

Painting the New Town: embodied experience, embodied memory and phenomenal transparency

André Stitt

Cardiff School of Art & Design, Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK

Author Biography

André Stitt is Professor of Performance and Interdisciplinary Art at Cardiff School of Art and Design, Cardiff Metropolitan University. He teaches Fine Art and has been Programme Director of Time Based Practice and Master of Fine Art. His research interests focus primarily on investigating transdisciplinarity through performance, painting, and installation art.

Abstract

This paper considers how phenomenological experiences of Britain's post-war New Towns, and the work made by artists through residential placements have had an impact upon the development of my recent painting practice.

Through a practice-led response to the site-specific work of Victor Pasmore in Peterlee, William Mitchell in Cwmbran, Mike Cumiskey in Skelmersdale and the experience of art embedded in Harlow New Town I identify the importance of the contribution made by artists to the New Town environment.

I use this context to investigate how I have developed an experimental approach to painting as a subjective interface between material and memory whereby a transformation of engagement with the New Town environment has occurred. This paper will show that through an integration of abstraction, gestural application, hard edge construction, transitional layering and transparency, embodied experiences of the New Towns under discussion can be revealed via the act of painting with the resulting work of art as document of the experience under discussion.

Keywords

New Towns, painting, abstraction, phenomenology, embodied experience

The municipal centres of the lost new towns of Britain are celebrated through utopian memorials for a future that didn't arrive.

The architecture of the military bunker is transposed, reconfigured and positioned as quasi-monumental edifice.

Monumental state sponsored 'Spomenick' sculptures become places of forgetting rather than places of remembering.

Social housing residents committees appropriate public sculpture as testimony for a nostalgia of repression.

The civic centre of Craigavon in Northern Ireland is triangulated with Victor Pasmore's 'Apollo Pavilion' in the new town of Peterlee and Alan Boyson's 'dark pyramid' of Skelmersdale.

William Mitchell's postwar concretopia becomes the lost dream of the cosmic soviet and a territorial memory of teenage years in Cwmbran.

The concrete art contagion of Mike Cumiskey sign-posts a way out of the dark and into the light as workers are delivered through decorative underpasses to the post-industrial concourse of their dreams.

Harlow in Essex, once known as 'pram city', becomes the mother of neo-corporate sculpture biennales.

British architectural brutalism and new town planning created an environment that is now being reconsidered as an era defining 'social experiment unique in the history of the world.' (Self 1972) I will explore through personal and subjective experience Britain's New Town planning and modernist architectural legacies as a visionary utopian embodiment of progressive civic, municipal, social and cultural liminality and how these experiences have contributed to my recent painting practice.

I will present examples of my own engagement with the materiality of the built environment and its abstract displacement through painting along with examples of engagements by other practitioners who were artists in residence in specific New Towns during the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies.

In particular, I will focus on the New Towns of Harlow in Essex, Peterlee in Durham, Cwmbran in South Wales, and Skelmersdale in Lancashire.

It is not in the scope of this text to produce a study of social and environmental issues that may be associated with Britain's post-war New Towns.

The New Town experience was predicated on a post-war reconstruction that allowed for optimistic dreams and potential futures to be created. However, this could also be converted into its opposite through dystopian experiences of a potential future that didn't arrive. I suggest that it is in the very nature of integrating these experiences through art that allows simultaneity to emerge and a transformation of engagement with the New Town environment to occur.

For the purposes of the current text I will focus on how art was embedded in the New Town and post-war modernist architectural space and how phenomenological and embodied experiences of this art and the places it inhabits can be translated into painted artworks. I will show from a subjective perspective how painting demonstrates the aesthetic nature of the New Town and how this can be used to describe ways in which visual art practice can facilitate an understanding of experience as embedded and embodied.

History: Out of the Blue

(The) New Town seemed all new at first; the ongoing construction – and the self-containing pattern of squares and tunnels and bridges and fields – made it seem, to a small child at least, as if nothing had been there before. The world before we imagined, was all just salt air and emptiness. [...] Everything we needed, everything we knew, was right there in concrete and chipboard. [...] My childhood was about seeing things emerge out of nowhere, seeing buildings go up every day, as we played among the cement mixers, and seeing history come out of the blue. (O'Hagen 1995: 70-71)

The Scots novelist Andrew O'Hagen recalls a formative experience of being enveloped by the construction of the New Town he grew up in (Irvine in Scotland), in what can be described as an embodied experience. Thomas Csordas suggests that

‘embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience’. (Weiss, Haber 1999 : 143) Although O’Hagen describes the New Town through visual metaphor we are in no doubt that this is arrived at by a physical mediation of the environment in his description of the emergence of the built environment through construction. This embodied experience of being part of a world within a world, a sense of new space and place, and the future to come is indicative of a general condition associated with Britain’s New Town utopias. I will return to experiences of embodiment relative to specific New Towns later, but first I will discuss the historical context of the New Town. It was modern, it was new, and it was the future, and that future began at the start of the twentieth century with a man called Ebenezer Howard.

Back to the Garden

Ebenezer Howard had a simple and radical idea for an industrialised society as it entered the twentieth century; he advocated the building of garden cities with the aim of reducing the alienation of society from nature. His treatise *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* published in 1898 proposed an ideal for planned living offering the best of the town and the country whereby people could live harmoniously together in a planned bucolic idyll. His was a utopian future vision influenced by social reformer Henry George (*Progress and Poverty*, 1883) where cleanliness and industry could co-exist with open spaces. His ideas gained immediate attraction from trade union groups, the Fabian Society and wider political groups that led to the foundation of the Garden Cities Association. (Harwood 2016) A cross between Karl Marx and William Morris Howard’s vision of ‘a clean and green city in which small townships of 10,000 people would flourish in clean air, privacy and space’ (Hanley 2007: 57) was eventually realized through the building of Britain’s first garden city at Letchworth, Hertfordshire, in 1903. Letchworth provided the model for future New Towns by advocating the creation of a town centre, shops, factories, residences, civic centres and open spaces and where appropriate an agricultural belt. The architecture however was more Arts and Crafts than modern with town planning based on a circular design, indeed Letchworth includes Britain’s first road traffic roundabout. Miniature versions sprang up as garden suburbs and garden villages in the early twentieth century and in particular around the time of the First World War. These

included Rhiwbina in Cardiff, and several workers garden villages such as the Lever Brothers Port Sunlight, in the Wirrel on Merseyside, Roundtree's model village near York and the Bournville village, Birmingham.

The second true Garden City was Welwyn Garden City (1920). However, although Welwyn was successful, twenty miles south in London and elsewhere during the interwar years the future was held in stasis with little planned social housing or construction taking place. City slums remained with only occasional cheap housing estates such as New Addington providing social housing. Howard had envisioned 'a vast network of co-operative communities in which every citizen has an equal stake.' (ibid.) This was hardly the case when finally Welwyn was marketed as a middle class commuter suburb, entirely at odds with the garden city ideals of a self-reliant city.

Post-War : End of Stasis

From 1940 onwards the Independent Town and Country Planning Association brought pressure to bear on the government to consider post-war reconstruction. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning was established in 1943 with the Country Planning Act of 1944 allowing authorities outside London the power to create land for the purposes of the resettlement of blitzed towns. In 1946 a New Towns Act was passed and in 1947 the Town and Country Planning Act was passed by the post-war Labour government preparing the way for a comprehensive development plan for Britain's New Towns.

It was hoped that, if orchestrated carefully enough, the New Towns would not act as mere dormitories for the cities they were built to relieve, but would have their own economic infrastructure and their own amenities, providing the benefits of city life for millions of people on a more manageable town sized scale. (Hanley 2007: 76)

New Towns developed in three waves. The first wave (1946-1950) was intended to alleviate housing shortages following the Second World War, creating a green belt around London. This first wave included Harlow in Essex, Peterlee in Durham and Cwmbran in South Wales. The second wave (1961-1964) was likewise initiated to alleviate housing shortfalls and included Skelmersdale in Lancashire (designated in

1961). The third and last wave of new towns (1967–70) allowed for additional growth. I will explore these four particular New Towns later.

New: Modern: Brutal

‘Is this concrete all around, or is it in my head’

(Bowie 1972)

The defining visual experience and physical style of newly-planned environments in post-war Britain was a modernist architecture based on the use of concrete that became known as ‘New Brutalism’. The French term for rough-cast concrete is *béton brut*, a material that Le Corbusier had used to striking effect in his influential *Unité d’Habitation* at Marseille (1947-1952).

In this post war period the New Brutalists ‘were an architectural analogue to the ‘angry young men’, known also to be of ‘redbrick extraction’ and a product of the new class mobility’ (Hatherley 2008) They saw themselves as being part of a social and civic reconstruction bringing a delayed international modernism to Britain. As a style International Modernism had been formulated in the 1920’s by architects Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and others. The British version in style and material was the product of a particular time and place: the mood of the immediate post-war era with its privation and austerity and its sense of building a new future along socialist principles. It is also interesting that there may have been an unconscious assimilation of material and form and that ‘the temporal gap between bellicose bunkers and the civilian buildings that took their cue from them was a mere few years.’ (Meades 2014)

The provocation of Brutalism was ‘its intent to at once produce an earthy, everyday style for the use of the proletariat [...] and at the same time create avant-garde, shocking images, to be a brick-bat flung in the public’s face.’ (Banham 1996:9)

It is the experience of this provocation and the intervention, integration and impact by artists upon the built environment that I wish to explore next.

I will now consider experiences of four New Towns: Harlow in Essex, Peterlee in Durham, Cwmbran in South Wales, and Skelmersdale in Lancashire and their impact upon the development of my painting practice. I will consider the importance of Harlow as a formative site for the integration of physical artworks and explore my own responses made through painting to Harlow and to each of the other New Town’s

legacy of residential placements by the artists Victor Pasmore, William Mitchell, and Mike Cumiskey.

Harlow: Sculpture Town

Frederick Gibberd, Harlow's architect-planner, had envisaged its civic centre as 'home to the finest works of art' (Gibberd, Harvard, White 1980) as a result the Harlow Art Trust was established in the early 1950's. Initial acquisitions included works by Henry Moore, F.E. McWilliam, Elisabeth Frink, Lynn Chadwick and Barbara Hepworth. To date eighty-four free standing sculptures have been acquired and placed throughout the town resulting in a sculpture trail of approximately twenty-five miles. In 2010 Harlow became the world's first 'Sculpture Town'. The initial acquisition of sculpture in the early fifties whereby the more abstract or 'art brut' forms of modernist art was balanced with more traditional figurative work created a healthy acceptance understood in the context of a new modern town.

Point Block: Painting, Phenomenology and Embodied Experience

Human scale comes into focus if one walks the Harlow sculpture trail rather than driving the interconnected roads. The experience of being in-between in a kind of liminal network of paths, greenspace, trees and shrubbery separated from road traffic creates spacial transition, ambiguity, and even unease. Unfamiliarity of environment and the intermittent surprise of sculptures dotted in and around the town can also contribute to a sense of disorientation. Things seem out of place and inexplicably in collision due to the placement of art in strange and unexpected places. The familiar (all New Town looks the same?) becomes unfamiliar and can be unsettling as sculptures are periodically repositioned and sometimes not where they are indicated on the map.

I had visited Harlow in 1982 when the sculpture 'Solo Flight' by Antanas Brazdys was newly erected on a high earth bank overlooking the busy First Avenue. On a visit

in 2015 taking a walk along the sculpture trail I came upon ‘Solo Flight’ again, revealed this time as a rather large, banal and gaudy metal sculpture that now looks like the eighties felt: all show, no substance and at odds with its surroundings. This rather confrontational work created a sense of *deja-vu* in me that was overwhelming, it was if the past (1982) had been superimposed upon the present creating an inexplicable sense of disorientation. I had an immediate urge to exit the sculpture trail in order to find my way back to the town centre and duly walked up a side road. As I walked up a road called Mark Hall North I saw a higher building standing alone through the trees which also felt at odds with its surroundings and the low-level housing. What I discovered down another small side street was The Lawns, Britain’s first tower block. Known as a ‘point block’, the Lawns was a modest ten story building opened in 1951 as an official event of the Festival of Britain. Based on Swedish design ‘The block is really a rather pretty fan shape, with each floor having its own balcony. The paintwork looks fresh and it seems in good nick for a festival-era building.’ (Grindrod 2013) I experienced a tangible a sense of relief on encountering the reassuring weight and volume of The Lawns within the landscape. The experience in Harlow remained with me and seemed indicative of an embodied experience in relation to the architecture, psychic atmosphere and transitional spaces I had encountered in other New Towns. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to identify embodied experience as the specific role of the body as mediator between the world and self. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach was based on structures of subjective experience and consciousness. Phenomenology allows us to explore our relationship to the world using *all* our senses. Central to this is the argument that the body is a form of consciousness underpinning all action. Merleau-Ponty, argues that ‘there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945)

Back in my studio and as a response to my experience in Harlow I set about making a series of paintings based on the sense of solidity, weight and grounding I had experienced on encountering The Lawns and in reaction to my negative experience encountering the work of Antanas Brazdys. The work was carried out quickly with a large square brush, using oils on sheets of thick cartridge paper. [Fig. 1]

I laid down muted colour bands of green, Paynes grey and grey/blue as if I was

building something firm and solid that in turn alluded to the cultivated landscape and build environment I had encountered. An element of certainty was also attained by the swift application of paint through gestural hand movement to denote the emotion experienced. I applied thick oil paint creating moments that simultaneously anchored the action in the present while integrating it with my subjective past experience. The act of painting seemed to create a connection to an art historical past riddled with the actions, personalities, and excesses associated with the primal sources and occasions of abstract gestural painting. It was as if I was living out a fairly controlled ritual in order to achieve a catharsis based on an approximation of painting that may have taken place in 1951 when Harlow and The Lawns was built. I had the sensation of being involved in a completely, unified, automatic and bodily experience during the act of painting that had a peculiar atemporal resonance. The process of painting in this instance was a response to a specific New Town environment (the site positioning of sculpture artworks and The Lawns building in Harlow and my own subjective disassociation within that environment) and underscored by abstract and non-representational operations; emphasis placed on being in and of the world, and of an embodied experience that suggested relationships being fluid and complex and that the subject was constituted within those relationships.

The embodied experience (and its conversion into a painted construction) in Harlow was also an embodied memory of a previous visit and by extension all the embodied experiences I have had in New Towns and housing estates. The architect Juhani Pallasmaa suggests as much when he asserts that ‘an embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or place. We transfer all cities and towns we have visited, all places we have recognized into the incarnate memory of our body.’ (Pallasmaa 2005) As Pallasmaa indicates, memory and recall are also embodied and therefore we might assume a link with the phenomenology of embodied experience as it is evident that phenomenology as theorized by Merleau-Ponty situates the body as a site of experience and corporeal knowledge.

Peterlee: The Apollo Pavilion

In 1955 Victor Pasmore was invited to collaborate with architects Frank Dixon and Peter Daniel on a new scheme at Sunny Blunts, a housing zone in Peterlee New Town in Durham. Pasmore was to see architecture, and spacial problems raised in urban

design and landscape as a way of reaching dimensions in space and time that he could also transfer to his painting practice 'so that the two became reciprocal. Then afterwards, as my painting changed and became fluid, linear and more spontaneous, so the change was transferred to the process of layout at Peterlee which in turn became fluid and linear.' (Pasmore 1967)

The land at Sunny Blunts falls sharply and a small lake was created at a plateau edge where the land dips. Here a sculptural feature was proposed, 'big enough to dominate the scene'. (Pasmore 1971:4-5) The Sunny Blunts Pavilion designed in 1967 was then named the Apollo Pavilion [Fig. 2] on its completion in 1970 in honour of Apollo XI space mission and the first man landing on the moon. The work is a massive cantilevered horizontal concrete construction raised on slab *pilotis*. The work spans the small lake and acts as a bridge through which one can walk, its complex form enhanced with signature Pasmore abstract patterning.

The function Pasmore stated later was not only as an object to look at:

'but also as a precinct through which one could physically enter and walk through. For this reason the Sculpture takes the form of a two-storied architectural construction or pavilion that carries through it, across the end of the lake as it falls into the Dene, the main footpath from Sunny blunts to South West 3 and the Town Centre. This means that the Sculpture is not an isolated feature which can only be seen on a special or accidental visit. On the contrary, it articulates and identifies the lake and at the same time, forms the focus of a converging junction in the public footpath system which directs the pedestrian across the valley to other part of the town.' (ibid.)

The structure was badly vandalized during the nineteen-eighties and suffered from general negative perceptions of New Town environments, public art and of brutalist architecture. It was eventually saved by a local pressure group who secured Heritage Lottery Funding for its restoration. It was listed Grade II* in 2011. (Harwood, E., Davies, J. 2015)

Pasmore's work suggests modern space (and space travel) as a transitional and liminal experience. The Apollo Pavilion and the New Town it inhabits invites participation by creating a threshold between environments. It achieves this through a physical bridge construction that has to be traversed thereby allowing an experience of

liminality to occur. This embodied experience also emphasizes transition between the present and the future and in a physical and literal sense as an architectural and transitional overlap between the inner and outer. In the Apollo Pavilion as in his other work Pasmore sought to unify the dualism of the objective and subjective – the concrete and the irrational or metaphysical in Pasmore's view. (Crippa, E. 2016) This was reflected in 'a more dynamic conception of the real world which unites object and observer' (Pasmore, V. 1953)

As with much of the New Brutalism in post-war Britain the clear modernist concrete lines of Pasmore's work also suggests an avant-garde lineage stretching back to 'the constructivist tradition (that) also had to do with a complex experience of perception and understanding and with the realization that, in life as in art, onlookers are not merely spectators: they actively and creatively partake in the construction of their own experience.' (Ernest, J. 1966:149) Pasmore's Apollo Pavilion has echoes of Soviet Constructivism, the Suprematists, and the Futurists. In particular there is more than a hint of the abstract Suprematist painter Vladimir Malevich's models; 'three dimensional interstellar architecture [...] much of (which) was literally science fiction.' (Hatherley 2008:62) The preoccupation of the Soviet avant-garde with a 'proletariat' participation in the revolution of everyday life included a fixation on space travel and with creating future worlds through 'its aspirations to the interstellar.' (ibid) The space-race binary of this and its conversion into a monumental artwork is evident in Pasmore's Apollo Pavillion.

Monument: Painting and Embodied Memory

After visiting the Apollo Pavilion in 2014 I produced a series of small oil paintings on canvas. **[Fig. 3]** These were executed much in the same way as the 'Point Block' paintings although this time I used linseed and a heavy damer resin as a medium with oil paint on a gloss enamel ground. I also chose a cotton duck canvas weave that lent resistance to the application which produced a weightiness and macerating reverberation to the brush strokes. This was important as I wanted the performance of the stroke from the fully loaded brush to have a transitional moment of resistance within the weave of the fabric in order to convey a simultaneous embodied and liminal experience evident in the exposure of the red enamel ground. The physicality of the paint as an abstract material in itself 'but never leaving the clotted body'.

(Elkins 1999) Using various sizes of flat-brush I applied simple heavy strokes to produce a series of architectural forms placed in an indeterminate space. This time the process was based on an accumulation of embodied experiences and memories of the Apollo Pavilion and a transference of similar architectural forms to produce various versions of brutalist structures that had more in common with large concrete monuments or military installations. The painting gesture was still central to how the work was perceived in that traces of human presence and subjectivity illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena and to explore and understand the experience from an embodied perspective.

However, I felt that the initial paintings were only partially successful as I wanted to get beyond an approximation of volume and form and to allow a further transition or transformation to occur. It was with this in mind that throughout 2015 I returned to the Apollo Pavilion experience and a perceived relationship in Pasmore's work and in 'brutalism' in general to the monumental. As a result of an interim period of experimentation with different paint applications I decided to execute two large scale works (200 x 300cm each) [Fig. 4] using contemporary synthetic paint. With the commercial availability of acrylic paint in the nineteen-fifties I wanted to place paint as a material in the context of the period of post-war reconstruction therefore I started working in acrylic.

I employed a similar gestural movement and application as before however, speed and execution was more important with working time accelerated due to the faster drying time for acrylic paint. Unlike oil which can be worked upon over several days the execution of painting in acrylic and on this scale had to be quick and precise. The size of the surface area meant the act of making the work was physically very demanding and felt more like carrying out major building or construction. The performative aspects required to execute the work relied upon 'embodied memory' to reenact experiences of transition and substance relative to Pasmore's pavilion but also to a history of post-war brutalist sculptural monuments. This shared a commonality with the planning and design of Britain's New Towns, military installations and with large concrete monuments such as the state sponsored 'Spomenicks' (Neutelings 2015) in Yugoslavia and other satellite Soviet states. The two large paintings produced emphasized mental and physical perception and, flatness as an illusion, yet in their

occupation of space might also evoke the monumental thereby alluding to Pasmore's work.

Cwmbran: The Concrete King Cometh

Cwmbran in South Wales was established in 1949 and was still proclaiming 'where the future is happening now' as late as 1972. (Cwmbran 1972) Unlike a view held by inhabitants of some other New Towns where the promised future never seemed to arrive, Cwmbran seems to have been a success story having reached its target population in 1986. The town centre with its bustling public thoroughfares, shopping outlets and entertainment precincts was completed in 1959. It is here that William Mitchell the 'go to' man for 'concretopian' artwork achieved one of his better integrations of concrete artwork and environment. It is here in Cwmbran that transitional space and liminality are revealed through the application of 'in-situ' concrete.

Mitchell's work is ubiquitous throughout Britain often consisting of a kind of ersatz approximation of modernist sculptural form embellished with a faux-ethnic decoration that might be Mayan or alien codices from a parallel universe. As an enthusiastic maverick, there was no one working in the post-war period who so thoroughly integrated art and architecture with a kind of unrestrained unpredictability that in the number of works produced leaves one breathless. The extremes in William Mitchell's work are extraordinary, compare Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, The Corn King and Spring Queen at Wexham, Buckinghamshire, the Hockley Flyover, Birmingham, Minute Men, Salford University, Curzon Cinema, London, Swiss Cottage Library, London, Montgomery Barracks, Aldershot, the Kirkby Library, the Wool Secretariat, Ikley, The Lea Valley Water Company murals, the largest single cast ever undertaken at that time and featured on the front cover of Concrete Quarterly magazine in Winter 1964. Literally hundreds of major public art works were produced of which some have now been grade listed and some like the 'Spirit of Brighton' known locally as 'The Monstrosity' have been demolished.

Mitchell's was a practice that thrived on manic energy with work created at a frantic pace and through a wild array of experimental methods and materials. 'As part of this experimental period, I was encouraged to produce all manner of strange things to show the potential of various materials - concrete, wood, plastics, bricks, glass, metal and so on'. (Mitchell 2017) His versatility was first recognized in *The Times* colour supplement article 'The Colourful Crusade of William Mitchell', published in 1962, where it was noted that one of his achievements was the invention of 'a perfectly democratic, classless form of decoration'. (Russell, J. 1962:15) This proved popular with, local authorities, architects and the construction industry responsible for the rebuilding of post-war Britain. However, Mitchell's 'art-brut' was often seen as a kitsch version of 'modern art' and as a consequence it was at the time derided by the arts establishment where it was contemptuously referred to as 'architectural knitting'. (Pereira 2009)

Theo Crosby ridiculed Mitchell's work [...] at the International Union of Architects Congress in 1961, however LCC architect Oliver Cox defended the work by comparing it to chain mail as he thought it was practical and decorative at the same time. Yet Crosby criticised his work again (showing a photograph of Willowbrook Estate) in the *Studio International* article 'A Kind of Urban Furniture' written in 1972. (ibid)

Mitchell's approach was to work closely with architects and contractors from the start of a project. He accrued an extensive knowledge of construction and utilized deeply modelled concrete, variously textured and cast against chunky sections of polyurethane and formwork acting as moulding. 'Concrete was an evolving technology and its use artistically was experimental' (Mitchell 2013:109) Mitchell experimented with all manner of moulding, textured treatments, hammering, layering and insertions. In Cwmbran there is an economy present not often seen in his other works. The austere external walls of the town centre lift tower 'embellished with a horizontal pattern made up of hemispherical reliefs between bands of vertical striations' (Mitchell 2103) pulls the viewer's senses skyward and up into space.

[Fig. 5]

The sense of trajectory is nothing short of cosmic and recalls the 'aspirations to the interstellar' (ibid) found in Soviet constructivist architecture albeit with Mitchell's

allusion to hybrid Mayan sun worship. The whole edifice creates a sense of lift off in contradiction to its mass. This is transitional space created through verticality, and a sense of liminality through velocity. Velocity is evident too in Mitchells concrete relief work that forms a transitional conduit into the town. Cwmbran Drive [Fig. 6] the main artery into the town has earthy concrete retaining walls along each side. This essentially creates a funnel with the moulded textural surfaces creating a sense of dynamic velocity that propels us into the hub of the New Town and into a parallel universe where we encounter the future happening now.

A Parallel Universe: Painting and the Transformation of Everyday Life.

Mitchell's works were not only positioned as free-standing sculptures and cast wall reliefs in external spaces but could also be evidenced throughout internal spaces in municipal buildings, offices, libraries, housing complexes, and civic environments in Britain. Throughout 2015-16 I started to create modular pieces that could be configured to suit various environments based on the approach to experimentation evident on Mitchell's work. The shift in material application that had started to take place through the Apollo/Monument works was developed into an interest in how painting could be experienced as installation through wall relief and floor environments. Throughout this period, I produced hundreds of paintings of various sizes on plywood panels with variable depth that could be stacked on the floor or attached to walls to create variable density, depth, arrangement and configuration. Each panel or module was a painting that explored various paint applications to create textured surfaces and images through a combination of the gestural mark and hard edge abstraction that alluded to an imaginary built environment.

Industrial enamel paint was often combined with oil or acrylic paint to create slippage and separation within masked areas. Bright high gloss paint was set next to matt or mute colours to create tonality and as a built environment started to develop on the floor of my studio other objects and materials that might correspond to organic forms or discarded residues would appear. The combination of materials was used to establish a topography for an imaginary future, or indeed where that 'future is happening now' perhaps in a parallel universe. In locating my embodied experience in the environments of Britain's New Towns and converting these experiences through

painting as three-dimensional objects in space I wanted to draw attention to a utopian vision inherent in post-war reconstruction. The ambition was for work that might create a sense of recognition counterbalanced by a sense of timelessness, loss, longing, disconnection and even melancholy. The work 'Municipal Wall Relief for a Residential Housing Complex in a Parallel Universe'(2015) [Fig.7] explored how art proposed for a specific civic environment might by its alien presence allow for the possibility of a certain 'infra-ordinary' attentiveness to take place. This phenomenological approach was also suggested by 'Synthetic Model for a Post-Capitalist Economy in A Parallel Universe'(2015-16). [Fig. 8] Here as in my previous piece I was interested in making large-scale work based on an extended painting practice with works that seemed to arrive as if from another time and place (late twentieth century New Towns in Britain): as a potential dissident space where all eras might co-exist; and that through a process of transitional superimposition of place and memory the paintings produced might contribute towards the transformation of everyday life.

Skelmersdale: The Regular Shape of Forever

Skelmersdale in Lancashire or 'Skem' as it's known to locals reached its fiftieth anniversary in 2011. Situated in West Lancashire, just a short distance from Ormskirk and Wigan, 'Skelmersdale was designed to house the overspill population of Merseyside. The result is a town ordered by loosely alphabeticised housing projects, vast green space and looping roads which contain no traffic lights - only roundabouts'. (Guy, P. 2016) While some would condemn 'Skem' as 'a planning disaster' (ibid) there is also evidence of utopian aspirations through the integration of housing, civic amenities, dedicated pedestrian and cycle paths and the separation of traffic and green-space. It is also in 'Skem' that you will find the 'gold meditation dome' home of the European Centre for Transcendental Meditation (TM) Utopian Village. The founder of (TM) Maharishi Mahesh Yogi became spiritual advisor to The Beatles in 1967. The Yogi was later excommunicated by the group, it is therefore ironic that the TM centre is thirteen miles from Liverpool, the birthplace of The Beatles. An attentiveness associated with 'TM' might be reflected in embodied experiences associated with 'Skem'. Paul Farley recalls a particular sense of being within and of the environment when he writes of growing up in Skelmersdale.

[...] endlessly waiting for something to happen, meant it was possible to develop an attentiveness to the world around you, the infra-ordinary, [...] the oddness, and excitement of being in such a new place, [...] I became quite obsessed with the ground that lay under the weight of those concrete shapes and all that newness. (Farley 2015)

During a two-year period as artist residence in the New Town of Craigavon in Northern Ireland (designated a New Town in 1965) I too recall embodied experiences of the here and now, and of memory, recall, and the ‘weight of those concrete shapes’ as I passed through subways and underpasses

‘...hometime underpass. Shadows of people rising up and vaguely staring back at childhood. Wonderland and the end of infinity, running to keep still, a lingering scent of Eden bathed in voiceless sunlight in the regular shape of forever. (Stitt 2000: 31-32)

My experience of several visits to Skelmersdale corresponds with experiences during my time in Craigavon with its ‘strangely intimate spaces in woods and lake-lands, of debris and residues, of demolished housing estates, civic buildings, vacant community centres and shopping precincts’. (ibid) This instilled a sense of conformity and similarity as Skem and Craigavon became one and the same with their endless roundabouts, concrete underpasses, lumpy green fields, and their separation of road traffic from pedestrian paths. This sense of a combined layering of memory, visual and embodied experience introduced a method for a response through painting that involved creating transparent layers as a response to Skelmersdale. I will discuss this in more detail later but first it is important to consider how other artists responded to the context of Skelmersdale.

The Skelmersdale Development Corporation (SDC) employed three resident artists during the town's formative period of growth during the 1960's-1970's. Ian Henderson was the first SDC artist employed to improve the ‘harsh concrete environment and make it a stimulating place.’ (Henderson 2012) However, as there was no materials budget he was told to use the left-over building materials available. This meant that all three resident artists had to approach the site responsive brief through the use of

available materials such as concrete and brick. Henderson himself created several large concrete signs for communal areas such as the large angular concrete signage for a 'Surgery' positioned in the New Church Farm area. His other major contribution was to create several children's adventure play areas with sculptural climbing constructions from building materials. Some of these remain in an adulterated form and many do not, having now been demolished or subsumed into the landscape. Alan Boyson was responsible for building the most well-known of the Skelmersdale's concrete 'monuments', The Pyramid. Alan Boyson's work suffered from being associated with a later rejection of all things associated with brutalism. Originally the work consisted of one large pyramid and four small ones. The large pyramid was placed above the original entrance to the Concourse Shopping Centre in Skelmersdale, but was demolished in the nineteen eighties when a large, glass extension to the building was made. He felt '[...] that the concrete design of the pyramid that I made under contract to the SDC was generally not well liked at the time of its construction' (Boyson 2014) There is no evidence of what happened to the other pyramids. The only work that remains reasonably intact are the concrete subway/underpass wall reliefs by Mike Cumiskey [Fig. 9] who was resident artist from 1966-1976. Four major wall reliefs by Cumiskey were made in 1967 and positioned at underpasses on the B5312, Railway Road. [Fig.10 -13] These 'decorated underpasses were to guide workers to their factories' (Modernist North West 2014) and linked Pennylands housing estates to the Gillibrands Industrial Estate. The wall reliefs are now weathered, and encrusted in dirt and graffiti. The underpasses have not been maintained, their dank concrete interiors now redolent of a liminal underworld.

In construction, they echo William Mitchell's work in 'concrete detailing (which) was carried out in carved polystyrene, attached before casting, and then cleaned to reveal the exposed concrete face.' (ibid) Like Mitchell, Cumiskey utilized deeply modelled concrete, variously textured and cast against chunky sections of polystyrene with formwork acting as moulding. The designs 'were derived partly from the idea of advertising hoardings, an image and lettering'. (Cumiskey 2017) This abstract translation of the utopian consumerist world of the 1960's seems all the more poignant when experiencing them today. The decorative portals through which (as the local employment agency proclaimed) 'Tomorrows People Today' marched happily

to work are now experienced as the abandoned remains of a previous generations hopes and aspirations.

The Concrete Concourse of Dreams: Painting and Phenomenal Transparency

In approaching a painting response to Skelmersdale the sense of déjà-vu, and layering of experience acted like a psychological palimpsest. Skelmersdale translated into Craigavon and likewise the 'ghosting' effect of all my New Town experiences became transparent layers of embodied experience. I returned to the use of acrylic paint and proceeded to develop a series of hard edge abstractions based on architectural forms on large wood panels. [Fig.14] I explored a transparent technique using very thin layers of acrylic diluted with co-polymer medium that would act as a physical elision between shape, form and composition. I wanted the physical elision of the paint to act as a transmitter that would allude to or evoke subjective experience. Paint was applied in thin coats with very large square and flat brushes, almost like using a squeegee in screen printing. As one coat dried I would then apply the paint in another direction creating a translucent cross hatching texture within the medium. These layers were built up into a painting through up to fifty or more applications in various compositions of shape and form. [Fig.15]

This simultaneous perception of different spatial locations that emerged through the process was similar to cubist paintings. This in turn was similar to the idea of phenomenal transparency in architecture that implies a subtle and complex notion of literal transparency. Literal transparency offers simple and direct communication with no sense of presence whereas with phenomenal transparency in architecture, space not only recedes it also fluctuates in a continuous activity. (Rowe, Slutsky 1955) This allows for multiple viewpoints or perspectives to occur and as a metaphorical device when regarding paint as a transmitter of experience. In the approach to painting that developed through this final body of work phenomenal transparency emerged as a continuous and layered dialogue between lived experience, memory, recall and the built environment.

The physical brutalism of Cumiskey's underpasses in Skelmersdale are transitional portals that like all the spaces and places explored, suggests that the new town environment was and is a multi-layered and liminal experience. The development of an applicable painting processes and techniques allowed ideas of transparency to emerge. This additional discursive element revealed a methodology that now

combined phenomenology and embodied experiences with phenomenological transparency to create paintings as an equivalence to ‘brutalism’ creating a ‘dialectic of the purist and the fragmented, montage and the memorable single image.’

(Hatherley 2008: 30)

Conclusion

Spectral Blueprints: Painting as a Transmitter of the Lost Modern

Embodied experience, embodied memory, phenomenal transparency, and an experimental approach to painting as a synthetic transmitter were identified as methodologies when responding to the built environment and to site works made by artists in Britain’s New Towns. These methodologies were then used as a subjective interface to anchor those experiences during the painting process. A transformation of engagement with the New Town environment occurred through an integration of embodied experience with an approach to painting that explored stages of abstraction, gestural application, hard edge construction, transitional layering and transparency. I suggest that it is in the very nature of integrating these experiences through art that simultaneity of embodied experience and memory occur. In my recent painting this has resulted in a developmental and experimental approach to painting that derived from phenomenological and embodied experiences of embedded artworks, architecture, and New Town environments. I would suggest that it is through these methodologies and the act of painting that we might be drawn to a re-activation of the spaces we have inhabited, in a future past that once held all our utopias.

Word count 6,961

Bibliography

Self, P. (1972) *New Towns: The British Experience*, Tonbridge, Kent, Charles Knight & Co.

O’Hagen, A. (1995) *The Missing*, London: Faber and Faber.

Weiss, G., Haber, H., (1999) *Perspectives of Embodiment*, London, Routledge

Farley, P. (2015) *Skelmersdale: A New Town*, Skelmersdale: Glassball Art Projects.

Stitt, A., McKeown, J, Johnston, M. (2000) *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*,
Craigavon: Millennium Court Arts Centre.

Harwood, E. (2016) *Space Hope and Brutalism, English Architecture 1945-1975*,
New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Meades, J. (2014) *Bunkers Brutalism and Bloodymindedness*, BBC television
broadcast 16th Feb. 2014.

Hanley, L. (2007) *Estates: An Intimate History*, London, Granta.

Bowie, D. (1972) *All the Young Dudes*, London, Peermusic, Sony/ATV,
Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

Hatherley, O. (2008) *Militant Modernism*, Ropley, O Books.

Meades, J. (2014) *Bunkers Brutalism and Bloodymindedness*, BBC television
broadcast 16th Feb. 2014.

Banham, R. (1996) *The New Brutalism*, Architectural Review 118, 1955, in *A Critic
Writes* (University of California, 1996)

Gibberd, F., Harvey, B.H., White, L. (1989) *Harlow: The Story of a New Town*,
Stevenage, Publication for Companies.

Healey, C. (2008) *'Is Public Art a Waste of Space? An Investigation into Residents'
Attitudes to Public Art in Harlow'*, MSc in the Built Environment, University of
London

Gindrod, J. (2013) *Concretopia*, Brecon, Old Street Publishing.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945) *The Phenomenology of Perception*, in *The Merleau-Ponty
Reader* (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy), (London, Routledge,
2002).

Pallasmaa, J. (2005) *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, London, John
Wiley and Sons

Pasmore, V., Richards, Williams, J.M., Marsden, A.V., A.T.W. (1967) BBC radio
broadcast, Third Programme, 22nd January 1967.

Pasmore, V. (1971) *Peterlee: The South West Area, Urban Design as a Problem of Topology and Psychology*, Durham County Records Office, NT/Pe3/1/86.

Financial Times (1999) *Pavilion of Only Rare Delights*, Financial Times, 8-9th May.

Harwood, E. Davies, J. (2015) *England's Post-War Listed Buildings*, London, Batsford.

Crippa, E. (2016) *The Environmental Work of Victor Pasmore, Playing Against Architecture, Victor Pasmore: Towards A New Reality*, London, Lund Humphries.

Pasmore, V. (1953) copy of typed notes enclosed in a letter to Charles Biederman, (2nd January 1953) Victor Pasmore's archive.

Ernest, J. (1966) *Constructivism and Content*, Studio International, April, Vol.171, No.876, London, Studio International.

Elkins, J., (1999) *What Painting Is*, New York, Routledge.

Neutelings, J. (2015) *Spomenik - Works - Jan Kempenaers*, Roma Publications

Cwmbran Urban District Council (1972) *Cwmbran: The Town where the Future Is Happening Now*, Cwmbran, P.R.S. Publicity Ltd.

Mitchell, W. <<http://willaim-mitchell.com.htm>> [accessed 2 July 2017]

Perkin, G. (1963) *Concrete Murals*, Concrete Quarterly, April, No. 57, London, Concrete Quarterly.

John Russell, J. *The Colourful Crusade of William Mitchell*, Design for Living, *The Times*, 24th June 1962, p. 15., London, The Times.

Pereira, D. (2009) *The Concrete Legacy of William Mitchell*, <[https://www.revolvy.com/topiuc/William%20Mitchell\(sculptor\)](https://www.revolvy.com/topiuc/William%20Mitchell(sculptor))> [accessed 2 July 2017]

Mitchell, W. (2013) *Self Portrait: The Eyes Within*, Dunbeath, Scotland, Whittles.

Guy, P. (2016) *Skelmersdale: The Weird and Wonderful West Lancashire Town*, Liverpool, Echo, <<http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/skelmersdale-weird-wonderful-world-west-11280633>> [accessed 3 July 2017]

Henderson, I. (2012) <<https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism/page/7/>> [accessed 22 Feb. 2016]

Boyson, A. (2014) <<https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism/>> [accessed 10 Sept. 2016]

Modernist North West (2014)

<<https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism/>>[accessed 10 Sept. 2016]

Cumiskey, M. (2017) unpublished email communication with André Stitt, 18 July 2017.

Rowe, C., Slutsky, R. (1955) *Literal Transparency and Phenomenal Transparency*, Basel, Birkhäuser Architecture.

Illustrations

Figure 1: André Stitt, *Point Block*, 2014, oil on paper, 30 x 21cm, Private Collection Cardiff. Copyright: André Stitt 2014.

Figure 2: Victor Pasmore, 1969, *Apollo Pavilion*, Sunny Blunts, Peterlee, England. Copyright: André Stitt 2014.

Figure 3: André Stitt, *Distant Pavilion*, 2014, oil and enamel on canvas, 40 x 50cm, gallery ten, Cardiff. Copyright: André Stitt 2014.

Figure 4: André Stitt, *Monument 1 & 2*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 300cm x 2, gallery ten, Cardiff. Copyright: André Stitt 2015.

Figure 5: William Mitchell, 1969, *Town Centre*, Cwmbran, Wales. Copyright: André Stitt 2016.

Figure 6: William Mitchell, 1969, *Cwmbran Drive*, Cwmbran, Wales. Copyright: André Stitt 2016.

Figure 7: André Stitt, *Municipal Wall Installation for a Residential Complex in a Parallel Universe*, 2015-16, 180 x 340cm, oil, acrylic and enamel on wood panels, 180 x 340cm, National Eisteddfod of Wales. Copyright: André Stitt 2016.

Figure 8: André Stitt, *Synthetic Model for a Post-Capitalist Economy in a Parallel Universe*, 2015-16, 350 x 600cm, oil, acrylic and enamel on wood panels, Cardiff Contemporary. Copyright: André Stitt 2016.

Figure 9: Mike Cumiskey, 1967, Skelmersdale New Town. Copyright: Lancashire Archives, Lancashire County Council, Archive reference (NTSK).

Figure 10: Mike Cumiskey, 1967, *Wall Relief Artwork, Underpass 1*, B5312, Skelmersdale New Town. Copyright: Lancashire Archives, Lancashire County Council, Archive reference (NTSK).

Figure 11: View of underpass in 2017, Mike Cumisky, 1967, *Wall Relief Artwork, Underpass 1*, B5312, Skelmersdale New Town, 2017. Copyright: Tim Freeman 2017.

Figure 12: Mike Cumiskey, 1967, *Wall Relief Artwork, Underpass 2*, B5312, Skelmersdale New Town. Copyright: Copyright: Lancashire Archives, Lancashire County Council, Archive reference (NTSK).

Figure 13: View of underpass in 2017, Mike Cumiskey, 1967, *Wall Relief Artwork, Underpass 2*, B5312, Skelmersdale New Town, 2017. Copyright: Tim Freeman 2017.

Figure 14: André Stitt, *A Parallel Life*, 2016, acrylic on wood panel, 90 x 150cm, gallery ten, Cardiff. Copyright: André Stitt 2016.

Figure 15: André Stitt, *Sunday in Skem*, 2017, acrylic on wood panel, 60 x 90cm, gallery ten, Cardiff. Copyright: André Stitt 2017.