

°surface

The Marina Leisure Centre

looking in from just beyond the shore toward the surface, the beginning of the land, at the town's perimeter.

[...]

Phrenetically flashing lights, glass boxes containing giant lollipops or soft toys cowering under a large steel talon. Tattoo parlours whose windows are filled with designs most likely to appeal to the 'walk-in' punter – Chinese symbols for truth, love, hate, destiny, and Mum; snarling British bulldogs donning coats adorned with the union jack; endless variations of the monochrome 'tribal' – all unify in a collective exclamation of leisure, pleasure, fun and frivolity: armatures of the code under which the seaside town operates.

No space is spared: spared space would mean a reprieve. In every gap between the prominence of arcades – The Mint, The Flamingo, The Golden Nugget, Show Boat, Gold Rush, Caesars Palace, Circus Circus – nestle appendages to these dominant flashing structures. Ice-cream parlours and donut huts sporting oversized simulacra of their chosen commodity or miniatures of popular fast food restaurants squeeze awkwardly into the gaps and assume a more modest guise than they usually bear. Underlying all of this is a soundtrack of dropping coins, disco music and men with high pitched quasi-American accents beckoning potential customers with UNBELIEVABLE ODDS and UNMISSABLE OFFERS and the Whaa Whaa!!!, Ding Ding!!!, Bwow Wow!!!, Chuck...Chuck.....Chuck of 10'000 fruit machines in chorus.

This glistening spectacle is Great Yarmouth's 'Golden Mile'. For all its bravado and over-exuberance it is still one of my favourite places to be; the experience it offers one of my favourite things. For me it's up there with bowling, the fruits of the forest thick shakes you used to be able to buy from ASDA's café and 1969 MGC GTs (the ones with chrome bumpers and multi-spoke wire wheels, preferably in 'Old English White'). It's the same perfectly uncomfortable mix of surface-level raw entertainment and trite nostalgia. In terms of the experiences of my hometown, it is on a par with the impromptu marketplace and the obligatory pastime of eating copious amounts of beef dripping fried chips from the chip stalls at its edge. It draws level with the oddly satisfying experience of feeling quite at home sharing a bench with perfectly spherical women and the diminutive pensioners that nestle between them for warmth. Being either half the size or a quarter of the age of everyone around you and feeling like somehow, you just fit.

The 'Golden Mile', for its very nature, its abounding preoccupation with self-image and surface appearance, hell bent on mastering techniques of seduction,

for me symbolizes the irrepressible charm of the seaside town that lays somewhere between beauty and desperation. Like the rest of the town behind it, it makes no pretence of grandeur, has no aspirations nor illusions of Middle-Classdom, it is what it is: an old peacock trying to entice a new mate with a tried and tested routine; a shimmering display of colour, light and sound.

Standing opposite the 'Golden Mile', halfway between the seafront's two celebrated Victorian piers, is the Marina Leisure Centre. Even here, a place where aesthetic harmony appears forcefully ousted and a general discordance embraced with open arms, this gargantuan structure has a striking incongruity. Four large brick and concrete slab geometric shapes overlap in an unglamorous tessellation to form the main body of the structure. These blocks are crowned at various points along the buildings apex with sets of ocean-blue bisected pyramids cast in aluminium. The whole thing sits on a platform that protrudes from the promenade like a giant angular helipad. Arguably, its form would be more comfortable amongst an architectural milieu of brutalism, perhaps on the edge of a hazy cityscape shrouded by smog, a fitting backdrop to the modern metropolis where an architecture of entropy presides.

Characterised by the inclination of all matter to gravitate and evolve toward a state of inertia and uniformity, entropy, taken in this way, speaks of a certain type of sameness, homogeneity of form and a similitude between one thing and the next. The Marina Centre, by and large fits this model. It complies with a genealogy of modernist design that in some people's view sapped the character and individualism from the modern building. However this case is not quite so simple. The architecture is more confused here and less willing to slot happily into one point in time; it evades such an easy categorization.

It is as if, as Robert Smithson remarks, it is "not built for the ages, but rather against the ages", as if this alien object did indeed come from outer space, from another unfamiliar time and place. Perhaps some distant planet far off in the cosmos where, for its austerity and vapid appearance, it didn't quite fit there either and from which it was banished only to fall to earth at another unwelcoming site. Perhaps the pyramid forms at its vertex, that jut dramatically skyward, emerged later as embodiments of a deep longing to return to that distant epoch and the planet from whence it came.

According to Smithson, with their use of "artificial materials" like plastic, and embellished ones such as lacquered aluminium, "instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future." Is The Marina Centre one of these "new monuments"? It does seem to speak of Flavin's "inactive history" where an objective present is missing and classical notions of time and space are deconstructed. However, I cannot help but feel that this particular monument once had a desire to fit, and, rather than inciting a romantic destabilization of temporality, it simply came at the wrong time.

So, how and why did the Marina Centre come to be? By 1970 it had become clear that the former Marina – a 1930's stone built bandstand dressed as a wild west

cow-town, a small car park and an unsightly open-air seawater swimming pool – had long since had its day. The need for regeneration seemed obvious. Between the years 1970 and 1977 the council invited interested parties to submit proposals for the development of the site and between these dates six proposals were heard and rejected. Notably three of these six proposals suggested that part of the redevelopment plan would consist of the building of a dolphinarium taking as a model such places as Skegness and Clacton-on-Sea. It was eventually concluded that what Great Yarmouth needed was a large scale sports and leisure centre with an indoor, heated swimming pool and so, in January 1979 work towards the Marina Leisure Centre commenced.

After just 29 months, in June 1981, the project was completed and the town was given access to a commodious sports hall, four squash courts, a fully equipped fitness room and multi-gym, restaurant, piazza, children's play area and "a free shape leisure pool" that was designed "to create an indoor beach environment with a warm Mediterranean type atmosphere".

Here one is encouraged to kick back and take in the vista of the real beach through the tinted glass at the margin of this mediated ideal. An actual beach, one with real sand complete with the mixed-in residues from past visitors and the bracing North Sea at its edge. Perhaps, in this moment of transcendence, the two are invited to coalesce as if the intention is that the relaxing participant somehow transposes their experience, circumventing their disbelief in the imitation they are offered. It seems unlikely that this game should be played in reverse however, and that the hardy beachgoers would be able to derive much comfort from looking in on this fragment of the paradisiacal hyperreal. One thing rings true here, "the dissociation from the real world is maximised, the island of utopia stands opposed to the continent of the real".

It was here that I learned to swim. I have memories of frantically paddling towards my Father as he uttered words of encouragement whilst shuffling gradually backwards so as to will on my continuation. It never occurred to me just how odd this constructed environment was and I never acknowledged the absurdity of it all. I just thought the wave machine and the heated beach area were complete novelties. I had no interest in Baudrillard or simulacrum, I didn't know who he, or what that was and I cared less than I do now. I was just a child learning to swim with his Dad.

The other mystery, aside from the logic behind creating an artificial beach just metres from the real McCoy, is the non-disclosure of specifics regarding the buildings design and architecture. This remains the one glaring omission from the Borough Council's optimistically titled overview of the project, "Innovations in Leisure – A Sea Front Redevelopment". There is little left out of the Council's comprehensive report. However, one is still left to merely speculate as to the true author of this grand monument. There is still no name mentioned in all of its 40 odd pages, no credence given to a master architect or chief designer. The inference in this document is that the design of the building somehow transpired as part of a collaborative effort between the council themselves and a sub-

contracted design and construction management company with the befittingly Sci-fic sounding name, “Module 2”.

An image arises of a gathering of tentative councillors and men in hi-vis vests and hard hats wearing varied styles of moustache, collected in a building that’s image is itself reminiscent of the modernistic vision of their collective design aspirations. Imagine a parsnip-soup-coloured rectangular table strewn with textbooks covering the 20th century’s imperious modes of architectural design. Naturally Le Corbusier would figure strongly, Ieoh Ming Pei would also make an appearance joined perhaps by his Bauhaus influences Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer and maybe Alison and Peter Smithson – designers of the Smithdon High School in the close-by Norfolk town of Hunstanton – would also be present. And what about art? Is not art a constituent of design and architecture? Does one not inform the other? But of course this is covered. The sway in such matters falls to the didactic interests of one particular councillor who passionately declares the importance of Robert Morris and speaks of his certain predilection for the lesser known ARGO collective of the 1970’s, extolling the “radical simplification of form” and their “visionary minimalist sensitivities”.

Such a fanciful narrative unfortunately seems unlikely. It is more probable that the motivations were more businesslike than artistic, more empirical than visionary. It is true, that when such projects are concerned, a kind of ‘functionalism’ is the adopted methodology. The concerns here are less aesthetic and more monetary. To corroborate this notion, the adopted procedure as stated in “Innovations in Leisure – A Sea Front Redevelopment” was to uptake a “Design and Construction Management Contract”. This would enable a much earlier commencement of work on the site, allow the management team to assist the design team with construction methods and techniques and effect a kind of ‘design as you go’ stratagem, expediting the process and ultimately reducing capital expenditure.

And so it would seem that this grand structure that sits so conspicuously, so boldly on the surface of Great Yarmouth’s initial stretch of land, came to be through fortuitous means. The celestial pyramids – abstracted representations of both the simulated waves within and the repetitious swell from those breaking on the shore beyond – simply came about by chance. The giant angular geometries on which they rest were formed out of spatial necessity, providing the most practical and economical accommodation of the facilities enclosed. The decision to counter an often considered cold and oppressive aesthetic true to brutalism, an architecture that would help “to foster the entropic mood”, with brightly coloured forms that speak more of the monuments built *against* entropy by the likes of Donald Judd, Forest Myers, Sol LeWitt and Robert Smithson, was again a contingent matter. Any recurrent commonalities in design are purely incidental, any historical allusions a result of mere happenstance.

In my view neither of the aforementioned scenarios hold much weight. The notion of an architectural resolution arrived at following the studious endeavours of council and construction contractors is too romantic. The idea that The Marina Leisure Centre came about as a result of pure fortune, as if an

understanding of 20th century design orthodoxy were innate to all of us, is just plain silly. So where does this leave us? It must be said that The Marina Centre has seen better days. Much of its purported 'attractions' are in desperate need of attention and its under usage over the past twenty years has brought about questions regarding its 'socially regenerative impact' and its continued use to a seemingly indifferent community. It is in danger of slipping into that shameful category of another redundant structure of an over-aspirational government. Some would struggle to find any redemptive qualities. I see it differently.

The Golden Mile is indeed one of my favourite places in the world and for all its apparent shortcomings The Marina Leisure Centre is an indispensable part of this. It punctuates this wild flurry of excesses with an unexpected and welcome point of composure and refrain. However its architectural design transpired, it is, in my mind, a work of refinement and conviction; one of those happy instances in which a confluence of awkward parts creates a sensation of visual equanimity. All too often the term 'white elephant' is bandied around when talking about the Marina Centre but, in reality, would a white elephant not be a rare and beautiful thing?