivation and it is also seen as a 'tacky' place, bad taste. So we've interested in this place in terms of product development. The first rule of place branding is to get your place product right.

And what I was thinking? It's a linear space. So what I am interested in is linear place making. How do we re-enchant linear spaces? In the same way, Manchester-Oxford Road is a linear space connecting two universities. So is Lenin Avenue. And I've walked up Lenin Avenue many times. And so have you, guys. I'm sure every day you thought "How can this place be better?" And it can! But don't come to look at Manchester, go to look at Blackpool, Blackpool promenade. I'll explain why.

The Blackpool promenade has been redesigned, because it's in Blackpool, because it's tacky. Serious urban designers and architects don't think of Blackpool as a place of innovation – I would argue the opposite. To re-enchant sterile urban settings, to think about place-making in more productive ways – what we did was go back to an earlier account of an even more denigrated linear space which is Las Vegas Strip.

43. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip hotels: elements, continued
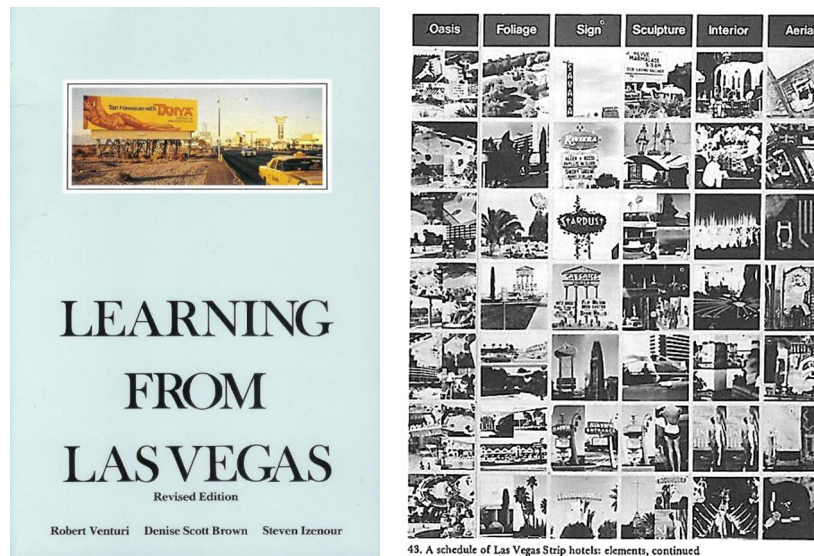
And specifically Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's 1972 "Learning from Las Vegas" – a text considered interlude to the development of postmodern spaces, and the decentering of high lofty culture. And their cult re-evaluates and celebrates popular motives and styles of architects and planners.

So the Las Vegas Strip is the way of rethinking popular taste, vernaculars style and access, but also we borrowed the methods of inquiry so to challenge the kind of abstract modernist purism that came to dominate in post-war planning, not just in Soviet Russia but also in Manchester and other western cities.

Today, what we're trying to do is challenge international professional design codes and practice that always encourage de-clutter, overdesign, overregulation, measures that prevent people from gathering in social space, or design out groups of people who aren't supposed to be there.

What we would argue is that with those designs, that kind of creative classic architects and planners, who articulate abstract ideas of what good design is, what Venturi called sophisticated architecture for grounding new things over vernacular traditions, and marginalize interventions, which are not cool. In short, this is not fun. It's boring, unsensual. And how many public spaces do you see around the world, which are exactly the same? It could be in Moscow, it could be in Paris, it could be in London, because the same designers, the same architects reproduce the same ideas everywhere. If you're trying to create place uniqueness, ignore those architects - this is my argument - and go to Venturi and think about it.

One more thing I'm going to talk about is playfulness - having fun with the urban realm. And also to think about how people actually use places in everyday routine. It's the people in the place, which give it vibrancy and vitality, make the place safer. People come to the bus stop on Lenin Avenue, and they walk from the bus stop to campus, and they walk up and down Lenin Avenue every day. How can we learn from that? How can we make that more pleasurable, more fun? Yes, that makes sense.

These are the four themes; I'll quickly go through them. I've got lots of pictures to think about movement, to think about playfulness, to think about the sensuous, and also to think about de-familiarization as linear place-making tactics.

Just to talk quickly about promenades. What we talk about here are esplanades, pathways or pedestrianized streets in an urban context. They speak to vibrancy and vitality of say Las Ramblas in Barcelona, the spaces for unregulated walking, which, in cities, are often on narrow pavements or parks. And often you might find there have been regulated environments, like a shopping mall. This is a kind of open space for leisurely walking; you can find it in Britain, not in the cities, but on the seaside.

This is Blackpool. It's the longest, five miles long, and it has all sorts of attractions including the famous Blackpool Tower, and also amusement arcades, and hotels, and places to get fish and chips, and pubs. People walk along this, families will walk along. They might not do the whole five miles, but they do little bits along the little stretches.

The Victorians built this monumental seawall to stop the town from being flooded. They built the resort on sand dunes, and then removed the sand dunes, and the town was flooded. So it's a huge seawall. That's the old promenade, 30-foot-high seawall; but it had to be redesigned. There was frequent over-topping because of the climate change, the tide would go over, and it also disconnected people from the top and from the beach.

The Author

So it's been completely redesigned using biomimicry to create artificial headlands to help build up the sand again so to protect the natural process and to protect the seafront. Also they created a new public space and that's what I want to focus on.

It's been an opportunity there. What used to be a straight line is now made more interesting, for example, through curves, through slope ramps, through a combination of steps, gradients and slopes. It has multiple levels and people might use this space. You can find people sharing the space: people walking, people in wheelchairs, on skateboards, pushing prams – all sorts of different ways of walking or mobility, all within the same space in a leisurely way; things which you don't often find within an urban context.

Through big regeneration funding, the space incorporates new design, and that new design speaks to local heritage.

For example, light in these rocks, they light up at night.

If you peer inside this submarine, you find a sea monster.

The new wind shelters. There are a lot of features that interact with the elements. This interacts with the wind.

Desire Chris Knight 2001
Author

This interacts with the sun to create a shadow of a heart on the pavement. So you might go on the holiday and find love, and that love is gone with the sun.

They shoot horses don't they 2002 Michael Trainor
The Author

This interacts with sunlight. I'll come back to this one later.

The Sound of Wind Looks Like This Stephen Hurrell 2002
The Author

This interacts with sound.

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The High Tide Organ by Liam Curtin and John Gooding 2002
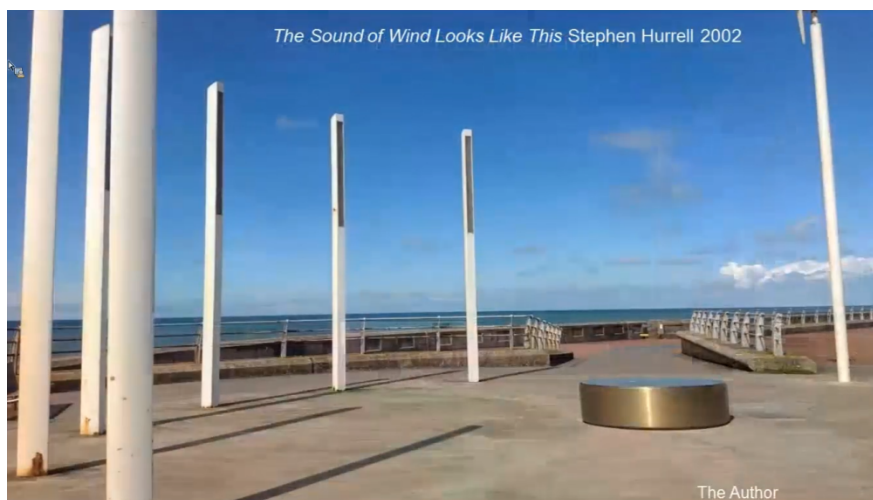
And this is the high tide organ. So when the tide comes in, it pushes air through the organ and makes music.

There're all sorts of interventions here. There're lots of interventions to encourage people to move, but also to dwell, and linger, and stop. This has been achieved through design.
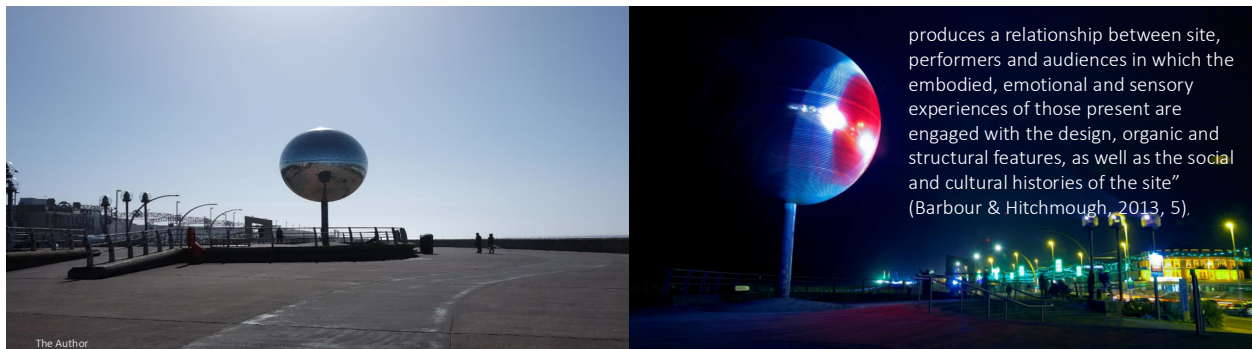

These are all different types of shelters. People sit in them, and this family is having a picnic.

These people are just hanging out. Just people sitting around, sitting on the steps. People can interact with the ocean.

This is Britain's biggest artwork. It is 2200 sq. meters in size, designed by Gordon Young. It is Britain's most famous jokes all transcribed in granite. So people read the jokes and they share the jokes. Even if they know the punchline, it promotes sociality - people laugh, dwell and linger. It is the most brilliant piece of public art I've ever seen in any city. And I've been to lots of cities. The way it absolutely speaks to the people who use that space, who understand instantly what it's about, and you see people laughing all the time in this space.

produces a relationship between site, performers and audiences in which the embodied, emotional and sensory experiences of those present are engaged with the design, organic and structural features, as well as the social and cultural histories of the site" (Barbour & Hitchmough, 2013, 5).

This is the giant mirrorball; this is about encouraging. Karen Barbour and Alex Hitchmough called it site-specific dance. At night it rotates and shines light, the light that spans around this public square.

The woman next to me says, "It's a bit like a Blackpool ballroom, maybe that's why they designed it?"

Other viewers associate the glitter blizzard with drunkenness, one exclaiming "Oh it's so strange! I feel like we've had a few!"

And this is from our observations watching people say it's like a ballroom. If you know anything about the British culture, it has ballroom and ballroom dancing. The world home of that is in Blackpool. So it's space for that dance culture. "It feels like I'm drunk", "It feels like I used to take drugs", "Does it make you miss ecstasy?!" said one person. And children love it as well. Children play with the lights as they spin around; they get lost in the glitter dots: "Let's catch it! Catch it!"

The Author

Then there is the sensuous. These are all sorts of tactile measures: touch, sound, sites, together with the traditional seaside vernacular alongside the prom as well.

The final one is de-familiarisation. This is where the ordinary becomes enchanted. Principally they do this through the illumination. So they transform everyday streets into something surreal, enchanted and spectacular every evening during the autumn, including new digital displays on the tower animations, where crowds gather to watch.

And then people themselves interact with the lights by lighting themselves up.

Learning From Blackpool

Value of local vernacular practices and specific cultural practices

Spaces fostering interactivity and play

Accommodates a range of different sensory and tactile processions

Disrupting the linear

Making the familiar strange

Accommodating and honouring the past without freezing it

So, the concluding points. If you're thinking about transforming the university campus, the several things you might learn from Blackpool: the value of local vernacular heritage and practices – how people identify with a particular place or street, and also how they actually use it, how you might bring in interactivity and play. How you might accommodate different sensory and tactile processions. How you might disrupt the linear qualities of long streets to make them more interesting. How you might make familiar objects appear strange and lighting is a good way of doing that, particularly in the area of the world where it's dark. And accommodating and honoring the past, but also without freezing its inheritage, to make it used and alive.

So my advice is to reconsider serious design against playful design to inject life into boring streets. And if you are ever in the United Kingdom, please come and find me in Manchester, and I will take you to Blackpool, and we will have some fun!