**BLINK Margate: Urban Renewal, Place and Performance**

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**Abstract:**

*Over the last thirty years arts activities have increasingly become a key component of urban regeneration and tourist redevelopment schemes. The ubiquity of arts programmes in this context suggests that they can play a meaningful role in the redevelopment of an area, and yet a methodology for studying the impacts these events have on the individual and their community remains undeveloped. This paper seeks to add to the discussion of the value of public arts practices by examining* BLINK Margate*, a site-specific public performance produced by Brighton-based production company McMcArts and Canterbury Festival, in partnership with close to a dozen arts, education and government agencies. The performance was a collaboration between Wayne McGregor and Random Dance, German spectacle ensemble Pan.Optikum, digital sound artist Scanner, and approximately 60 local people from the seaside town of Margate in Kent.* BLINK *was designed to complement an ongoing regeneration scheme by providing creative and professional development opportunities for local people that might catalyse future arts projects, thereby establishing a creative legacy. In this paper, the author considers the process for making* BLINK *and theorises the impact that site-specific public art projects like it can have on communities undergoing urban regeneration. Informed by Michele de Certeau’s and Marc Augé’s concepts of space, place and non-place, it is argued that, by inviting spectators to practice spaces differently, public artworks, including performances, may result is ‘perceptual shifts’ that can contribute to a redefinition of the underlying meanings given to a place. In this way, arts practices are shown to be a useful companion to urban regeneration and place re-making.*

***Keywords***: site-specific, public arts, contemporary dance, outdoor performance, urban regeneration

The ordinary practitioners of the city [….] are walkers, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984

**27 August 2011**

We arrived in the English seaside town of Margate just before sunset. We had come to see *BLINK* Margate – a one-off, site-specific performance – which was not due to start for at least another hour. I had never been to Margate before, but I had heard rumours about its recent decline. Once a well-known holiday destination, it had fallen on hard times in the 1980s and 1990s as cheap flights took its holidaymakers away. As a consequence, many of its seaside attractions and businesses were abandoned and/or deteriorating. Hardly anyone, I was told, went to Margate any longer. On this late summer evening, however, these rumours appeared to be largely untrue. The seafront was teeming with people. Crowds from pubs and shops had spilled out onto the streets in anticipation of the performance, and some had even started gathering around the stages and lighting towers scattered across the beach below. My three companions and I waited nearly half an hour at the local Wimpy for food, one of only a few restaurants on the seafront – all of which were full. Armed with our fast-food bounty, we joined the growing crowds on the beach. We ate, talked, observed and waited for the show to begin. I zipped up my jacket and flicked sand out of my shoes. Nearby, a small group of children played in the sand. The crowd continued to grow. If Margate was economically depressed, the crowds who had come to see *BLINK* temporary masked this.

Around nine o’clock, the beach and surrounding areas were so full of people it became difficult to move freely about. Around quarter past, music began to play and a series of lights and projections lit up Margate’s Victorian clock tower. As the music’s volume and bass increased, the beach began to vibrate, as did those of us standing on it. Several minutes later, the buildings behind the clock tower – which included an abandoned amusement arcade and the Wimpy – began to dance with the help of more projections to music (see Figure 1). Some dancers, wearing muted colours, then came out onto one of the large temporary stages. They performed a series of fast-paced, fragmented movements, interchanging every so often with another small group of performers who executed complementary movement patterns. A constantly changing digital backdrop featuring a water motif was projected onto the amusement arcades and local businesses lining the beach, framing the dance. After about fifteen minutes, a group of parkour dancers, performing on smaller stages resembling the recently opened Turner Contemporary gallery, executed a series of tasks that seemed to echo the earlier movement sequences, albeit in far more physically daring ways. A short period later, half a dozen large plastic bubbles containing performers were slowly carried through the crowds. Given the darkness and use of theatrical lighting, the bubbles and performers appeared to float towards the sea (Figure 2). The bubbles led to an area close to the water that had been cordoned off by fencing and stewards. Inside there existed a series of large pendulums with performers fastened to them. Gradually the pendulums began to move in mechanically repetitive patterns. Fireworks and other pyrotechnic effects were gradually added, giving the effect that the performers were meteors. The meteor shower grew into a large pyrotechnic display that concluded the show (Figure 3). Following the performance, the smell of pyrotechnics, sea and barbeques filled the air, while an estimated 20,000 other spectators, including my companions and I, slowly began our journeys home.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**[insert figures 1, 2 and 3]**

The performance, which lasted approximately forty minutes, had been a collage of moving bodies, water imagery and fire, held together by a sophisticated, celebratory aesthetic. It was not driven by any obvious narrative, but organised, instead, in short vignettes of independent movement sequences, tied loosely together with small, choreographed actions. In terms of representation, it minimally engaged with the local community through its references to the sea in the projections and the giant bubbles, but apart from that the piece seemed more concerned with expressive imagery centred on celebration, which was punctuated by its pyrotechnic finale. The overall effect was not dissimilar to a well-attended music festival or community celebration. For me, it had been a fun, enriching experience.

As a viewer of Margate for approximately two hours on this particular evening and of *BLINK*, the performance that occupied some of its spaces during that time, I cannot separate the large number of people, the festival-like atmosphere, the smell of sea air and pyrotechnics, or the sand in my shoes from my reading of the work. Neither can I separate from my reading the negative things I had heard about Margate prior to this visit, nor the fact that it had been selected, in part, because of this. The two images that I was presented with – that which was surely a well-masked (on this evening at least) reality and the carnivalesque, picturesque performance Margate the town put on for the performance *BLINK Margate* – are so vastly different that they problematize any attempt at a straightforward reading of this work.

This paper represents my attempt to evaluate the tensions between these two images. In the first part of the paper I discuss *BLINK* as it was conceived and delivered. My narrative of this process is largely informed by interviews I conducted with the project’s principal architects, including Jane McMarrow and Elizabeth Lynch of production company McMcArts; Jasmine Wilson, the Director for Creative Learning for Random Dance; and Jon Linstrum, Manager of Combined Arts for Arts Council England. Through my discussions with these individuals, it became clear that one of the project’s principal aims was to facilitate a cultural legacy in the region. This, they hoped, would possibly manifest in the form of future creative work carried out by the project’s participants, between the network of local partners it had developed, or a combination of the two. For some, this legacy might feed into the ongoing regeneration project in the area, which seeks to revive the town, making it profitable again. In the second part, I take up the issue of a legacy in relation to community projects like *BLINK* and openly question the possibilities of public art in engendering a legacy and the ways they might contribute to urban regeneration. Drawing on the work of theorists Michele de Certeau and anthropologist Marc Augé, I argue that public artworks invite us to use and see spaces in a different way, which might result in perceptual shifts that alter the way we come to understand or know spaces. Whilst I raise doubts about the efficacy of arts projects and urban regeneration schemes throughout, as neither may attend to the underlying economic or structural problems which have resulted in degeneration, I suggest that performances such as *BLINK* and the spatial re-practices they facilitate can play a significant role in the re-making of a particular place when they are coordinated alongside a range of other regeneration projects and in routine dialogue with the local community.

**Part 1: Place and Project**

On Margate Sands.

I can connect

Nothing with nothing.

The broken finger-nails of dirty hands.

My people humble people who expect

Nothing.

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, Part III*, 1922

Margate is a town on the northeast coast of Kent in the Isle of Thanet. It has historically been known as a seaside holiday destination, with the first consistent wave of holidaymakers arriving in the eighteenth century.[[2]](#footnote-2) The town famously inspired painter J.M.W. Turner, whose legacy is now remembered in Margate’s Turner Contemporary gallery, and T.S. Eliot is said to have written *Part III* of *The Waste Land* inNayland Rock Shelter on its beach, Margate Sands. Margate continued to be a popular holiday destination until the late twentieth century when cheap flights slowly took the holidaymakers away, and, more recently, out of town shopping centres the shoppers. It is now recognised as one of the most destitute places in Britain. Unemployment currently stands at around 20%, and the town has one of the highest percentage of individuals on Job Seekers Allowance in the country.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The effects of its failing economy is evidenced by the many deteriorating abandoned spaces scattered across the town. The Dreamland amusement park, opened in 1920, was closed in 2005; the central location it once inhabited near the seafront now sits largely unoccupied. It is not alone. A study conducted in 2011 shows that the town has the highest proportion of unused retail space in the UK, with 37.4% of its shops standing empty.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many of its residences have also been neglected, which has attracted a growing homeless and vagrant population. [[5]](#footnote-5) A report prepared by the town’s regeneration partnership acknowledges that while providing facilities to care for the growing transient population has ‘brought short-term economic benefits to the area’, this has been at the ‘detriment of the longer-term regeneration’ of the region.[[6]](#footnote-6) Writing today, T.S. Eliot may have had genuine reason to ‘connect nothing with nothing’, as there is very little available to connect with.

In 2003, the local authority, Thanet District Council, appointed Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design of London to help diagnose the town’s problems. The company’s findings, which were published as *Margate: A Strategic Urban Design Framework For Central Margate* confirmed what many already knew: that the town ‘had suffered a long-term decline as the numbers of visitors dropped off’ and that the town’s deterioration was aesthetically apparent and concentrated in central areas.[[7]](#footnote-7) This, the report notes, ‘has had a major impact on perceptions on arrival and on the image of Margate’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Their proposals to improve the situation, which supported developing new tourist opportunities, like restoring Dreamland and beautifying public spaces, eventually became known as the Margate Masterplan.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Margate Renewal Partnership (MRP) was created in 2005 by the council to oversee the implementation of this plan; it is formed of eight local and national agencies, including Thanet District Council, Kent County Council, South East England Development Agency, and Arts Council England.[[10]](#footnote-10) Fostering arts opportunities in the town is a key component of the master plan, which was foregrounded by the opening of the Turner Contemporary in 2011. The regeneration plans were initiated in 2006 and are estimated to take between ten and fifteen years to fully implement.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*BLINK: Margate* was developed in and for this context. While the project was not a specific component of the MRP’s redevelopment strategy, the producers of the work, Brighton-based McMcArts and Canterbury Festival, were very much aware of and keen to work in an environment where other regenerative arts activities were taking place. The project was initially conceived by Arts Council England as the ‘East Kent Creative Producers Project’, which Jon Linstrum, Manager of Combined Arts for Arts Council England, explains was designed to fund an unspecified project with an existing organisation in Kent.[[12]](#footnote-12) Canterbury Festival eventually won the funding, and set out a tender, ‘inviting applications from producers with some experience of working in the outdoor sector to put proposals in for an event or series of events.’[[13]](#footnote-13) McMcArts, who eventually won the bid, submitted a proposal that would see the development of a one-off, large-scale performance that would have ‘an impact on the place where it happened [and] a large, active engagement with some people in the area.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Jane McMarrow, one of the directors of McMcArts, noted that their decision to set the project in Margate was due in large part to the demonstrable interest in the arts that projects like the Turner Contemporary represented.[[15]](#footnote-15) So whilst the performance was not a product of the town’s regeneration plans, it tapped into the enthusiasm and momentum that those plans had garnered at the local level.

*BLINK* was fundamentally conceived as a project with an artistic legacy, where local people brought together to help make the work could be taught skills that would enable them to ‘continue to look for opportunities to work together again’ after the performance.[[16]](#footnote-16) Elizabeth Lynch, an associate for McMcArts, confirms this:

Thinking through what we could achieve in terms of participation, professional development, working with local and community and education partners was all there first. [W]e needed local partners to own what was happening in Margate and the surrounding area because we knew we might not be there after the project.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

The partners, who eventually included the Turner Contemporary, Thanet District Council, Theatre Royal Margate, Kent County Council, the University of Kent, Margate Regeneration Partnership, and Thanet College, became the gatekeepers to local participants and resources that would help McMcArts and Canterbury Festival realise *BLINK* and, it was hoped, to help foster its creative afterlife.

While imagining the kinds of partnerships needed to facilitate a longer-term legacy may have been prioritised initially, the selection of artists for the project would also need careful attention. McMarrow acknowledges that McMcArts had wanted to showcase contemporary dance for some time.[[18]](#footnote-18) ‘Wayne McGregor and Random Dance seemed an ideal choice because of the high profile nature of the company and the strength of its creative learning programme’.[[19]](#footnote-19) McGregor’s Random Dance, which the choreographer-in-residence at the Royal Ballet set up in 1992 as a kind of movement laboratory, has an international reputation for developing innovative, interdisciplinary, contemporary dance performances. [[20]](#footnote-20) The company’s works are characterised by their use of technology, sharp, athletic movements and non-linear structure. Luke Jennings of *The Observer* has characterised Random Dance’s work as ‘[m]arrying the sinuosity of contemporary dance to a fractured postmodernism’.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to Jasmine Wilson, the Director of Creative Learning for Random Dance, the creative learning component is ‘integral to the company and it’s something that [McGregor is] really passionate about’.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is evidenced by the some 20 participatory works the company has developed since 2000.[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus, bringing McGregor and his Random Dance company on board meant that McMcArts could be more confident in their ability to deliver on their promise of a participatory project that might catalyse future creative projects in Margate.

The selection of Pan.Optikum feeds into an ongoing McMcArts’ project, which is to foster interdisciplinary collaborations that might result in a sharing of skills and techniques to help develop artists.[[24]](#footnote-24) The project also needed an outdoor performance specialist, and Pan.Optikum’s thirty year history of developing large-scale spectacles in public spaces has made it one of the top outdoor companies in Europe.[[25]](#footnote-25) Further, although the companies work in different mediums and scales, there are similarities in their creative approaches and the aesthetics these produce which McMcArts hoped would make for a healthy collaboration. Underscoring the work of these companies would be Scanner, aka Robin Rimbaud, whose reputation for composing layered digital soundscapes is well known in the music, live performance and art sectors.[[26]](#footnote-26) Having worked with Random Dance before, and sharing similar aesthetic qualities with both Random’s and Pan.Optikum’s work, Scanner seemed like an appropriate addition to the project.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Once artists were confirmed, the project became much easier to sell to local people and efforts to recruit and train participants began in earnest.[[28]](#footnote-28) McMarrow and Lynch confirmed that projects to promote and develop the work were initiated about a year before the performance opened. Opportunities, including advertising work placements, professional development for theatre technicians and performer training workshops were organised to coincide with or complement the existing offer of local partners. The Buzz Project was one such initiative. It saw twenty six BTECH film and television students from Thanet College compete to win the opportunity to develop *BLINK*’s PR campaign, under the supervision of The Corner Shop PR agency from London. The Buzz Project winners were given a budget of £5,000 which they used to develop an installation in an empty shop in the local shopping centre. The installation consisted of a tower of recycled TV and computer screens that played film clips of Random Dance’s and Pan.Optikum’s work. It opened several days before the performance and attracted an estimated one thousand people.[[29]](#footnote-29) Opportunities were also organised for local theatre technicians from Theatre Royal Margate to gain professional development experience by helping to organised and run the tech for the final show.[[30]](#footnote-30) In this way, McMcArts sought to prepare the performance by providing skill-development opportunities for local people, by making use of connections and resources provided by the broad network of project partners.

By far the largest component of the project, however, was the dance. In order to recruit participants, McMcArts and Random Dance organised a series of taster workshops with local schools. Wilson and company dancers from Random Dance, alongside four ‘creative apprentices’, e.g. early-career professional dancers hired through South East Dance to gain experience through the project, led the workshops. Wilson explains that the workshops were designed to give participants a clear idea of McGregor’s creative process:

What’s quite specific in terms of what we deliver is that it absolutely reflects the way that Wayne works in the studio with his dancers. We very rarely ever go and teach steps. We work with a kind of generative creative process with […] the participants. So it’s about giving them quite specific tasks that might include a numerical or spatial element, working with a range of stimuli, and really getting them to create material which we then edit and structure into the final work.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Wilson and her team eventually delivered taster workshops to around four hundred young people over a six-week period. While it was anticipated that the workshops would recruit about one hundred students for the final performance, only forty came forward. Wilson and Lynch believe that the timing of the performance, during the summer holidays when students would have had other commitments, mired their ability to recruit to target.[[32]](#footnote-32) Nevertheless, the final forty went into rehearsals with ten Random Dance company members, McGregor, Wilson and the four creative apprentices. This staffing level was intended to accommodate one hundred students, and thus may seem high, but Wilson observed it actually turned out to be ‘about right’. Given the high audience turnout, she believes it would have been difficult to safely lead one hundred people through the crowds and to the stages on the beach. She also noted the level of professional attention that the students received resulted in a ‘higher quality piece’ in the end.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Overall, around six hundred and fifty local people became involved in the project at some point in its eighteen month lifespan, with around sixty taking part in the final performance.[[34]](#footnote-34) While the project’s architects would have preferred to see a higher number involved at the end, the project had satisfied its brief, i.e., ‘a large, active engagement with some people in the area’.[[35]](#footnote-35) The project’s other key aim, the development of a cultural legacy, is decidedly less clear at this stage. For McMcArts, this legacy was about fostering relationships and imparting skills that might enable members of the community to develop their own work, with the support of the network of local partners, post-performance. For Lynch, this legacy was also about ‘putting Margate on the map’ and replacing some of its recent negative publicity with some that was more positive.[[36]](#footnote-36) Whilst playing an active role in Margate’s regeneration scheme was not part of its remit, for Lynch and the others the project was seen as having the potential for contributing to the regeneration of the town by creating a kind of ‘groundswell’ of enthusiasm for the plans, which had been ‘scuppered by the extreme economic downturn’.[[37]](#footnote-37) This suggests that *BLINK*’s legacy is not simply about the local performers and network of local partners and the kind of work they might continue to develop together, but it is also about the potentialities of the performance itself to help renegotiate tensions regarding the changes taking place in the community, as well as contributing to the re-imaging, or re-branding, of Margate as a place; ‘putting Margate [back] on the map’ as a tourist destination.

Since the 1970s, interest in and application of public arts has grown considerably, primarily on the widely accepted view that such activities can make a meaningful contribution to urban regeneration initiatives. These views are supported by a healthy body of scholarship on public arts, which have shown that work produced in these contexts is capable of: ‘restoring [a community’s] self-confidence and […] also some civic pride’’[[38]](#footnote-38), enhanc[ing] [one’s] experience of a particular environment’[[39]](#footnote-39) and even ‘creat[ing] a change in people’s perceptions of that place’.[[40]](#footnote-40) But as Paola Merli has noted, many of these claims are hard to substantiate as the methods developed for measuring local impacts are seriously flawed and lack a ‘strong theoretical grounding’.[[41]](#footnote-41) While she concedes that public arts projects *could* make one ‘feel[…] differently about the place one lives’, this is unlikely to result in actual social change. For Merli, change is not brought about by ‘benevolent arts programmes’[[42]](#footnote-42), but by attending to the economic, political and infrastructural systems that have led to the degeneration of the community.

As a community project and a performance *BLINK* consistently positioned itself close to, but outside, the regeneration scheme. In my understanding of what the organisers mean by ‘legacy’, the individual was central to its success: for the participant, both the training and experience of performing with high-profile artists had the potential to impact on one’s life, either as an artist or even fostering an interest in the arts; for the spectator, the performance could provide an experience to see the community in a new way and, possibly, contribute to one’s enthusiasm for other local projects, including the regeneration scheme. While I accept Merli’s point about structural change, this does not appear to have been a concern of the project’s architects and thus it seems unfair to consider the efficacy of this project through those lenses. What does seem apparent, however, is that perceptual change was an important component of the project’s design. Drawing on the momentum initiated by a range of local partners, *BLINK* was conceived of as an agent to engender perceptual changes in its participants and spectators that might help in the regeneration, or re-making, of Margate. My goal in the rest of this paper is to question the possible impacts performances like *BLINK* may have as an agent of *perceptual change* and how this might contribute to the re-making of the places they temporarily inhabit. My argument accepts Merli’s conclusions, that changes to the institutions and structures which have facilitated degeneration are crucial for the regeneration of communities, but positions perceptual changes at the community level as significant in achieving this goal. In this way, public arts events like *BLINK* which locate themselves within and temporarily transform public spaces by actively engaging local people and their institutions can be useful companions to community regeneration. Central to this argument is how we conceive of and come to know a *place* and the ways in which this may be reconfigured through encounters with live performance.

**Part 2: Place, Non-Place and Possibilities**

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau makes a crucial distinction between place and space. In his view, place ‘implies an indication of stability’, ‘an order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Space, on the other hand, ‘is a practiced place’, which is ‘composed of intersections of mobile elements’ that *occurs* ‘as the effect produced by the operations that orientate it’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Drawing on the metaphor of language, de Certeau explains that place might be understood as the ‘proper meanings’ of words and phrases determined by grammarians and linguists to establish a ‘normal and normative level to compare the drifting of figurative language’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Put more succinctly, a place is determined by its geographical location and by its topography, which would consist of natural and built (i.e., man-made) elements. Spaces, however, are locations in a place that are defined by the way that they are used. So, for instance, the place of the beach, which is *placed* (ordered) by its relationship to water, becomes a *space* for leisure when users actively make it so. For others, the beach may be a space for income (shops, cafés, fishing, etc.) or a space in which to live. Defined in this way, the place remains the stable unit on which its users author the spaces onto it. Thus, each time we practice a space – walk, run, lounge or perform – we author new spatial possibilities. Drawing on this conception of place in his *Site-Specific Art*, Nick Kaye writes: ‘Thus, different and even incompatible spaces may realise the various possibilities of a single place’.[[46]](#footnote-46)

For Margate, its inability to attract particular kinds of practitioners (tourists) has led to the repurposing of many of its spaces: former bed and breakfasts have become hostels for the homeless; its empty amusement arcades and retail spaces canvases for graffiti. While place is typically understood to be a more stable unit, we can see in the case of Margate how these new (and sometimes lack of) practices have impacted it as a place. These spatial ‘deviations’ have helped re-define the ‘literal meaning’ of the town[[47]](#footnote-47). As a place that has consistently defined itself through its attractiveness to tourists, and relied upon this to a large extent for its survival, its need for more positive, or revived, spatial practices has never been greater. If we accept de Certeau’s logic, then serious doubts emerge as to whether a regeneration scheme alone is capable of remedying Margate’s problems. Infrastructural changes and cosmetic attention may make spaces more attractive for potential practitioners, but their value can only be realised through their practice. These practices appear to be the key to restoring confidence in Margate as a place, to re-define or revive more favourable ‘meanings’, to potential practitioners.

It is in these contexts where public arts projects like *BLINK* may be seen as useful. Not only do they reveal spatial possibilities in their own right as temporary occupier of a space, a point which I will return to shortly, but they facilitate new spatial practices by encouraging people to navigate spaces differently: they walk around the performance; they follow it; they look through and around it, as well as each other, and through these activities are made aware of new ways of looking at and practicing the space. For de Certeau, the pathways taken by individual spectators/spatial practitioners as they navigate the space to experience the work are unique spatial ‘texts’. In this way, *BLINK* and other public artworks not only demonstrate new spatial possibilities by the way they appropriate spaces, they may also facilitate a collective ‘writing over’ of place through the spatial practices they provoke. This ‘writing over’ can be seen as both the movement of the spectator as they navigate the space, but also the way the performance ‘writes’ itself onto the site, literally projecting itself onto and traversing the surfaces of the spaces it appropriates.

To Kaye and de Certeau, ‘authoring’ in this way is palimpsestic: the new texts are written over the still visible but rubbed out pre-texts. I favour viewing this process as intertextual as we navigate and author new spatial texts with knowledge of the old; knowledge which may pre-determine or anchor the spatial choices we make. The ‘writing over’ process, I believe, is particularly important in places attempting to overturn a negative image, such as with Margate. Rather than seeing a boarded up amusement arcade, spectators of *BLINK* saw digital projections literally write over those abandoned spaces. Rather than an empty beach, spectators and dancers co-authored new spatial texts onto its sand. Regardless of how the ‘writing over’ process is theorised, the point is that in the writing over of spaces that may have grown to be associated with the place’s misfortune more positive or imaginative possibilities for the space are revealed. Being positioned on the seafront, the ultimate symbol of Margate’s leisure past, *BLINK* was able to facilitate a process of space re-making through the co-authoring of spatial practices with its 20,000 spectators. Thus, over the course of an evening, literally thousands of spatial possibilities were uncovered from a single performance.

But simply practicing spaces in different ways does not bring about perceptual change. The event and the way it imbeds itself in our memories is also crucial for this to occur. And while all public artworks have the potential to facilitate an encounter with a space that is memorable, I would like to suggest that performances are particularly well-equipped to do this. Unlike statues or other more permanent works of public art, which may, over time, become part of the underlying logic, i.e., the ‘literal meanings’ of a place, a performance helps us author new spatial categories and then departs. Further, as a live, moving organism itself (perceived as such by the human effort which can be seen in both its design and in its execution), the performance, like the walker, may be read as a temporary spatial practitioner. Both its temporality and its liveness mark it out as unique, thus making it difficult for it to blend into its surroundings in such a way that we fail to notice it. Because of this, we are more likely to remember our encounter with it. The late Cliff McLucas of Brith Goff, in writing about site-specific theatre, refers to performances constructed in response to site as ‘the ghost’[[48]](#footnote-48), calling attention to the way that performances are capable of haunting the public and their spaces well after the work has ended. The permanent public artwork may continue to haunt those of us who come from outside the community to see it, but for local people it becomes a fixture over time, becoming lost in the scenography of the familiar, which is made up of those other useful spaces we practice in ways established through routine and consequently learn to (un)see, such as office blocks, our homes, local shops and the post office. The temporal artwork, however, invites us to traverse, look and see the space it appropriates before disappearing. While the permanent work gets lost in our field of vision by becoming mundane, the temporal one becomes more interesting for us because it is marked out as unique. For this reason I would argue that the spatial possibilities that temporal works in public spaces reveals to us are more memorable than those we customarily carry out as walkers, shoppers or inhabitants of a place. This is important because if new spatial practices are needed to help redefine the ‘literal meanings’ of the place that have evolved through discursive or *mis*-practice, we need to be able to *see* the spaces and the possibilities they hold, something which routine practice has taken from us by making us accustomed to our surroundings. And here, I believe, is the location of what can often come across as the utopian claims for public arts referred to earlier, i.e., that they are capable of altering the way we perceive particular places through the ways they transform the space or by the memories and associations they make or trigger.[[49]](#footnote-49) Performance seems particularly appropriate for this task given its expertise in illusion and its unique live-ness, which causes it to ‘get under our skin’, as Joe Kelleher as observed.[[50]](#footnote-50) The potential for any performance to *work* on us, and this would include the way that it allows us to practice or perceive spaces in new ways, will be determined by what ‘remains’ with us after the event. Like McLucas’ ‘ghost’, these ‘remains’ are fragments of memory that we recall post-performance, triggered perhaps by future encounters with the spaces it appropriated, through discussions with others, or simply on personal reflection. While it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to know whether these remains will result in a ‘perceptual change’ of the space, by ‘getting under our skin’ or haunting us, as performance can, it seems that this is not altogether unfathomable either.

Another way we might approach the question of perceptual change is through concept of non-place. Non-place for de Certeau refers to the absences created through the naming of a place. Rather than locate them, the words we assign to places reduce the complexity of a place into the symbolic, a name, resulting in a ‘universe haunted by nowhere or by dreamed-of place[…]’.[[51]](#footnote-51) For Augé, non-places are designed for ‘certain ends’, such as leisure or transport (airports, holiday resorts, shopping malls) which are defined by their relationship to individuals and they ways they *move through* them.[[52]](#footnote-52) This movement engenders a ‘projection forward’ – an imagining of what we might reach at the end of our travels.[[53]](#footnote-53) Although they conceive of spaces and places in different ways, the concepts deployed here share some similarities, which are important for my analysis. For de Certeau, to move through a place is to search for it; thus, the act of walking is to ‘lack’ place; ‘it is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper’.[[54]](#footnote-54) For Augé, this moving through is also a dis-placement, but his view is that in this process we project forward, producing a mental picture of our destination (the place). This leads him to conclude that the ‘traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of non-place’.[[55]](#footnote-55)

It is easy to conceive of Margate as a non-place for several reasons. Firstly, it is a traveller’s space. While it does not share the high-speed and gloss of the supermodern non-places discussed by Augé – in fact, it is the town’s lack of these qualities which may have, arguably, caused some of its present misfortunate – it is a place recognised for the coming and going of visitors; it was designed to be, and is being redesigned to be, a holiday resort, a place defined by travel - or, to be more precise – the seasonal movement of travellers. According to Augé, in this ‘coming and going’, or moving through the non-place, the traveller creates a fiction, which is formed of the ‘partial glimpses, a series of snapshots piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives of them’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Here again we see a way in which our memories are significant in terms of place, as they determine, through the way we organise our ‘snapshots’ (or ‘remains’) of it, the way we come to understand it (or, indeed, fictionalize and imagine it). Another way that Margate may be conceived of as a non-place is in its own movement as a result of the ongoing regeneration scheme: it is thus moving from its present state into a different one. While we might apply this possibility to all places – as all evolve gradually over time as a consequence of the weather and usage – a community undergoing coordinated regeneration is effectively initiating its own ‘projection forward’ through the designs and plans it makes. It is imperative that these ‘projections’ can be imagined by the inhabitants of a community, otherwise the realisability of the imagined ‘new’ place could be jeopardized.

In either application of non-place in relation to Margate, recesses appear. In the first instance, a recess opens up between the actuality of the place and the author’s fictional account of it. Where recent travels through the place may have engender negative fictions, reinforced perhaps by the media’s negative portrayal of the town, projects like *BLINK* which invite travellers to return and move through its spaces in the context of a unique experience, helps reconfigure those fictions, once again engendering a perceptual shift in one’s sense of space, similar to those discussed earlier. In the latter example, the recess appears between the place as it is and as it will be. Here, *BLINK* occupies the recess as a catalyst for the ‘projection forward’, providing one with temporary access to what a thriving Margate might look like once it has been ‘regenerated’. There are various ways in which this could have worked. For instance, had *BLINK* been concerned with the local on a historical level, instead of a more expressive, celebratory one, then it may have usefully filled the non-place ‘recess’ with a more reflexive category of work that facilities, particularly in local people, a hyper-realistic, nostalgic response by temporarily (re)placing the present through performance with the illusion of an imagined past. This, too, might enable a projection forward as it encourages audiences to apply those feelings of nostalgia for the old to the now and the new. Like McLucas’ ghost metaphor, performance can be read here as a temporary occupier of a space whose memory may haunt either through conjuring images of the past or future. Either way, in gaining access to an alternative, even if this is fictionalized, an opportunity for expanding or altering one’s perception of a place through its alternative practice is, I suggest, a crucial stage of a process of redefining the ‘literal meaning’, or underlying logic, of a place.

On 27 August 2011, *BLINK* provided the opportunity to renegotiate the meaning of its former seaside leisure spaces by actively encouraging its practitioners / spectators / travellers to practice and see them in new ways. As I have been arguing, public works of art and the pathways and ways of looking they invite so as to be seen, imbed themselves in our memories in ways that I believe may be responsible for the perceptual changes often attributed to this kind of work. That this work will result in actual social change on its own is, as Merli concludes, unlikely. However, the structural changes that Merli advocate are, I believe, unachievable without the support of the practitioners of a given space. Such changes are surely best brought about through a dialogic process between developers and the community. It is my suggestion that arts projects like *BLINK* presents opportunities to help mediate that discourse.

While it is too soon to tell what kind of a legacy *BLINK* left behind, I can see how the performance will have had some impact on the way that local people conceive of the space in which the work was performed and, possibly, how they engage with the ongoing regeneration plans. By facilitating opportunities to author new spatial practices and ‘project forward’, *BLINK* gave local people the chance to see some of the possibilities that a regenerated Margate might offer. Whether the work was well received or not is beside the point: whilst this may make for some critical ‘fictions’ of the event itself, the work may still *work* by facilitating an encounter with the space that is likely unusual (out-of-the-ordinary) enough to make us *see* the space differently. Even if it only forces us to consider what kind of artwork might work better for us, we are still participating in new spatial practices by imagining alternatives.

Like Augé’s traveller, I collected ‘partial glimpses, a series of snapshots piled hurriedly into my memory’ when I attended *BLINK Margate* in the late summer of 2011.[[57]](#footnote-57) Nearly a year after the event, I used those remains to construct the fiction that opens this paper. I continue to struggle to fully understand the tensions between the images of the Margate that I heard about and the Margate I experienced – walked, felt, smelt, saw, etc. – that evening. My tendency is to believe the fictions of the space I’ve authored through my memories of the encounter. To recall de Certeau once more: ‘It is through the experience that the possibility of space and localization of the subject is inaugurated’.[[58]](#footnote-58) While I accept the reality may be otherwise, my fictions are what locate me in Margate and allow me to see its potential.

1. Jane McMarrow, Interview with the author, Brighton, UK, 19 Sept. 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anthony Lee, *Margate in the Georgian Era* (Margate: Droit House, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. South East England Development Agency, *Margate (Thanet) Economy Update*, (Guildford: SEEDA Research & Economics Team, 2010), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Emine Saner, “Margate’s miserable claim to fame”, *The Guardian*, 12 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/feb/18/margate-miserable-claim-to-fame> [accessed 27 March 2012] (par. 2 of 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Margate Renewal Partnership, ‘Framework and Implementation Plan: 2009-11’, <<http://www.thisismargate.co.uk/margate_renewal_partnership.aspx>> [accessed 23 Feb 2012]p. 12. The report also notes that transiency is high, with a ‘30% turnover in a 12 month period’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Margate Renewal Partnership, ‘Framework and Implementation Plan: 2007-8’ , <http://www.thisismargate.co.uk/margate\_renewal\_partnership.aspx>, [accessed 23 Feb 2012], p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design Company, ‘Margate: A strategic urban design framework for central Margate’, <http://www.thisismargate.co.uk/read\_all\_about\_it/documents/margate\_masterplan.aspx> [accessed 12 Nov. 2011], p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tibbalds, ’Design Framework’, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Margate Renewal Partnership, Framework and Implementation Plan: 2007-8, <http://www.thisismargate.co.uk/margate\_renewal\_partnership.aspx> [accessed 23 February 2012], p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Linstrum, Telephone interview with the author, Brighton, UK, 25 Nov. 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. McMarrow interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. William Shaw, ‘Blink, Margate 2011: A case study in collaborative practice’, <http://mcmc-arts.com/blink-margate-2011-a-case-study-in-collaborative-practice/> [accessed 13 Sept 2011] (par. 8 of 16) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Elizabeth Lynch, Skype interview with the author, 28 Nov. 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. McMarrow interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Random Dance, ‘The Company Biography,’ <http://www.randomdance/org/the\_company/biography> [accessed 12 Sept. 2011]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Luke Jennings, ‘Wayne McGregor CBE: the rock star of ballet steps up’, *The Observer*, 2 Jan 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/jan/02/wayne-mcgregor-cbe-interview-jennings> [accessed 9 Sept. 2011] (par. 3 of 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jasmine Wilson, Interview with the author, Sadlers Wells, London, UK, 12 Dec. 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. These have included *Proprius* (2008), which was performed in the Covent Garden Piazza by 50 young people from schools across London, and, more recently, the Big Dance Trafalgar Square 2012, which will bring together an estimated 1,500 participants from across London to dance in a 40 minute piece choreographed by McGregor. See Random Dance, ‘Creative Learning’, <http://www.randomdance.org/creative\_learning/participatory\_performances> for a full list. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Both McMarrow and Linstrum commented on what they saw as Britain’s weakness in developing outdoor works to the scale and standard of other European countries. Linstrum believes this is because Britain ‘rarely attracts the highest quality artists’ and its ‘wider [low] status and position within the art’s sector’ means it never attracts the attention of high-profile media, which makes this kind of work less attractive to British artists. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. These have included *Il Corso* (2001), based on Pablo Neruda’s *Book of Questions*, which included 25 actors, acrobats and musicians, projections and various pyrotechnic effects, generating a surreal series of images designed to question man’s immortality, and *TRANSITion* (2009), which questioned the role of myth in contemporary society. Based on the work of Wajdi Mouawad, *TRANSITion* consisted of a series of large pendulums that moved bodies and streams of fire back and forth, up and down and around the performance space (typically an inner-city area) accompanied by a digital soundscape, projections and pyrotechnics. See Pan.Optikum, <http://www.theatre-panoptikum.de> for further details. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Scanner, ‘Scanner Biography 2012’, <http://www.scannerdot.com/scanner\_ie.shtml> [accessed 1 June 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. McMarrow interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lynch interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A full list of activities were described by McMarrow and Lynch in their interviews with me, but a brief overview is also available in Arts Council England, ‘Exploring the legacy of summer seafront spectacular Blink Margate’, 23 Dec. 2011, < http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/funded-projects/case-studies/exploring-legacy-summer-seafront-spectacular-blink-margate/> [accessed 27 March 2012]. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Wilson interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Wilson and Lynch interviews. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wilson interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This figure includes the forty dancers, a local parkour group recruited during the final weeks of rehearsal, volunteer technicians and stewards. Arts Council England, ‘Exploring the legacy’, (par. 8 of 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Linstrum interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Lynch interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Maurice Roche, ‘Mega-events and urban policy’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 21: 1 (1994), 1-19 (p. 9). See also Beatriz Garcia, ‘Urban Regeneration, Arts Programming and Major Events in Western European Cities: Lessons from Experience, Prospects for the Future’, *Local Economy*, 19:4 (2004), pp. 312-326, (p. 315). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Adams, *Public Art*, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Paola Merli, ‘Evaluating the social impact of participation in arts activities’, in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8:1 (2002), 107-118 (p. 115). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cliff McLucas qtd in Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Adams, *Public Art*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Joe Kelleher, *Theatre* *& Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, p. 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. In Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Augé in Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Augé in Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)