

Dream City: London's Pleasurescapes

London is in the throws of a pleasure revival. Its major landmarks and public spaces are being transformed by a growing appetite for new and thrilling ways to consume the urban environment. The London Eye, a 135-meter revolving observation wheel on the Southbank, offers spectacular panoramic views to nearly four million passengers each year. High-speed powerboats provide river tours of the capital with a white-knuckle twist. The O2 Arena in Greenwich invites us to 'clip on' and climb a vertigo-inducing suspended track stretching up and over its enormous domed canopy. At the Olympic Park, the looping red tower of Anish Kapoor's ArcelorMittal Orbit blurs the line between sculpture and thrill ride. And, most recently, on Tower Bridge itself—one of London's most iconic structures—engineered glass floors have been inserted into a high-level walkway, creating the giddy illusion of walking on air, 42 meters above the swirling river and the world-famous bridge below.

The proliferation of urban novelties in London and other cities reveals a collective desire for a more embodied experience of the modern city, for technological multisensory spectacles, which might reconnect us emotionally to a landscape often characterized as anonymous or dehumanized. But the idea of the city as technological playground has roots that stretch beyond Rem Koolhaas' thrilling Manhattanism or Cedric Price's Fun Palace. Londoners at the turn of the 20th century were no less hungry for exhilarating high-tech sensations; but, rather than delight in playful interventions in the everyday urban environment, they flocked to a new kind of purpose-built pleasurescape: the amusement park.

The early amusement parks, which appeared at exhibition sites and pleasure grounds around the country in the early 1900s, were enclosed sites combining thrill rides with the most popular entertainments of the day. Inspired by the pioneering parks at New York's Coney Island, these engineered otherworlds were designed to transport visitors away from the blandness of working life, to relax social etiquettes, and to encourage everyone to be spendthrifts for the day. The appeal of kinesthetic pleasures—of giant thrill machines, fast flowing crowds, and spectacular landscapes—transcended age, gender, and class boundaries, attracting people from all walks of life in vast numbers. Between 1900 and 1939, over 40 major parks operated across Britain and, by the outbreak of World War II, millions visited these sites each year.

In London, almost no physical trace of the golden age of British amusement parks survives, but the ghost of pleasures past manifests in some intriguing ways. The forgotten parks at Earl's Court, Olympia, Crystal Palace, Battersea, and Wembley forged new ideas about modern pleasure that have been hugely influential. The rise (and fall) of these great urban amusements resonates in the current enthusiasm for architectural pleasure seeking in the city, but the relationship is not straightforward. Both belong to a much older story about the shifting fortunes of pleasure—and leisure—since the Industrial Revolution.

Amusement Park: Rise & Fall

London's first purpose-built amusement park opened in 1908, conceived as a light-hearted sideline for visitors to Imre Kiralfy's new exhibition ground at White City, Shepherds Bush. In fact, the park's spectacular rides came to dominate the whole site and were reproduced in countless postcards and souvenirs. Descriptions of the 'mechanical marvels' dominated the

press. Readers of *The Times* were informed of long queues for the Flip Flap —an extraordinary ride with gigantic steel arms carrying passengers back and forth in a 200-foot arc—and of the endless cars crawling to the top of the Spiral Railway rollercoaster before “roaring and rattling, round and round to the bottom.”¹ The annual exhibitions held at White City were visited by millions, but it was the amusement park that captured the public imagination.²

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White City exploited a growing market for mechanical amusements in London, epitomized by attractions such as the Great Wheel at Earl's Court (1896–1907) and the Topsy Turvy Railway at Crystal Palace, Sydenham, a loop-the-loop rollercoaster which claimed to have entertained over 40,000 passengers during the 1902 season.³ But White City was London's first fully fledged amusement park, and its opening coincides with a brief but frenzied phase of investment in Coney Island-inspired ventures which reached far beyond the capital.

Just as riding a bicycle or shopping in a department store were identified as activities unique to the modern age, a trip to an amusement park became one way in which Edwardians across Britain could experience ‘being modern.’ The shock of modernity was experienced quite literally through a host of rides designed to bump, shake, and startle the body in novel and apparently enjoyable ways. The exhilaration associated with new technologies of speed, such as the motorcar and aeroplane, were well beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest few. By providing machine simulations of the latest modern wonders, the amusement parks inaugurated a socially inclusive culture of mechanized thrill-seeking, which continues to thrive today in endless variations.

The appeal of the parks continued to grow in the interwar years, with Londoners travelling out to the nearest seaside resorts for days spent at the new parks at Dreamland, Margate and the Kursaal in Southend. However, World War II marked a watershed and the postwar era saw what would be London's last great amusement park. In 1951, the Festival of Britain featured a pleasure garden with classic thrill rides—including a Water Chute and Big Dipper—installed alongside themed landscapes and nostalgic novelties. The amusement park outlived the Festival, remaining open throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.⁴

As new forms of entertainment emerged, Battersea—like parks around the country—struggled to substantiate their claims of cutting edge modernity. Many of the technological pleasures popularized by the early parks (flying, driving, and foreign travel) shifted from the world of public entertainment into the realm of private consumption. More people were able to afford first-hand experience of modern pleasures in the second half of the century, and so the demand for simulations of new technologies and exotic locations began to fade. Respectable pleasures were increasingly sought in personal consumption – of food, holidays, films, cars, and other newly available commodities.

A resurgence of debate about the effects of mechanized amusement sealed the fate of the amusement park. Influential cultural commentators such as Richard Hoggart warned of a new degenerate breed of working-class youth, “the hedonistic but passive barbarian,” who formed the target audience for mass entertainment.⁵ Filmmaker Lindsay Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953) depicts the cultural impoverishment of London's working classes through a series of grim, abstracted shots of Dreamland amusement park, and reflected a growing chorus of concern.⁶ Seaside parks faced dwindling numbers of domestic holidaymakers in

the postwar period and, with fewer profits to reinvest in rides and facilities, the amusement park industry as a whole went into decline.

The final blow came in 1972 when Battersea amusement park closed after a mechanical failure on the Big Dipper caused multiple fatalities. The reputation of the parks never really recovered and the Battersea tragedy signaled the end of an era. Across the country, wooden rollercoasters were demolished and major parks were forced to shut down.

The kinesthetic pleasures made popular by the early amusement parks were embraced and reinvigorated in the 1980s and 1990s by a new generation of out of town Disney-inspired theme parks in Britain. These continue to offer a sanitized, family-friendly version of the technology-for-fun formula, encouraging visitors to identify themselves as consumers of modern leisure. The shift from public pleasure seeker to leisure consumer suggests a momentous cultural transformation has been played out in the built environment over the last century.

The fact that Westfield, London's first mega mall, now straddles the 40-acre site once occupied by White City's ground-breaking amusement park reflects this wider process. The site's reincarnation as a giant shopping and leisure complex shows how radically our conception of public pleasure has altered, and hints at a rather more complex trajectory from Edwardian rollercoasters to today's urban thrills than at first appears.

The Pleasure Problem

Leisure, so the dictionary tells us, refers to activity outside work. To be 'at leisure' is to have time at one's disposal, free from occupation. The term has specific associations with class and aspirational social practices, often in a collective sense (the 'leisured classes'). Pleasure, on the other hand, is rooted in the phenomenological. It is the "condition or sensation induced by the experience or anticipation of what is felt to be good or desirable; a feeling of happy satisfaction or enjoyment; delight, gratification. Opposed to pain."⁷ Implicit within these definitions is a distinction between *practice* and *experience*: leisure is what you *do*, pleasure is what you *feel*. It is not surprising, then, that during the last two hundred years, distinct kinds of architectural experience have been produced by these distinct ideologies. The rise and fall of urban amusement parks illustrates how the world of popular entertainment provides a point of tension between the competing regimes of pleasure and leisure.

Shared notions of what might constitute pleasurable activities were transformed by the onset of modernity. Before the 18th century, when classical philosophy and Christian theology wholly rejected the earthly pleasures of the senses, pleasure was seen as being vulgar and self-destructive, to be avoided and self-denied. During the Enlightenment, however, popular pleasure-taking was sanctioned for the first time. Influential thinkers, such as Hobbes in the 1650s and Mandeville in the early 1700s, successfully disseminated the idea that self-fulfillment, rather than denial, was a natural human instinct and could be beneficial to the national well being. The 'new hedonism'—the moderate pursuit of pleasures—came to encompass both individual sensory gratification (drinking, eating, and sex) and more convivial practices (such as the shared enjoyment of theatre and public spectacles). The 18th century pleasure garden embodied many of the hallmarks of this newly accepted notion of public pleasure.⁸

The early Victorians continued the legacy of moderate public pleasures—in the shape of

parks, tea-drinking rituals, and a host of commercial entertainments—whilst simultaneously viewing the pleasure-seeking masses with a mixture of scorn and dread. Reacting against the excesses of their Georgian forbears, the Victorians looked upon most forms of mass merrymaking as breeding grounds for debauchery and social unrest.⁹ Malthus's highly influential doctrine of 'moral restraint' (1803), for example, identified the working classes as lacking cultivation and self-discipline, regressive traits borne out by their love of 'drunkenness and dissipation'.¹⁰ From the 1830s, the middle-class rational recreation movement sought to counter this predisposition towards dangerous bodily pleasures by promoting organized and edifying non-work activities.¹¹ And so the idea of leisure as a way of managing pleasure finds its first expression.

Simultaneously, an explosion of commercialized entertainment in industrial Britain allowed the masses to participate in a much wider range of commercial pleasure pursuits. Government authorities were anxious to regulate the new entertainment industries, whilst the entrepreneurs running them found that safe and respectable ventures were the most lucrative. By the 1890s, thanks to the mutual interests of businessmen and local authorities, the popular pleasures of circus, fairground, pub, and music hall did not seem so threatening – a shift which the early amusement parks took full advantage of.

The late 19th and early 20th century brought commodified, respectable, public pleasures to a larger and more diverse audience than ever before. At the same time, new notions of pleasure were emerging. International exhibitions, department stores and mechanized transport foregrounded the pleasures of visual spectacle and bodies in motion. The amusement parks combined the legacy of these 19th-century phenomena—transience, crowds, spectacle, and speed—with technologically produced multisensory experience. In doing so, they forged a new and specifically modern form of respectable pleasure.¹²

At the amusement park, the consumption of pleasure was mediated by mechanization. The 'gear and girder' aesthetic of the industrialized city was relocated to the world of recreation in the form of mechanical rides and, in particular, the rollercoaster.¹³ By 1910, mechanically produced multi-sensory stimulation—promoted as health giving, thrilling, transformative, and transcendent—was, for the first time, widely accepted as pleasurable.

Contemporary commentators were often bemused by the success of amusement parks. Rather than providing an escape from the urban spectacle, they offered a heightened version of it: speeding rides, repetitive noise, flashing electric lights, and transient crowds. But what many critics, then as now, failed to grasp is the possibility that these things might hold a powerful romantic allure of their own.

Visceral City

For Londoners a hundred years ago, visiting an amusement park was a defining counterpart to life in the modern metropolis. By the turn of the 20th century, when the fast pace of crowds, travel, and urban life had become normal, observers noted that city-dwellers were growing desensitized. The idea that people living in cities develop a protective mental layer against the over-stimulation of modern life was formulated by the work of sociologist Georg Simmel (*The Metropolis and Mental Life*, 1903), and later by Sigmund Freud's notion of the "stimulus-shield."¹⁴ These authors suggested that only extreme shocks could penetrate this protective psychological layer. Just as the amusement parks were becoming more popular, such shocks were increasingly deemed to be pleasurable.

Amusement park rides were thus stripped of all sensory buffers in order to reinject the sense of velocity and danger that had been diminished by upholstered, sealed railway carriages. The opportunity for interaction with strangers and physical intimacy on rides such as The Tickler, or in the quiet darkness of the River Caves, compensated for the indifference of the city street. The parks represented a unique space in which the stimulus-shield of modern life might be momentarily cast aside.

The search for intense experience—thrill seeking—was (and is) understood as a defining characteristic of the modern psyche. In 1908, a journalist described his experience on the Scenic Railway as “a psychological revelation” in which “the modern man [...] enjoys primitive emotions in a scientific fashion”.¹⁵ The amusement parks provided an escape from the anonymity of urban life. In doing so, they catered for a shared desire for sensuous and immediate engagement with life, a desire that continues to drive urban pleasure-seeking trends. Today, even as techno-pleasures are taken for granted and as the ‘shock’ of the modern city has been internalized, urban crowds continue to be drawn to environments in which a purely emotional intensity might still be found.

[P]leisure

The postmodern blurring of lines between work and play has rendered distinctions between leisure and pleasure redundant. No longer fearful of pleasures of the senses, sex, food, and shopping permeate our public spaces and dominate our non-work lives. In such a context, it is perhaps not surprising to see thrilling kinesthetic pleasures making a comeback. Rather than seeking out immersive pleasures, geographically separated from the everyday, we now find kinesthetic pleasures dotted around the city, inserted into familiar structures and enmeshed in the urban experience itself.

Epitomizing the current pleasure revival, Atelier Zündel Cristea, a French architectural studio recently published plans for the rebirth of Battersea Power Station, another icon of London’s skyline, as a museum of architecture, “a new site for architectural pleasures.” Designed to encourage playfulness, the scheme weaves a giant curving scaffold in and around the heritage-listed building, creating a network of paths between the exhibition spaces. In an audacious twist, these aerial walkways in turn provide tracks for an enormous rollercoaster running on top.¹⁶ The scheme pays homage to the hugely successful Festival of Britain Pleasure Gardens at Battersea in 1951. But it harks back even further, unwittingly perhaps, to an ambitious but unrealized Dream City project (complete with 200 foot electric tower and giant water chute) proposed in 1908 at the height of the Edwardian amusement park rush.¹⁷

<Insert Figure 3>

Pleasure-seeking Londoners will, unfortunately, have to look elsewhere for their next urban thrill fix. In 2012, the Power Station was bought by a Malaysian consortium developing the site into luxury residential, office, and retail space. Economic forces and the exponential rise of real estate value in London dictate that no developer would ever seriously contemplate a space dedicated entirely to fun. Instead it has become almost mandatory for landmark projects to weave a pleasure narrative into their sales pitch. At the Power Station, this is represented by the inclusion of a glass elevator transporting visitors to the top of a reconstructed chimney from which two floors of apartments on the roofs of the turbine annexes can be surveyed.

Despite the trumpeting of each new novelty as bigger, more innovative, more exhilarating than the last, we remain timid in our pleasure seeking. The real delight that the best architectural interventions have brought to the city is undeniable. But, held up to the otherworldly adventures pioneered by the Edwardian amusement parks, today's urban pleasures appear fragmented and fleeting.

¹ 'At the Franco-British Exhibition', *The Times* (June 9, 1908), 8

² Javier Pes, "Kiralffy, Imre (1845–1919)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [Online].

³ From the prospectus of Topsy Turvy Pleasure Railway Southend on Sea Ltd (April 17, 1903), The National Archive, BT 31/10260/77063.

⁴ Mary Banham & Bevis Hillier (eds) *Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain, 1951* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), 121–124. Over 18 million people visited the amusement park after it passed to private ownership in 1954. "£1m improvement scheme for Battersea funfair," *The Times* (March 24, 1971), 3.

⁵ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 205.

⁶ Erik Hedling, *Lindsay Anderson: Maverick Film-Maker* (London: Cassell, 1998).

⁷ "leisure, n.," and "pleasure, n.," Oxford English Dictionary Online (September 2014).

⁸ See Roy Porter's chapters "Enlightenment and Pleasure" and "Material Pleasures," in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 1996). Also see Jonathan Conlin (ed.), *The Pleasure Garden, From Vauxhall to Coney Island 1660* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁹ The popular cultures that evolved around the sensory pleasures of drinking and sex were the cause of particular alarm amongst Victorian reformers. See James Walvin, *Leisure and Society 1830-1950* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1978), 33–46; Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 47.

¹⁰ Cited in Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32–34.

¹² Lauren Rabinovitz discusses new ideas about pleasure in the context of American exhibitions in "Urban Wonderlands: Siting Modernity in turn-of-the-century Amusement Parks," *European Contributions to American Studies* 45 (2001): 89.

¹³ I have borrowed this phrase from Cecilia Tichi, who uses it to describe the industrialized landscape of 19th-century America in *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (London: University of North Carolina, 1987), xiii.

¹⁴ See David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 73–4; James Strachey (ed.) *Sigmund Freud: Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press & Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1974), 20–22

¹⁵ "A Fortune in a Thrill," *The Sunday Chronicle* (Manchester) (August 23, 1908).

¹⁶ Atelier Zündel Cristea, <http://www.zundelcristea.com/architecture/battersea-power-station> (accessed December 8, 2014).

¹⁷ "The Dream City," *World's Fair* (March 14, 1908), 10.