**The Seaside Resort, Nostalgia and Restoration**

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**The story of the seaside and Seaside Moderne**

The British shoreline has proven a blank canvas, onto which several meanings have been drawn over time. In recent years, the narrative of seaside resorts has tended towards one of decline. However, this perception of seaside towns as failing and irrelevant to modern life is one which both Jenny and I have challenged through our work.

Seaside resorts vary in terms of scale, history, clientele and the extent to which visitor numbers have ebbed and flowed over the years. Some have arguably become *ex-resorts* through a severe decline in numbers and infrastructure. Yet, despite negative media coverage, image problems and some very real challenges regarding the poverty of residents, traditional seaside resorts do continue to attract visitors. Blackpool, on the north-west coast, is the most obvious example. On the one hand, it is a place of deprivation, as evidenced by its many Houses of Multiple Occupancy (house sharing where the property is rented by at least three people who are not from one family or ‘household’) and high levels of substance abuse, but, on the other, it continues to thrive as a visitor destination, attracting around 8.6 million day visits per annum and making it the most visited seaside resort in Britain (Visit Britain 2017).

Around 20 miles up the coast, the town of Morecambe faced similar social and reputational challenges and a remarkable decline in visitor numbers. Yet it has managed to survive as a depleted resort and has seen regeneration in recent years. On the other side of Morecambe Bay lies Grange-over-Sands, which has not seen a significant drop in visitors, reputation or affluence since Victorian times. The forces behind the changes are not as simple as the rise of overseas package holidays since the 1960s, although this was a factor along with economic restructuring more generally. Essentially, the seaside fell out of fashion. A growing variety of UK holidays and leisure pastimes competed with the seaside – going for a drive in the country, camping, staying in and watching television and later, the city break. Not only did the leisure boom mean more competition, but the seaside resort slipped down the leisure spaces hierarchy (Urry 1997). Some resorts became retirement centres and/or places of residence for the urban poor due to a glut of accommodation once the spiral of decline set in. Nevertheless, this loss of prestige has not necessarily meant an end to tourism in such places. For example, many people still take their second or third annual holiday at the seaside, for a few days, rather than making it their primary break of the year as was still common in the 1960s, 1970s and even the early 1980s.

It is remarkable that the cotton mills have closed, the age of railway has given way to the age of the car and we now aspire to visit city centres rather than to escape their once polluted environments, yet these seaside towns of the industrial revolution survive. One reason for their continuation is that people have developed a relationship with these places – the resorts are now a tradition and part of Britain’s heritage and popular culture. Part of their appeal is that the seashore remains relatively unchanged. It is a rich, multisensory environment which allows us to reconnect with the natural world, relax and recover; just as it did in its early role as a competitor to inland spas. Moreover, these environments, with their connotations of fun and reverie, can evoke happy memories of past holidays and facilitate nostalgia (Shields 1991; Jarratt and Gammon 2016). Since Victorian times the British seaside has been associated with childhood, not only through beach games, family entertainment and funfairs, but also through a long tradition of children’s literature that encompasses these places (Walton 2000). However, this nostalgia is not just for our own personal memories (of childhood) but also for a collective or social nostalgia for the past more generally. These themes of sensoriality, restoration, stability and nostalgia inform the traditional seaside resort’s sense of place, or *genus loci*, which I refer to as ‘seasideness’ – a term which I developed during my research in the Lancashire seaside town of Morecambe (Jarratt 2015).

**[image 1]**

*The notion of seasideness and the idea of the seaside as a place of recuperation and recovery is embodied by coastal ‘Seaside Moderne’ architecture, which is the focus of my current practice. Constructed during the mid-war leisure boom, Seaside Moderne, or ‘Nautical Moderne’, was inspired by the nautical, long, sweeping curves of ocean liners, creating interiors of wide, open spaces with views out to sea. Influenced by the International Modernist style, it fought against the more decorative aspects of Art Deco, displaying mid-war austerity. The architecture symbolised resilience: no matter what devastation the country had suffered, it could overcome it and rebuild.*

*After the trauma of World War I, in the UK and many Western countries there was a social emphasis on health and wellbeing. In 1930s Britain, workers nationally were given an annual holiday for the first time, also powered by efficient rail networks. Many new ‘palaces of fun’ were built in existing popular seaside resorts, such as Blackpool and Morecambe, to house the even greater influx of holidaymakers. Buildings for exercise, such as the Stonehaven Open Air Pool in Aberdeenshire, were financed by local councils. As were pavilions, such as the Rothesay Pavilion on the Isle of Bute and Largs Pavilion, also both in Scotland, which provided space for tourist entertainment, as well as for local people’s recreational needs. Pleasure buildings, like The Midland Hotel, Morecambe and Blackpool Casino, were constructed by private companies, in this case London, Midland and Scottish Railway Company and Blackpool Pleasure Beach Holdings respectively, taking advantage of this new national obsession with recreation, following the death and devastation of World War I.*

**[images 2 and 3]**

*The ocean liners referenced by Seaside Moderne buildings signified the height of opulence at the time. They carried people across the oceans to new colonial lands where better lives were promised. Similar to the ship’s design, the interiors of Seaside Moderne buildings were dominated by opulent features – exotic wood panelling, modern textiles and terrazzo flooring. These grand environments, which differed greatly from the usual surroundings of factory and office workers, created a stage set where people were encouraged to relax and enjoy themselves.*

*Most significantly, these buildings stood out visually from the previous Victorian and Edwardian architecture lining the coast, which usually consisted of tall, stone buildings with bay windows and decorative detailing. This modern architecture embodied an attitude of collective resilience, optimism and reassurance of social and economic recovery, which can also be seen in the widespread construction of municipal architecture such as town halls in the 1930s (East et al. 2012). Whatever atrocities we had experienced, we could build mighty architecture to overcome it, with hope for a better future.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

**Seasideness – sense of place at the seaside**

Seasideness is the specific sense of place which people experience at the seaside. Edward Relph (1976), one of earliest human geographers to pay close attention to the notion of place, identified three key aspects of it: the physical characteristics of the environment, the meaning of place (memories and associations) and the activities afforded by the place, including social interactions. Over the years, these three dimensions have been refined by scholars but still underpin contemporary definitions of place (Patterson and Williams 2005). Sense of place is when place identity is significant enough to be felt or experienced; it is the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place (Cresswell 2015). I have previously defined it as:

The fluid and multi-faceted way in which we know notable or memorable places through sensing, experiencing, and remembering a geographical location and its features. It is therefore a combination of our interaction with a physical environment and the meanings that we (as individuals and a society) bestow upon it, at the time or subsequently. (Jarratt *et al.* 2018).

My work on the seaside-specific sense of place, or seasideness, has revealed several emergent themes, foremost amongst these are nostalgia and wellness/restoration. Both are central to the visitor experience and were considered reasons to visit the seaside by the people I spoke to during my research, which took the form of a case study and was largely based around interviews with older visitors to the traditional resort of Morecambe. These interviews revealed that seasideness was strongly felt by the interviewees, who described the shoreline as a place to relax, reconnect and reminisce. In addition to the shoreline, beach and promenade, the other physical features which were consistently mentioned were seaside buildings, from modest traditional cafés to grand hotels. This combination of seashore and distinctive architecture provided a fittingly distinctive backdrop to the activities, experiences and memories, which can be described as seasideness.

The historian Fred Gray talks about how our ‘complex memories and feelings about the seaside’, such as ‘sunburnt childhood holidays on a beach littered…with deckchairs and windbreaks or sun loungers and parasols…fumbled first sexual encounters under a pier…a family stroll along a promenade or boardwalk or a cliff-top park…or old people sitting in a seafront shelter watching the world go by’ are all ‘framed and conditioned by seaside architecture’ (2006: 7). As well as the natural environment, therefore, architecture and built heritage play an important role in facilitating such seasideness.

**[image 4/4a]**

*The restorative role of architecture, and specifically Seaside Moderne, as a backdrop or framing devise for the enhanced feelings of wellness and enjoyment encapsulated by seasideness is a central focus of my artwork. I am interested in how the seaside location frames our experience outdoors, whilst the architectural interior envelopes us in a space specifically designed to facilitate enjoyment, release and recuperation.*

*Restoration is a theme which relates to seaside architecture in more ways than one. For example, some of David’s interviewees describe their time at the seaside in the following terms:*

*…And to be able to look at something that is unchanging, and for all intents and purposes will always be like that…has a calming effect, you know, to see that something won’t change. Mankind’s changing so much*

*...it takes your mind completely away from all our sort of manmade hustle and bustle. It takes you right back to nature really doesn’t it? (Jarratt 2015a: 158).*

*Despite the deterioration of many seaside towns, the sense of continuity and mental wellbeing provided by proximity to a ‘blue space’ (White et al 2013), alongside personal connections to these places, keeps people returning. In our society we are increasingly overwhelmed by digital visual stimuli, on top of life’s inevitable pressures and challenges. We require a release and I believe that the seaside continues to provide a restorative environment for us.*

*The mentally restorative effects we experience when spending time at the seaside are mirrored by the progression from degeneration to restoration which has taken place in many seaside towns. Each building I explored in my 2015 project in northern Britain, ‘Looking Back Moving Forward’,[[2]](#footnote-2) and in my recent research into Miami South Beach Seaside Moderne, had its own narrative of decline and, in most cases, revival. The Midland Hotel in Morecambe was renovated in 2008 by developers Urban Splash, and has since thrived as a hotel and events venue, bringing more interest and activity to the town, such as Vintage by the Sea festival, organised by Deco Publique. In Miami, numerous hotels on Ocean Drive and Collins Avenue in Miami Beach, such as the McAlpin and the Breakwater, were renovated in the 1990s, contributing to the area’s overall success as a thriving all-year resort.*

*In recent years, the restoration of 1930s architecture has been used as a catalyst for revitalising seaside economies. Examples such as the restoration of Morecambe’s The Midland and De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill on the south coast have proved successful in generating a steady increase in interest. The Rothesay Pavilion on the Isle of Bute hopes to emulate this with a redevelopment due to open in 2019. What I find interesting is that such refurbishments consciously use nostalgia as a hook to bring in visitors. But unlike the personal nostalgia which seaside resorts seem to evoke through memories of childhood holidays, this is a type of collective nostalgia for past eras which are outside of our direct experience.*

**[image 5/5a]**

**Nostalgia for the seaside**

Fundamentally, nostalgia is an idealised and selective representation of the past. Christina Goulding (1999) distinguishes between nostalgia for real personal memories and simulated nostalgia, that is, vicarious nostalgia evoked from narratives, images and objects; this allows nostalgia for a period that one has not experienced directly. All nostalgia reflects dissatisfaction with the present, acts as a counterpoint to modernity and can be a reaction to an uncertain or limited future (Dann 1994; Harvey 2000). The need for nostalgia to idealise the past at the expense of the present, or future, sets it apart from reminiscence, which has no such requirement. Nostalgia is often dismissed as pessimistic, looked down upon as a misrepresentation, considered as a loss of faith or even described in terms of a disease (Hewison 1987). Yet, nostalgia can be considered in more balanced terms as an emotional state that allows for ambivalences within it and tolerates the existence of different human realities –- it is a melancholic delight; people do not want to be cured of their past (Bishop 1995). Svetlana Boym (2001: xiv) defines nostalgia as:

a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.

Identity and continuity lie at the heart of nostalgia, which can also be described as the relationship between personal and collective memory (Boym 2001; Bishop 1995). Not only can it solidify identity, but it can also sustain a sense of meaning and invigorate social connectedness (Routledge *et al*. 2011). As a self-focused emotional process, it gives the opportunity to form a meaningful narrative from memories. This is significant because, for many of us, our past lies at the centre of our sense of identity. David Lowenthal (2011) stresses the importance to wellbeing of identification with the earlier stages of one’s own life. For many, this identification with the past is achieved through attachment to certain places which hold memories or meaning. The fact that nostalgia is often shared is significant; it strengthens feelings of attachment security, perceptions of social support and empathy with others. Fond and selective recollections of past vacations, when people came together, can ward off negative feelings towards the present and future (Fairley and Gammon 2005). In short, nostalgia is melancholic, but the overall experience is positive and can lift our mood (see Routledge *et al.* 2011).

My research has specifically considered seaside nostalgia as experienced by older visitors to Morecambe. For the respondents in this study, nostalgia was strongly felt and a significant part of the seaside experience. Respondents became emotional when recounting memories of family holidays that clearly meant a great deal to them. However, a feeling of loss was tempered by a feeling of continuity; interviewees took comfort in the fact that they now played the role of parent or grandparent in trips to the beach. One of seaside nostalgia’s functions is to support these narratives, which dwell on the past but influence the present and will inform the future. Through this work, the three main functions of seaside nostalgia were identified as: a reconnection to childhood memories, to support (family) narratives and to find reassurance/stability through the ability to escape our everyday perception of time and to reconnect to the past or a different perception of time (Jarratt and Gammon, 2016).

**[image 6]**

*References to nostalgia, in both its personal and collective form, evoked by experiences of seasideness, occur frequently in my work. I am interested in how experiencing nostalgia can have an uplifting effect on our wellbeing without naively viewing the past as a better version of our current life. The wallpaper, ‘Over and Over Jump In!’ responds to the architecture and archive of the Stonehaven Open Air Pool in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. My father visited the pool weekly as a child and took my sister and me as children. We now visit the pool as an annual family ritual with our spouses and children. The artwork uses architectural motifs from the building’s colourful design, interspersed with divers from archival photographs. The title references the passing of time through generations, the repeated activities we undertake in the restorative environment of the pool and the importance of taking time to relax and recuperate during life’s difficulties.*

**Recovery at the seaside**

As Jenny’s work suggests, this bitter-sweet seaside nostalgia, which is strongly felt and can lift our mood and offer social connections, is often linked to notions of wellbeing. Any more substantial or long-term health benefits have not yet been proven. However, exposure to blue space (aquatic environments) more generally has been clearly linked to a feeling of restorativeness and seems to offer real health benefits (see Bell *et al*. 2015; White *et al*. 2010; White *et al*. 2013).

To some extent, seaside resorts have retained associations with wellness and recovery since they first developed in the industrial revolution when air pollution in cities was notoriously bad and the environmental benefits of the seaside were most obvious. Yet, resorts continued to market their health-giving properties well into the 20th century. If we take Morecambe as an example, the high quality of its air and climate were clearly extolled in various letters in the press throughout the 19th century (Grass 1972). Even in 1925, Morecambe girls were described as having ‘clear eyes and clear complexions which only ideal surroundings can give’ in marketing material (Bingham 1990: 185). The inter-war and post-war periods saw the height of seaside popularity, which was still concerned with health – especially swimming and exposure to the sun. During the second half of the 20th century, justified concerns about coastal pollution no doubt tempered this reputation, but the underlying association with health has remained (Hassan 2003).

With efforts to improve British beaches (largely due to EU regulations) and the recent confirmation by psychologists that blue space is good for us (see Foley and Kistemann 2015), the longstanding association with recovery may well be in recovery itself and this, in turn, can only be good news for British resorts. What is certain is that since the start of the 21st century, the British seaside resort has had a renaissance. Seaside towns around the country have seen numbers swell, not least due to recent changes in the value of the pound brought on by Brexit, but also through a growing demand for traditional holidays fit for modern consumers (*Financial Times* 2017). In 2015 seaside locations accounted for an impressive 39% of British holiday nights and this seems set to rise (Visit Britain 2017). The reasons for this are numerous, but resorts like Morecambe have become more fashionable. The designer Wayne Hemingway argues that there is a movement amongst young people to rediscover the coast and this is facilitated through a growing programme of coastal events (Hemmingway 2017), examples include Coastival in Scarborough and The Great Seaside Vintage Fair in Whitby. Indeed, Morecambe’s nostalgia-fuelled Vintage by the Sea festival, associated with Hemmingway, now attracts 40,000 visitors compared with 6,000 only three years ago (Deco Publique 2017).

**[images 7, 8 and 9]**

*The many layers of restoration and revival in relation to the seaside and its modern history fuel my making and research. My exhibition, ‘This Building for Hope’ at The Midland Hotel, Morecambe in October 2017, came from a desire to restore and highlight the optimism and exuberance evident in the original 1930s design of the building. The exhibition was also informed by research into Miami Seaside Moderne architecture, which I undertook during a visit to Miami Beach earlier that year. Following a hurricane in 1926, the majority of this resort, which had been swampland until 1885, was rebuilt in the Seaside Moderne style. Hundreds of hotels were built quickly and cheaply in the early 1930s, many of which referenced ship design, with features of masts, small windows and portholes. Horizontal racing stripes were also a common feature, suggesting movement towards a better and more progressive future.*

**[image 10]**

*I installed a series of ‘fountains’ within the interior of The Midland, which referenced the recurring motif on the façades of the 1930s seafront architecture on Miami South Beach. The fountain motif, halted at the point of spouting upwards, features heavily as a plaster relief on the coastal architecture and acts as a metaphor for the social attitude of optimism during the building’s construction. As a nation currently in the wake of austerity following financial crisis, and with considerable social and economic unease preceding the UK’s separation from the European Union, the fountains suggest optimistic assurance that our country has recovered from previous trauma. Yet, just as the exuberance embodied by the original fountain motif was subsequently shattered by World War II, they also serve to remind us of how quickly the world can change.*

*The printed and painted fountains were temporary objects interspersed within the hotel’s interior, suggesting an atmosphere of celebration and excitement through their shape, pattern and form. My aim was to enhance the atmosphere of revitalisation within the hotel’s interior by connecting with its past and reviving the air of optimism and excitement which accompanied the building’s original construction. In this way, the sculptures became new props within the existing stage set created by the original architect, Oliver Hill – an environment in which our main role is to enjoy ourselves.*

**[image 11]**

*The practice of taking and re-presenting architectural motifs, which may have gone unnoticed during our busy everyday lives, informs many of my artworks. I often reposition these motifs in new constellations to suggest an alternative narrative or a contribution to a larger history. Within the outdoor artwork, ‘Not so Nautical a Divide’, a 56-metre-long banner snaked along Morecambe’s promenade separating the beach from The Midland and vice versa. The circular portholes in the work are motifs taken from both The Midland and examples of Seaside Moderne architecture in Miami, with the patterns and base line referencing the waterline of the ocean liners which carried the architectural style between the two continents.[[3]](#footnote-3) The motifs, which otherwise adorn geographically distant buildings, are brought together to create one new artwork with an ambivalent shared history, which speaks of an international desire for optimism and release after the horrors of World War I but also the role of colonialism within the international development of modernist architecture.*

**[image 12]**

**The seaside in summary: resilience, reconnection, reverie and restoration**

The seaside resort has proven itself to be resilient. A nostalgia-fuelled seasideness represents the longstanding sociocultural meaning of these places, but it is not as static as its adoption by the vintage movement indicates. This seasideness, which informs the cross-generational appeal of the resorts with their various traditions, featured in advertising campaigns in the 1980s, when the Isle of Man Marketing Board used the slogan ‘Looking forward to going back’ (Dann 1994: 75). In addition, the underlying appeal of the coastline as a place to ‘reconnect’ (primarily with nature) goes back at least as far as the early days of the Industrial Revolution and is now of great interest to environmental psychologists. Such reconnection not only occurs with natural and aquatic environments and coastal activities, but also involves the nostalgic past and our memories of seaside visits (Jarratt and Gammon 2016). Both forms of reconnection are now seen as experiences which can positively affect our mental state and wellbeing. So, the seaside is indeed a place of recovery through reconnection. As commentators such as Kenneth Lindley (1973) and Fred Gray (2006) have pointed out, and as I have discovered through my research, this nostalgic, perhaps romantic, sense of seasideness is facilitated by not only the liminal setting, but also the built environment. Despite the prevalence of ‘dreary estates’ along the coast (Lindley 1973: 20),[[4]](#footnote-4) it is the seaside buildings and heritage of the seafront which really characterise these places and evoke a ‘seaside image’ (Lindley 1973: 19). Unique structures such as winter gardens, towers and piers, along with exotic architectural styles such as orientalism, all contribute to the ‘otherness’ of the seaside (Gray 2006).

*Of all seaside architecture, Seaside Moderne is the style which best reflects not only otherness, but also aspects of optimism, wellness and recovery with which the seaside is associated. This is one of the main reasons why I keep returning to this architecture in my work. It creates the most joyful set of parameters within which we can escape our everyday lives and, no matter how fleetingly, enjoy ourselves. As Miami Modern architect Morris Lapidus famously said, ‘If you create the stage setting and it’s grand, everyone who enters will play their part’ (Schellenbaum**2018).*

*This notion of architecture as a stage set for extraordinary activities and encounters is something which I’m particularly interested in. Seaside resorts are enhanced atmospheres, created for our enjoyment. As such, they could be, and often are, judged as false, frivolous and divorced from everyday life. The building façades of Seaside Moderne in Miami, built quickly and economically to be ready for the upcoming tourist season, were constructed from cheap plaster reliefs and intended to last for a maximum of twenty years. As with other seaside locations, the tropical paradise surrounding these building is also manufactured, with man-made sand dunes, imported palm trees and other exotic birds and foliage introduced to create an otherworldly environment. Yet, such artifice is what gives Seaside Moderne its power to enchant and enthral us.*

*The processes by which I make my work share a similar concern with façade; they are predominantly surface based – drawing, screen-print, painting and digital – and interventions, such as those within The Midland, are temporary and fleeting. ‘The Tropical Garden’, was a printed vinyl installation in the right-hand rotunda window of The Midland, which visually referenced the colourful and detailed façades of Seaside Moderne architecture in Miami. The work was influenced by photographs in the archive of The Wolfsonian of a ‘Tropical Garden’ in the Lincoln Road Mall, South Beach, Miami from the 1920s. The exotic garden diorama was lit up at night, as was my tropical garden, but, despite drawing people in to look, was physically inaccessible.*

**[image 13]**

*At the seaside there is always a tension between reality and artifice, the mundane and the fanciful, the everyday and escape – and this liminality is part of the seaside’s genus loci (Gray 2006; Jarratt 2015; Jarratt and Sharpley 2017; Walton 2000). By whatever means we experience this optimism and exuberance, however transitory, superficial or rose tinted, seaside resorts provide an important release and new perspective on the everyday and ourselves. It is perhaps due to this very deficiency of depth that we are able to momentarily connect to a semi-idealised version of the world, through a ‘tranquil reverie’ (Bachelard 1971: 99) and feel uplifted.*

1. *This optimism was severed by World War II, when pleasure architecture took on new utilitarian war roles. Morecambe’s The Midland Hotel became a hospital, Stonehaven Open Air Pool was a training pool and New Brighton Palace in New Brighton on the Wirral, an ammunition factory.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *See:* http://lookingbackmovingforward2014.wordpress.com*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *In 1925, US President Calvin Coolidge travelled to the Paris Industrial Arts Exposition and was impressed by examples of early modernist design and architecture in the design of the pavilions by Louis Dejean and Robert Mallet-Stevens. Coolidge decided that the US wanted to adopt this forward-looking design in New York, further spreading south to Miami.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lindley is referring to the mid-20th-century growth of suburban housing in coastal resorts, which became increasingly popular with commuters and retirees. He criticised speculative builders for their lack of sensitivity for the *locale*, singling out bungalows and semi-detached houses in particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)