

Keeping up appearances

Regular contributor **Adrian Stokes** on the dangerous decline of our visual landscape

One of the most depressing journeys I take is by car, down the A1 in winter. Between October and December anything green dies, revealing a centre reservation and verges infused with a grim mix of thrown and fly tipped rubbish; by the end of February this is in full bloom!

I'm a litter picker. On family walks, to the embarrassment of our children, I'd often arrive home with handfuls of other people's cast-offs. The habit has been lifelong and won't go away. I remember a public information film from the 60's that showed a family pulling up in a field, off-loading a picnic, then driving off oblivious to the trashy foot print they'd left behind. I try to keep my patch clear, where-ever that is. In London, the Thames path between Kingston and Teddington was spotless and when I witness mess on the move, I fantasize about a world that see's things through my eyes and does something about it.

For me litter is an aesthetic blot on the landscape; a symbol of complacency and a creeping blight that has a dispiriting effect on individuals and communities, nationally. UK research shows 25% of us are blind to the problem, many happily owning up to "careful littering" (can on wall/ packet behind post etc.) but no one's immune to its effects. Casual littering of public spaces is symptomatic of a disturbing decline in the quality of our visual landscape and increasing disregard for its effects on those living in it and with it.



Litter and littering are metaphors for a malaise brought about by a subtle estrangement from so many aspects of our lives. We're constantly in receipt of goods and services paradoxically presented as time saving, life enhancing, health giving, more convenient, money making, da de da, when for many they are a source of bemusement and disconnection. My contention in this piece is that much of modern life has left some deeply concerned and many others indifferent, indolent and accepting. This in turn seems to trigger forms of behaviour that respond in kind, making bad, worse and precipitating a type of visual lawlessness

In the late 70's until to the early 90's I worked in central London and my commute took in Waterloo bridge. The view, day and night, was probably one of the great urban outlooks to be had anywhere in the world. West, up river past

the Festival Hall and the Shell Building, to the Houses of Parliament & Millbank, then looking east, more spectacularly, the National Theatre, OXO Tower, St Paul's and on to the City, with NatWest Tower and the Lloyds building visible. By the time my studio moved out of the centre in 1993, the city and the embankment south of the river, were about to experience an insurgency. The rise of the property speculator and fall of publicly funded master-planning and direction, quickly led to a loss of control, essential if we're to maintain the quality of places and spaces on which the soul of any city or town depends.

Try taking a 1980's picture and stand on Waterloo Bridge today. The city has become a hideous squeeze of ghastly towers crammed onto a medieval street plan, robbing the area and each other, of light and a view, whilst casting a shadow over anything of merit that happens to share the same neighbourhood. It seems branding and bulk carry the day in planning decisions at the cost of design, quality and appropriateness. The one bright spot on the distant horizon is that planned obsolescence will mean that this towering tat won't be there in 50 years and hopefully someone will have learnt some lessons. Boris Johnson with his promise that London wouldn't become "Dubai on Thames", certainly didn't.

London isn't the only major UK city to be affected, though the scale and nature of the problem is amplified there. Witness the miles



of ugly, looming, riverside apartment blocks, continually under construction on a promise to provide housing for London's mushrooming population, but which can only be afforded by a small minority of them. The failure is widespread; government encourages councils to raise money by granting planning permission to developers who build dull homes, unconstrained by minimum standards of planning, integration, amenities or heaven forbid, design and the public are left agog at what's happening in their back yards. Without enforceable, national guidelines and minimum standards of execution and with existing developer friendly, planning policy, it's little wonder we have something akin to the wild west, with cowboys in charge of building control.

On the other side of the tracks, once great manufacturing towns across the midlands and the north, have some fine buildings and would cry out for the opportunity to show their city cousins how to go on. Alas the only attention they attract is from conquering armies of retail park developers who lay siege to their centres,

pillage their customers and leave them utterly unviable; these become places where no one with a car would wish to be, let alone shop. That this model has been foisted on so many towns without any attempt to regulate or demand some form of reparations is disgraceful, carrying with it an incalculable cost to the social fabric and visual character of our country.

The irony is that the invaders are being invaded, as the next, unregulated business model, occasioned by Amazon in 1998, requires that we cover swathes of green belt with vast empty hangars into which "reimagined retailers" are currently decamping. Amazon started selling books online and now sells just about everything else, paying little tax and showing not the slightest concern for the whole new level of havoc they've facilitated. As ever the puffery which accompanies any new idea aims to convince bemused consumers that if it makes their lives easier, it will make them better; when nothing could be further from the truth. Change does not necessarily bring progress and ill-considered change will have consequences which for the most part are felt

lower down the food chain, by those least able to offset its effects.

We like to spend time in Europe which boasts some wonderfully well organized and culturally sophisticated cities and city communities. No-where's perfect, but generally we find they take pride in their history and historical architecture, and exhibit a desire and ability to integrate new developments in a sensitive and responsible way, respecting the needs of those from all walks of life who live and work there. Recently we were in Lisbon, which perfectly demonstrates this. A modern commercial port and city that exemplifies all of the above, from its glorious pavements, trams and historic architecture, to its modern quarters and transport systems planned and designed as a perfect contemporary complement to the established districts. It came as a surprise to see all that's good tainted by random graffiti, which used in this way, is just spray on trash benefiting only the vanity of the tagger. Lisbon has a transport network which uses a combination of early 20thC trams and their modern equivalents.

Opposite | Adrian Stokes
Below left | Litter, an aesthetic blot on the landscape everywhere
Below right | Litter picked and pristine





Trams which go up particularly steep hills are called Funiculars. These are beautiful, functional items, mostly bright yellow, with some, decorated to reflect the city's charming tiled walls. The obliteration of the decoration by graffiti is difficult to comprehend.

Having said that is casual graffiti any worse than the equally random acts of visual vandalism that pepper our skylines and sightlines? In London, the city's Walkie Talkie, Cheese Grater and soon to be built Tulip, will outlive me, but not my kids and can't be niftily obliterated by steam cleaning. Some may recall the paraphrased anti-war slogan from the movie Full Metal Jacket "join the army, see exotic places, meet interesting people and kill them". The wounds inflicted on our environment by poor decisions made at all levels, need healing. Whether it's dropped, sprayed, built or made,

the effects of aesthetic indifference are borne, knowingly or otherwise, by everyone.

There are some hopeful signs though. Recently I read about proposals from European environment ministers to force manufacturers to make goods that last longer and are easier to take apart and repair. Yes, "Make do and Mend"! (ND issue 65) The piece reported that the EU Eco-design directive is initially aimed at lighting, TV's and large appliances, which are over complex, difficult to access and don't have any repair instructions. Currently, household appliances are dying sooner and waste is living longer; manufacturers say the regulations will stifle innovation (surprise) but surely it must have the opposite effect and demand innovative new business models, products and services. Products that are better quality, simpler to repair or



upgrade and services that promote the approach and tune-in consumers to the benefits of *built out* obsolescence. It seems so delightfully simple, but as I've written many times before, in so many areas of consumer product design from kettles to cars, consumers are cash cows and increasingly detached from the products they own and the systems and services created to supply them. This is disgraceful and a situation that is at the heart of the disconnection we feel towards much of modern life. But it's a problem with a solution that the enlightened EU proposals might just bring about. Spontaneous change won't happen, it has to be encouraged; in part by legislation, partly by demonstration and lastly by fostering a realization that some change can be in all our best interests.

I recently read Simon Reeves book Step by Step in which he describes how, as a 17 year old with no prospects, he emerged from a hopeless, hapless, bedroom depression and began a slow



but accelerating climb, to emerge as the man he is now. A sympathetic lady at the DSS listened to his story of fear and failure before saying "If it's difficult for you, just take it all slowly. Take things step by step". It occurred to him he was no longer a child and should stand by his own decisions. In his case, it meant taking a train to Scotland, finding a mountain in Glencoe and, wearing the wrong gear, at the wrong time of year, at the wrong time of day and without any experience, start climbing. When others were coming down he was going up and despite their warnings, rock to rock, tree to tree, he reached the top and the effect was profound.

This chimes with me. I've learnt that presented with a visual choice, in the moment, most of us will instinctively make a good one and take a risk. But choice in general is complicated by intrusive advertising and interfering algorithms, eroding self-confidence and leaving us compliant. It's a form of brainwashing, the problem being that if



Opposite top | Waterloo view of the city in the 1980's
Opposite bottom | Waterloo view today a hideous squeeze of ghastly towers
Opposite right | Lisbon's beautiful trams
Below top left | Random graffiti, selfish vanity
Below top right | The Alton estate considered to be the most important example of 20thC housing to be found anywhere in the world
Below bottom right | Battersea Power station apartments, a tragedy of uncontrolled, developer led planning



consumers aren't trusted and encouraged to think and act for themselves they will disengage. In his book *the Wisdom of the Hands*, Doug Stowe writes about his innate connection to materials, in particular wood and the deep pleasure to be had when hand and mind come together, pursuing simple, functional beauty, in a problem-solving

collaboration. My feeling is that if we remove that possibility from the lives of people, we're playing with fire. In his teaching over many years Doug experienced the intellectual, practical, spiritual and personal self-confidence, which these kinds of activities bring with them and yet modern systems of education and commerce

commoditise and prescribe everything, costing us our individuality, ability to think independently and capacity for making good decisions. Simon Reeve found an empathetic ear who gave him his "Step by Step", mantra for life and I've read of similar epiphanies in, Raynor Winn's, *Salt Path* and Guardian journalist Mike Carter's, *One Man and His Bike* and more recently in the documentary movie *Free Solo*. Stories of people changed by adopting a similar step at a time, philosophy, whilst developing a deep connection with the world they inhabit.

Of course, 67 million people can't set off in search of themselves in the hope they'll drop less litter, but they can be encouraged from an early age to think independently, take responsibility, appreciate the world around them and become better able to engage with it. Good, functioning, communities require collaborative individuals if they are to effectively demand more from those whose decisions have such a profound effect on their lives.

Sad to say, no significant change will happen unless policy makers encourage behavioural change, through education from an early age and by demanding a completely fresh approach to city and town planning, where people's needs dominate strategy, not external interests. One celebrated example of wholesale innovative change is to be found in the Colombian capital Bogotá, where Mayor Enrique Peñalosa's policies helped transform the city, introducing a transport system based on the needs of all the inhabitants. In his 2013 TED talk he states, "An advanced city is not one where even the poor use cars, but rather one where even the rich use public transport." It would seem self-evident that if



people feel disenfranchised this despondency might play out in the wider environment. Enrique Peñalosa talks about the importance of hope and the consequent engagement of communities that feel they are being considered, all of which is clear to see in Bogotá. Problems at home derive from a failure of government and whilst mapping



out solutions is an activity way above my pay grade I can make observations as well as any, one of which is the willingness of people, individually and collectively, to respond in support of a worthy cause. From *Children in Need* to marches in support of a *Peoples Vote*, there's a right thinking, ordinarily silent, hoard, who will answer the call.

Opposite top / bottom | Bogotá mayor Enrique Peñalosa's visionary proposals gave the city back to its inhabitants with bus only roads, green pedestrian spaces and cycle ways

Below top left | Dull, pastiche, developer led housing

Below top right | Community led, award winning housing project New Ground in High Barnet. Thoughtful, beautifully detailed and embraced by the community.

Below bottom left | Isokon flats, an experimental building of 36 flats from 1934. Typical of an age in which architects and designers used new materials and ideas to create homes that considered the needs of people first.

In 2013, the once proud maritime city of Hull was chosen as UK city of Culture 2017, about the time Siemens chose it as the manufacturing site for the world's largest offshore wind farm. The city fathers seized both opportunities. They assembled a world class team to plan the event and restored its ailing city centre and great civic buildings to an uncompromisingly high standard. On New Year's Eve 2017, the people of Hull and beyond turned out and never stopped coming. In 4 years it went from national joke to a model of city and cultural regeneration, attracting £billions of inward investment. Like all cities it has challenges, but its people are once more "Hull and Proud" and it's a shame that political leaders don't recognize and capitalize on the latent potential of their citizens across the country; invest in their infrastructure, protect them from predators, give them back some pride and trust them to treat it well. Why they might all become litter pickers! |

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