

Stéphane Degoutin

Blackpool immobile

NOGO VOYAGES
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Immobile travel notes
Tower World, Blackpool Tower, May 27th, 2008.

What am I doing here?

I am not the only one asking: every person I cross, when they learn that I am French, look sincerely intrigued and ask for answers I could hardly provide.

At the hotel, a man tells me he has been coming here for the last 22 years ; and for the fourth time this year. Yet, he does not seem to figure out why a French person would come here.

I ♥ Blackpool

For a non English person, Blackpool represents the most alien and exotic place. A fascinating space: fictional, yet definitely part of reality. A door left open to a different space, time and logic.

For the last three days, I have been exploring the city all around, running from a place to the other, by foot, by bus, by tram..., from the attractions to the outer suburbs, from the ocean to the interior, from the center to the neighbouring towns. I let myself be carried by the naive tourist's temptation to visit everything, to miss nothing, to understand everything, to take the most of it...

Tourism implies a form of perpetual motion. Rare are those (Paris Hilton ?) who can afford the luxury to roam around the globe and take the time to stop when they wish, without a schedule, as did the English aristocrats on their Grand Tour.

For the most of us, travelling implies making the best use of the time which has been subtracted from our professional life at great expense.

City of rides

Tourism represents the massive democratisation of the art of the promenade, of aristocratic extraction.

Once freed from its aristocratic shell and from the rules it imposed on the body, the promenade becomes a pure enjoyment of the space : roller coaster, monorail, steeplechase, great wheel, tramways... Rides represent the hyperbole of hedonist displacement.

Habitable theme park

The theme park city is the condensation of travel. It piles up differences on the smallest and densest possible space. It gives more for less. A few footsteps are enough to move to a different world.

Blackpool calls for perpetual motion. This is why it is adequate to experience exactly the opposite: travel immobile in a place which embodies the act of traveling.

Spot-traveling: to concentrate oneself on only one point of space, carefully selected as the unique place to travel. The most ordinary tourism thus becomes travel.

Staying immobile in the attraction implies a discrepancy in the practice of space, similar to the one I found on my first immobile travel, in the concourse of the train station of the Forum des Halles, in Paris, a hub where hundreds of thousands of people commute daily. Staying immobile in a place devoted to the movement creates the possibility for a travel.

In opposition with the desire of a global comprehension of the city, Nogo Voyages proposes the *voyage immobile* (motionless trip): to concentrate the energy of traveling in only one, very carefully chosen point.

The *voyage immobile* is a condensation of a travel.

Immobility may seem an absolutely normal practice in the public space. Yet it is not always that easy to travel immobile. Staying in a place without moving is not any more a normal use in the contemporary metropolis. It becomes more and more unusual, if not marginal.

It took me some time to find the right place for a *voyage immobile* in Blackpool. The first requirement was to choose a relevant point in the city at which to stop. The choice demands precision and subtlety: the spot must allow a relevant point of view. It must also be somehow illogical to be immobile there.

The main attraction – Blackpool's tower – finally appeared, with clarity, as the most appropriate place. I stop right in the center of the attraction. It allows me to tackle the theme park city from the heart, from the point of maximal tourist energy.

I will make a *voyage immobile* in the bizarre brick building that forms the base of the Tower and contains the amusement park Tower World.



Beginning of the *voyage immobile*

But am I really in the center of the attraction? Where exactly is the point of maximum tourist energy? in Blackpool? Now that I am in the Tower basement, I realize that it might not be here.

The Eiffel Tower (of Paris) offers spectacular points of views for the pedestrian who walks underneath. In Blackpool, the closer one gets to the tower, the less he sees it. From the outside, it is hidden by its brick base. Inside, one enters a labyrinth of corridors. The Tower acts as a landmark, an interesting view from everywhere around, except nearby.

Its verticality facing the infinite horizon is fascinating. Seen from the suburbs, it rises above the houses in lines, like a surrealist collage. Visible from everywhere, it diffuses the attraction everywhere.

Here, in the basement, I am at the same time at the center and in the periphery of the attraction: in the empty bubble around the landmark.

The periphery of the attraction is the main territory of exploration for Nogo Voyages (www.nogovoyages.com). We question the transitions between everyday life and attraction, and try to open doors between the two.

Our "Paris Suburbs Public Bus Tour" lengthens the duration of a very casual travel (a suburban bus ride) so that it lasts 8 hours and goes all the way around Paris' first ring of suburbs. Thus stretched, the commute becomes an attraction.

The *voyage immobile* in Tower World stretches the attraction. Like a magic trick, a repeated attraction loses its power to



fascinate – Blackpool demands constant motion, and through immobility one can unweave the impact of the place. This is why all amusement parks try to make the public move from an attraction to the other: to give them an impression of profusion, but more importantly, to prevent them from sticking around. Because, for those who do, the attraction is stretched in time, and as a result it becomes ordinary, opening itself to analysis.

The ticket to the tower includes the entrance to all the attractions contained in the building. I pass around, but do not really visit, then I sit on a bench in the artificial cave of the aquarium, near the circus, in the depths of the building. The room is lightened by glimmering, cheap fairy lights suspended at the ceiling, of a model one would use to decorate a christmas tree at home.

In this blue darkness, surrounded by fishes, I feel very relaxed.

The cries of the children going out of the circus could be annoying, but the indifference of the fishes seems to muffle them.

I will not describe in every detail what is happening around me. First, because it is of limited interest (families watching fishes momentarily, passing by, with no evidence of sustained attention). Second, because the non-description rule is an essential principle of the art of *voyage immobile*. For who stays in a place without moving, equipped with a pencil and a



note-book, description is an easy way to pass time, instead of analysing it¹.

What happens around one is unimportant for the immobile traveler. The essential point is to stop time. Staying still is a pretext, a rule that forces one to take time in a tight schedule, organized for permanent action, not to ever waste time – whereas wasting time is the only way to move on.

A *voyage immobile* resembles a long vacation in a country house where there would be only one magazine to read: this one magazine becomes the only center of interest. One reads it again and again, as if it contained hidden the secrets of the universe. And indeed, under such scrutiny, it begins to speak – maybe even more than a pile of excellent books would have.

The aquarium is now empty of visitors: I am alone with the fishes. A melody of pop music, coming from a slot machine in the next room, breaks the silence at uneven intervals.

Why travel here, if nothing happens? This is a recurring question, that I ask myself during every *voyage immobile*. Yet, until now, every of these trips has allowed me to discover something. What will it be is impossible to know in advance.

¹ This is not true of course of Georges Pérec describing every detail of the Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris (*Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*). Yet I do not think the experience would gain to be reproduced.



Tower World contains a palace for the people: labyrinths of corridors and huge rooms on 7 levels. Several of these spaces have no precise function (they are only passages), others are unoccupied.

Strangely, the palace looks empty. There is no lack of content however: circus, aquarium, 3D cinema, ballroom, fake dinosaurs, restaurant with a view on the ocean, slot machines, historical exhibition, bar, exhibition on a local music hall artist (Charlie Cairoli), and of course the Tower's viewing deck. In the past, there was also a menagerie, a model Chinese village, and shops.

The park is conceived for the public to spend an entire day inside, which is rather consistent with the versatility of the local climate. The holiday makers can benefit from an interior place where to eat, dance, hang around, see shows, visit exhibitions... For a flat rate of £16, one fills his leisure time with everything he can.

None of the attractions is class leading: it is not the best circus, the aquarium is small, the dinosaurs look like a supermarket scenery, etc.: they form a series of samples of each imaginable program.

A photograph might convey the illusion, but in reality, the idea of a "palace" is constantly contradicted by the construction materials which have been used, the same as in a train station or any place frequented by a massive crowd, and which reveal the true destination of it – along with the ubiquitous slot machines and loudspeakers filling every room with muzak.



The palace for the people was 19th century utopian Charles Fourier's dream. I am now sitting in what has come true out of this dream.

The palace seems literally left to its visitors. It might be the only place in England where I did not notice any surveillance cameras. Nor are there any guards in the exhibitions. The public is left completely free to use the spaces as he wishes. There is no need to buy food or drink to sit at a table with a view on the ocean, nor to dance to use the ballroom. One can hang around in the attraction, like in a city, with no urge to participate. One can choose what to do in the place, contrary to the usual amusement parks, where each attraction calls for a unique and precise use.

Tower World represents the archetype of the "all in a box" amusement park. One single building, almost windowless, is packed with all kinds of attractions, mixed together without order or unity, in a former state of the evolution of the amusement park – before the theme park².

In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas describes this sort of building contained amusement parks, built on whole blocks of the Manhattan Grid after the fall of Coney Island. He sees them as prototypes of the manhattanian skyscrapers.

² The Tower and its base opened to the public in 1894. The first theme park, Luna Park, opened in Coney Island in 1903. It gave the public the experience of a journey to the moon, beginning with a skyrocket travel.



Contrary to Pleasure Beach rides, which cross each other continuously, each attraction of Tower World remains blind to the others.

Each interior space is self sufficient, autonomous, unlinked to the rest of the park. They were simply added up in an indifferent order. It wouldn't make any difference to switch their positions. The iron structure of the Tower intersects the circus; but only architects might notice it, since it is covered with stucco and gilt, to mimic a classic auditorium.

One never knows where one is in the building, which is spatially confusing, but conveys the impression of being inside a complete, complex universe. A box contained tridimensional labyrinth: the same configuration as the Parisian grands magasins.

It might be even more fascinating to mix the different activities: instead of simply abutting side by side a disappointing ballroom, an ordinary exhibition, little plausible dinosaurs and a small aquarium, why not put the aquarium in the ballroom or the dinosaurs in the exhibition? Or the dinosaurs in the exhibition in the aquarium in the ballroom?

I watch distractedly the passing tourists.

The attractions used to have something in common, though: at the time of the construction, all of them were exotic. They showed the public (the popular classes of the end of the 19th



century) what he had never had the occasion to see before: wild animals, rare fishes, palace interiors, a high tower etc.

Tower World did condensate in one place every otherness, every travel experience.

It embodied the fantasy to contain all the richness of the world in one self sufficient place. A place which would make travel useless. It is also the fantasy of the metropolis: the city that contains and condensates everything – in a single point of space.

If the theme park condensates the travel, then the theme park block (a complete amusement park contained in one single building) condensates this condensation.

This program is now archaic: no element of Tower World stands for the public as a never seen before attraction. The place survives nevertheless, and therefore proposes a new attraction: a journey into the past.

Tower World is a time machine, that gives an idea of what amusement parks must have looked like at the time of their splendor.

If it wasn't for the tower, the park wouldn't probably attract enough tourists, and would have closed a long time ago. The tower draws tourists into an anachronistic amusement park, which we would only know otherwise by the descriptions of the historians.

In other words, the park survives as a parasite to a bigger attraction; as if it was necessary to go through wine cellars to



enter the Eiffel Tower, or visit a Museum of the Shoe to go to the Hollywood Sign in L.A.

Parasite attraction with a captive audience, Tower World needs no optimization. It stands here similar as it once was, unaffected by the passing of time.

The whole city of Blackpool resists optimization. It mixes attractions on a territory without any density or global plan. The promenades along the coast are still under construction, having not found their ideal shape after 200 years of tourist presence.

There is something captivating about such a resistance. It results in a city built as a collage of patched up attractions, shippets of materials. Blackpool has a charm that Disneyland will never have, despite or because of all the efforts they put to continuously polish and modernize its parks.

Blackpool has a childish feeling, like a city one would endlessly return to, looking for memories of immediate pleasures, in an atmosphere similar to some fairy tales (like the candy house in Hansel and Gretel – Blackpool as a giant candy town). The persistence of the past makes it a support for the memory of different generations.

This might be the reason an English person cannot understand why a foreigner would come here, since he has no memories to recollect.

Well, I do have a few though. Some of them are fictional, some are based on experience: memories of the Blackpool



such as I have rapidly seen it during a previous journey, last year; of the Blackpool such as I re-imagined it by watching the movie *Funny Bones* (which was directed by a native of the city); and of the Coney Island such as I have imagined it by reading its description by Rem Koolhaas.

Coney Island's golden age theme parks have completely disappeared, and therefore can fuel the fantasy and Koolhaas' magnificent overinterpretation.

Blackpool, on the other hand, still exists, in a configuration close to the original one. Blackpool is fully archaic. To many, its form and appearance are repulsive.

Unfinished Blackpool

Blackpool is no finished product. It is out of date, sloppy, fragmented, uneven, incomplete. It does not contain enough attractions.

Its charm comes from the infinite proliferation of bars, hotels, shops, the lawless accumulation of redundant attractions, the crazy stag parties and the costumes. The opposite of the Disney-like global design theme park.

Blackpool is improbable, bizarre and, because of this, has a metropolitan potential.

Contrary to the secular village, the metropolis – like the amusement park – offers different worlds, among which the



citizen can choose. It gives him the possibility to switch from a world to another.

The attachment to the ground, to the specific location, is rather thin. The metropolis offers interchangeable places, not that they all are similar, but because they all are compatible. One can switch from a city to the other, from a way of life to another... as one would switch from an hotel room to another, or from an attraction to another in a theme park.

An amusement park is a condensed metropolis.

A metropolis is an amusement park that has been stretched out.

The inhabitant of the metropolis could be a permanent tourist in his own city.

I would propose the addition of more improbable elements to the city:

More attractions for Blackpool

A Masterplan for Blackpool

Since the city's success comes from the bars and clubs, why not call on artists, publicists and other brainstormers, to invent new gathering places, new means of encounter, new kinds of love hotels, swappers clubs, implement Meetic and Facebook in the reality... Blackpool might become the world capital for interpersonal experimentation and alternative sex exercises:

a relational theme park. Make one night stands an artistic practice.

Other attractions might be of interest: imported historical monuments... Museums of everything: disco ball museum, slide museum, Blackpool souvenirs museum, Blackpool history museum, null stuff museum, hat museum... And a real Eiffel Tower, but higher than the original one this time.

Tower World has a special potential: there is something fascinating in the attempt to enclose the whole world in a box facing the ocean, but with almost no view beneath the 7th floor – insulation in the density, withdrawal in front of the infinite. Yet the reality is not so poetic.

A hotel might complete the palace. Temporary lodging is consistent with temporary attraction. The genius logic of Las Vegas is to have developed both together. There is no such thing as a hotel incorporated in the attraction

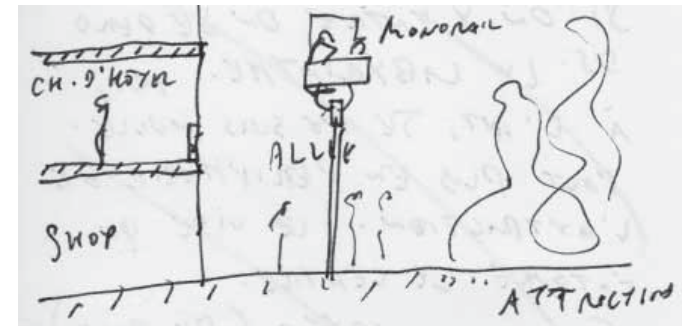
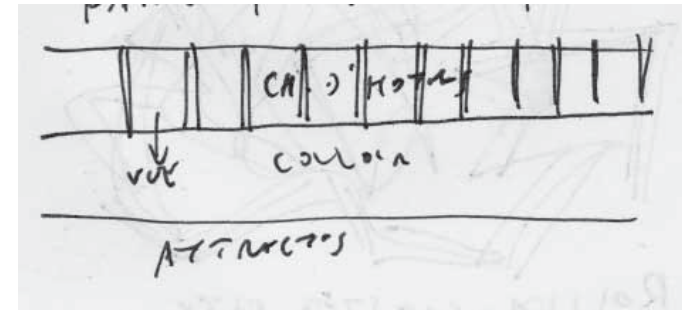
The hotel is a world in itself that adds its own universe to the one of the attraction. It makes the attraction inhabitable.

For the zone between Central and South Pier, I imagine a way to associate the attractions and the hotels in systematic and close proximity.

An infinite row of hotel rooms, built upon a row of shops, faces a series of aligned attractions, on both sides of an alley. A

monorail train passes in the alley. The passengers enjoy the view on the rooms, shops and attractions.

Together, these elements form a continuous hotel-attractions-shopping-transportation band, a linear theme park city that can deploy itself in three dimensions, like the rollercoasters of Pleasure Beach, to create a ride-city or Roller Coaster City.

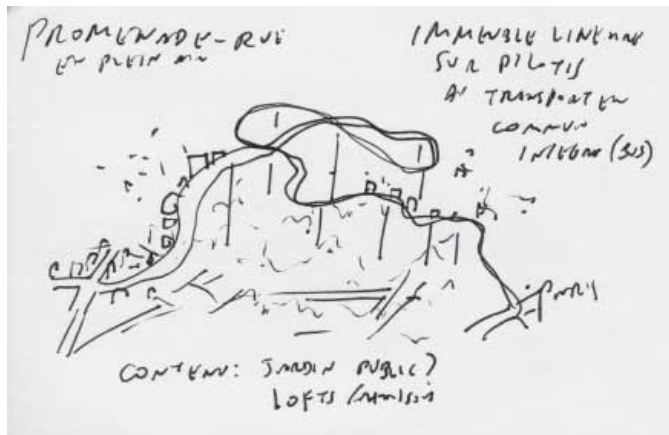


(Sketches were drawn during the voyage immobile)

The intertwined curves of the roller coaster generate a movement shaped city.

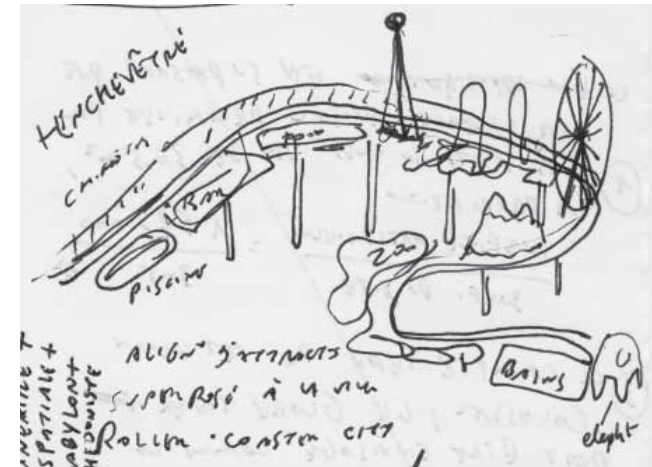
The band roams in the air. It adds a new line of attractions to the city, that it completes: Blackpool, Seoul, Paris...

Roller City is a mix of linear city (Arturo Soria y Mata), "ville spatiale" (Yona Friedman), New Babylon (Constant Nieuwenhuis) and hedonist urbanism (Rem Koolhaas).



Among the attractions:

- elephant hotel
- International Postcard Museum
- Public baths
- etc.



I write down a list of essential books:

- Conrads, *Fantastic Architecture*, 1960
- Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1977
- Colin Rowe, *Collage City*, 1978
- Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 1978
- Umberto Eco, *La Guerre du faux*, 1985
- Anne-Marie Eyssartel et Bernard Rochette, *Des Mondes inventés : les parcs à thème*, 1992
- Bernard Tschumi, *Event Cities: Praxis*, 1995
- Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, 1998

These books describe the principles that would allow to reinvent architecture and urbanism, far from the boring operative practices.

An urbanism of Attractions.

Strangely, they had almost no outcome in terms of built projects. It wasn't from lack of reading; yet their potential has remained unseen.

End

Tower World will soon be closing. Only 10 minutes left. I would like to stay here. I hate to be in a hurry. Time should never be squeezed in an immobile travel – on the opposite, it is supposed to be suspended.

8pm, the park does not close its doors. No one asks me to leave. A few guards pass in front of me but do not seem to see me. I fantasize on having become invisible, sitting so comfortably on my bench that I cannot be noticed. Forgotten here, I would spend the night taking notes.

But I go out, suddenly. It takes only one second. I thought I was far in the depths of the building, when I was actually on the ground floor, very close to the door.

I jump in a tram. From the upper platform, I look at the massive, undefined, unwelcoming building where I was sitting during all this time. Even if it was easy to get out of it, the

first word that comes to my mind is "prison". The box is not a magic one, like Mecca's Kaaba. It says nothing on its content. It seems to contain nothing mysterious, on the contrary, it seems to say "You will waste your time if you come inside".

Its secret is so well hidden that even now, I am unable to reconnect this outside view with what I saw inside.

A few minutes later, I am at the hotel in a very good mood: I feel like I have tamed Blackpool.

Photographs

p.12 : Blackpool tower. Tower World is contained in the brick building which forms the base of the tower.

p.14 : Tower World sign.

p.16 : Aquarium, Tower World.

p.18 : Circus, Tower World.

p.20 : Entrance to Pleasure Beach, under the "Big One".

p.22 : Blackpool's beach promenade.

p.24 : Blackpool city center.

p.26 : The "Family Bar" of Blackpool's Central Pier.

p.28 : Work of art, along the promenade, south of Pleasure Beach.

p.30 : Noah's Ark, Pleasure Beach.

p.40-41 : Pleasure Beach as seen from Squires Gate Ln.

All texts, photographs and drawings

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Proof reading

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