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The Lost World of the British Leisure-Centre

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This article presents a brief history of the early years of the British leisure centre. To many people in Britain the idea of a leisure centre will be immediately and intensely evocative, associated perhaps with the smell of chlorine and the risk of verrucas. Non-British readers may not quite understand what the term connotes. To put it briefly: leisure centres are municipally funded, environmentally controlled buildings, with a free-form pool alongside other entertainments such as flumes (water chutes), sauna, café and so on. The subject is at first sight banal, even frivolous. This article is inspired by some recent writings by Joe Moran, who has uncovered a poetically charged ‘hidden history’ in such seemingly everyday environments as motorway service stations.¹

A 1976 article on the phenomenon in the *Architects’ Journal* commented on the recent boom:

Throughout the 1970s there has been a phenomenal growth in the design and construction of sports and leisure centres. The pace has been frantic, as if every local authority now feels the need for the new facility to be something which it cannot exist without, and like the pocket calculator, it seems essential to modern everyday life. How did we manage without, a generation ago? Some sports buildings, which cut across traditional barriers of class and privilege, have taken on a social significance which had previously been associated with the parish church or local hall. They have become an object of community identity.²

Architecturally, leisure centres provided sealed environments, heated to around twenty-nine degrees centigrade throughout the year, with ‘fun pools’ designed not primarily for exercise, but for relaxation. Rather than a rectangular pool for doing laps competitively, leisure pools aimed to encourage a ‘holiday atmosphere’, with ‘gentle changes in depth and curved indentations, punctuated by tropical planting’.³ They were unashamedly populist and lowbrow in mood: ‘Pop imagery of fun and sun is

seen as central to a successful holiday leisure centre, belying the municipal parentage.’⁴

The leisure centres built from the late nineteen-sixties and through the seventies are an almost completely unexamined building type in the British urban and suburban landscape, although their novelty was recognized and stressed at the time.⁵ They are nevertheless a highly suggestive historical source, expressing widespread aspirations for Britain as an affluent social democratic society in an age of economic and social change and offering a novel viewpoint on society and the state in the 1970s. This article is a response to Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton’s call for alternative readings of the 1970s, showing how a sense of crisis during the period was conducive to new ideas and approaches.⁶ It aims to historicize the phenomenon and suggests that these buildings are eloquent about a moment in British history. The leisure centre shifted the focus of the state’s provision of amenities away from the traditional concern with hygiene and fitness, towards more nebulous concepts of happiness, free time, and even fun and glamour. In a small way this shift suggests that this was not a period of sclerosis for social democracy, but one in which municipal government was actually expanding its purview. Such an argument parallels the recent work of Guy Ortolano, who has used a study of the New Town of Milton Keynes to make an important argument about the continuing dynamism of social democracy in the 1970s.⁷

Leisure centres were an attempt by the social democratic state to assimilate to affluence. Although local authorities would be their primary funders the centres were profoundly informed by ideas emerging from private enterprise, especially through the conduit of a small number of enterprising architectural firms. The resulting buildings belonged to a long tradition of the municipal provision of facilities to improve health and well-being, but their architects also imported into the public sector many features and ideas that had been developed in commercial entertainment. This admixture of public and private sector conceptions of leisure provision resulted in an innovative and ambitious building typology, one that employed new technologies of environmental control to create spaces of superabundance that would accommodate and celebrate a cross-cultural conception of the good life. Their planning also intersected with many local and regional issues, and they were conceived as having an important role to play in issues ranging from economic regeneration to the amelioration of social divisions.

Although the leisure-centre boom is a phenomenon of the relatively recent past, its world is one now lost. Almost without exception, the pioneering leisure centres discussed in this article have been demolished. The article will detail the myriad ways in which the future predicted by these buildings failed to emerge. It aims nevertheless to recapture something of the excitement and ambition of leisure centres when they were new.

FROM SPORT TO LEISURE

Municipal government had long provided amenities – from parks to public bathhouses to lidos.⁸ Leisure centres were an extension and aggrandisement of such older municipal activity, but they grew most directly out of the provision of indoor sports centres, with which they often overlapped. The Wolfenden Report *Sport and Community*, commissioned by the Central Council for Recreative Physical Training and published in 1960, had contained the recommendation that local authorities should provide indoor facilities for sport.⁹ The successful introduction of the oral polio vaccine in Britain in 1962 did much to boost swimming as an activity, as it eliminated the parents' fear of this contagious waterborne virus.¹⁰ Increasing recognition of the value of sport provision led to the establishment of the Sports Council as an advisory body in 1965, and its granting of a royal charter in 1972.¹¹ Its budget was small however: by 1973 only £5 million a year was spent, as opposed to the Arts Council's annual £17.3 million. Nevertheless, between 1968 and 1973, the Sports Council estimated, indoor sports centres in the UK increased from five to around a hundred, with up to another 200 in planning and construction and a further 850 needed.¹² Another report suggested that 350 'community sports centres' were built between 1964 and 1974, whilst 600 existed by 1981.¹³ An English Heritage report stresses the difficulty of gauging just how many pools were built during the 1970s – but estimates that around 450 indoor pools opened between 1970 and 1977.¹⁴ As the range of nomenclature suggests, it is even harder to ascertain how many of these pools were full leisure centres. Local authority expenditure on leisure centres (both those with and without pools, but excluding traditional swimming pools) in 1980–1 was estimated to be £102.7 million. This accounted for sixteen percent of a total expenditure of £642 million spent on leisure and recreation (half of which went on parks).¹⁵ A Sports Council graph shows that 1973–4 was when the building of both public indoor swimming pools and indoor sports centres really took off, although

significant growth continued throughout the decade, despite much lamented restrictions on local authority expenditure.¹⁶

Although the exact numbers for the growth in leisure centres are difficult to ascertain, these years saw a definite conceptual switch in provision from sport centres ('sweat boxes for gladiatorial combat' as they were disparagingly described)¹⁷ to leisure centres, with their more holistic ambition. This was recognized in a 1974 article in the *Architectural Review*:

This is the era too of the switch from 'sport' as a specialized activity to 'leisure' in which sport figures as part of a new better way of life... The achievement of this era will undoubtedly be seen in its attempt at a synthesis between 'sport' and 'life': the 'leisure centre' is a place for everyone, from infants to geriatrics.¹⁸

As one architect complained:

Sports Centre implies a smell of sweat, hard work and showers with men and women strictly separated and children a nuisance. Recreation Centre sounds like a place you have to attend after a prison sentence... The Arts Centre is too specific and misunderstood by half the population who think that the standard of performance and appreciation in such centres must be way above their head – if only they knew!¹⁹

The word 'centre' advertised the movement's local-authority origin – adding the 'leisure centre' to those bastions of interwar municipal socialism, the health centre, the community centre, the civic centre, and so on. 'Leisure' was developing its own powerful associations. As one commentator put it: 'The word "leisure" is rapidly becoming the "in" word just as perhaps "environment" has been for the past year or so'.²⁰ 'Leisure' acted as a locus for many of people's optimistic predictions about the continuing trajectory of changes that were perceivable in society, the result of a period of unbroken economic growth presumed to be sustainable. Much of this growth was predicated on a belief that there would be limitless energy provision, energy that would heat the artificial environment of the leisure centre. A foundational text for conceptualizing leisure was Michael Dower's 1965 article, 'The Fourth Wave, the

Challenge of Leisure’, published in the *Architects’ Journal*, and later as a Civic Trust pamphlet. Its explosive opening paragraph was widely cited:

Three great waves have broken across the face of Britain since 1800. First, the sudden growth of dark industrial towns. Second, the thrusting movement along far-flung railways. Third, the sprawl of car-based suburbs. Now we see, under the guise of a modest word, the surge of a fourth wave which could be more powerful than all others. The modest word is *leisure*... Leisure must be given equal weight with housing, schools, factories, hospitals, in the fight for space: nay more, it must be *built into* all these things.²¹

Working hours were steadily reducing, for both middle and working class constituencies, and the five-day week was becoming virtually universal. Two weeks paid holiday was creeping in. Wages had increased rapidly and people had more free time during which to spend them. Differences between classes were understood to be diminishing.²² However, this extra free time was seen as creating problems as well as opportunities – not just the fear of youth delinquency, but worries about growing boredom, and whether the countryside would be able to cope with the added pressure put on it by new forms of leisure pursuits.²³ It was understood that new forms of housing, growing usage of television, and the motor car were all co-operating ‘to isolate individual family-units’.²⁴ As Guy Ortolano has written about the period: ‘The leisure promised by the thirty-hour week thus threatened to produce boredom, loneliness, frustration – even “delinquency”’.²⁵ The *Affluent Worker* study had influentially argued that working class individuals had lost much of their traditional patterns of sociability, and were increasingly centred on a ‘privatized’ home sphere.²⁶ Slum clearance had destroyed many traditional spaces of conviviality such as pubs and working men’s clubs.²⁷ Children had become increasingly segregated from the wider urban environment.²⁸

Leisure centres were part of a technocratic and paternalistic response to these fears: ‘The scene is set. Millions of people will soon be emancipated from the need to work long hours, and, together with a rise in affluence, will need all the help and guidance possible from a perceptive environmental team in adjusting to a leisure oriented existence’.²⁹ Leisure centres were attentive to populist desires, but also keen to draw people away from less approved pastimes: ‘One’s attention and time could

become focused onto devious classes of sham leisure creations, such as betting, pornography, hunting etc. when our real wealth should lie in the appreciation of personal relationships.’³⁰ As Wilfred Burns (chief planner at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government) stressed: ‘Leisure pursuits need to be seen as meaningful activities in securing wider social contacts, developing self and group expression in society, as well as repairing mind and body after work. Recreation planning should be aimed at developing new activities as well as extending facilities for existing activities’.³¹ Dennis Howell, Minister of State for Sport, argued that those authorities hesitating to proceed with leisure centres ‘would do well to realise that there is a direct relationship between the failure to provide such centres for young people, where they can enjoy sport and relax, and the delinquency and vandalism that occur in some neighbourhoods’.³²

Leisure centres aimed to provide a wholesome alternative to the alleged anomie of the affluent society. The movement was nevertheless proudly democratic, and relatively free of do-goodery or Reithian paternalism; surprisingly for example alcohol was often on sale at leisure centres.³³ The leisure-centre movement was an extension of longer-term cultural ambitions to expand the reach of the welfare state beyond issues of basic survival.³⁴ By the 1970s, though, the high-mindedness of the postwar period was less prominent.³⁵ Leisure architects were briefed that, ‘The priority need for leisure is that of the mass majority of working people. Analyse what they want to do without prejudice’.³⁶ The architect Peter Sargent was proud that visitors to his leisure centres were ‘more likely to find fat, flabby squash players, juvenile, vigorous five-a-siders and milk-drinking body builders with pallid white skin than bronzed athletes’.³⁷ Despite this populist aspect to leisure centres, they shared with earlier municipal ventures into cultural arenas a view of leisure as something to be provided by the state for a public constituency, and there is little in the leisure-centre boom that envisions the kind of enabling cultural policy that was pursued, for example, by the Greater London Council in the 1980s.³⁸

Nonetheless, one keynote of leisure-centre provision was that it should appeal across the generations, with an implicit presumption towards the nuclear family: ‘Leisure should be all-embracing; the family must be involved.’³⁹ Leisure centres were also early in offering provision for disabled and elderly people,⁴⁰ a practice much encouraged by the ‘Sport For All Campaign’ of 1972.⁴¹ All of this responded to contemporary worries about friction between generations.⁴² Leisure activities,

especially sport, had often been gender specific till then, but leisure centres attempted to appeal equally to men and women – and tended to avoid segregation. With more women working, after-school clubs and child-friendly activities were increasingly important. The pioneering leisure centres were therefore attempting to break down the demarcations in leisure pursuits – between different generations, classes, and genders – that had often structured leisure in the past.⁴³ How far they actually achieved these egalitarian ambitions would come to be questioned by the mid 1980s, when it was argued, in line with generalized critiques of the welfare state, that the ‘main beneficiaries of expansion have been, in fact, the better-off sections of the population – the middle and upper classes and White [sic] upper working-class males’.⁴⁴ Such critiques shouldn’t however obscure the widespread and often vocal commitment to providing leisure *for all*, which was a marked aspect of the rhetoric surrounding the leisure-centre boom.

Architecturally leisure centres tended to take their cue from the cheap and cheerful modernism of private-sector developers. Nevertheless, architects largely failed to get private developers to finance leisure projects, at least on this more expansive scale. The commercial architect Owen Luder explained why. ‘Leisure projects were difficult to finance. As long-term investments, they rated well below offices, shopping and industrial buildings.’⁴⁵ A developer might finance less savoury forms of leisure, but the question remained for the architect, ‘Who is going to pay for his [sic] leisure centre? A developer perhaps? Well, if it is bingo or amusement machines, a dance hall, a discotheque or a pub – yes, a developer. But if it is any other kind of leisure then the developer or the leisure operator cannot be interested’.⁴⁶ Local authorities were persuaded to foot the bill, which was only partly recouped by charging. As the former manager of Harlow Sports Centre explained, ‘No community sports or leisure centre runs a profit and few ever manage to offset capital loan charges from revenue income’.⁴⁷ The average charge for an adult visiting a swimming pool was between fifteen and twenty pence, where the real cost to the authority was eighty pence to a pound.⁴⁸ Something of the economics of a new leisure centre can be gathered from Sunderland’s admittedly grandiose Crowtree Centre, (Fig. 1), opened in 1977), which cost £4 million to build. Over four million people visited it in its first three years, but its gross annual expenditure was £2.5 million, of which only £0.8 million was recouped by income. A hundred and forty-five fulltime staff were needed to run the centre, which cost nearly £1 million.⁴⁹ Despite this considerable expense,

leisure centres nonetheless offer an example of a growth of the entrepreneurial state: 'the client is still a local authority, but one which has taken on some of the attitude of the private developer and is drumming up business',⁵⁰

A list of thirty-four diverse local authorities that had large leisure projects in hand in 1973, from Anglesey to Wisbech, and ranging in budget from £30,000 to £2.5 million, suggests that there was no single type of place that invested in leisure centres.⁵¹ Nothing suggests that either Conservatives or Labour were more sympathetic to them. Nevertheless, there were types of community for which a new leisure centre had a more pronounced meaning, as they were seen as helping to combat particular ills. Many of the most elaborate leisure centres were located in seaside resort towns, increasingly unable to compete with package holidays abroad and suffering from the decline of the British internal holiday economy. A 'holiday leisure centre' could extend the season, and make up for Britain's frequently inclement weather. New towns were also particularly likely to invest in a leisure centre, responding to a widespread and longstanding sense that the new towns had failed to develop adequate social provision. Further, leisure centres were seen as having an ameliorative effect in the inner city and in areas of multiple deprivation,⁵² an issue of growing importance in 1970s Britain.⁵³ Inner-city authorities could often use Urban Programme grants to help fund centres. That leisure centres were seen as a possible panacea for social ills can be seen at its most extreme from the fact that in Northern Ireland: 'central government expenditure on leisure in the Province has increased dramatically, almost in direct proportion to levels of civil unrest'.⁵⁴ Leisure centres were one of the few areas where councillors could flex their political muscles after the imposition of direct rule. It was estimated that government sponsored leisure provision was better in Belfast than anywhere else in Western Europe, let alone Britain.⁵⁵ A further local reason for the leisure-centre boom was the extensive local-government reorganization of the period, 'during which outgoing councils indulged in one last spending spree, while, in an attempt to prove their worth, incoming authorities equally pressed ahead with their own prestige works.'⁵⁶

The Billingham Forum (Fig. 2) was widely understood to be, 'without question the father of the British leisure centre'.⁵⁷ It was started in 1962 and completed in 1967 (at a cost of around £1 million) by the architects Elder and Lester. Billingham, in the north east of England, was probably one of the richest urban district councils in Britain, thanks to rate payments from the chemical manufacturers ICI based there.

Billingham would be absorbed into Teesside in 1968. Billingham used the Forum in its extensive boosterish literature, in an attempt to attract people to the new town⁵⁸ The Forum was part of a whole town-centre scheme, completed by the same architects. It was based on a wider conception of leisure than later centres, as it included a theatre, besides swimming pools, sports facilities, skating rink, restaurant and bars. The Olympic size pool included tiers of stadium-style seating, suggesting that it was still seen primarily as catering for serious sports. This centre also pioneered having a first-floor restaurant overlooking the facilities below. Formally speaking, each of the functions of the Forum were readable as separate masses from outside, where later centres tended to be enclosed within a single structural envelope – allowing for more flexibility in what could be provided.

BLETCHLEY LEISURE CENTRE

When Bletchley Leisure Centre (Figs 3–6) opened in July 1974 it was, narrowly, the first completed free-form leisure pool in England (Fig. 7).⁵⁹ Designed by architects Faulkner-Brown, Hendy, Watkinson, Stonor, it cost £1.5 million, a last splurge by Bletchley Urban District Council before the largely Victorian town was administratively and physically submerged within the sprawling grid of the new town of Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes itself took recreation extremely seriously, projecting a £7 million budget for recreation over its first five years, to give it a ‘heart’ that it was felt earlier new towns lacked – especially in their early years.⁶⁰ Bletchley Leisure Centre was demolished in 2009. This section of the article uses contemporary photographs, architectural plans, and written accounts to imagine the multi-sensual experience of visiting that pioneering leisure centre during its mid-1970s heyday.⁶¹ These reveal the remarkable holistic ambition of an early leisure centre.

We arrive by car, parking in the multi-storey car park, which straddles a dual carriageway. It is near-impossible to enter the leisure centre at ground level on foot. The ‘brutally frank orientation towards the larger motorized community to the manifest disadvantage of the closer pedestrian community’ has been criticized in the *Architectural Review*, but then Bletchley is orienting itself towards supremely automobile-centred Milton Keynes.⁶² From the car-park we take a ‘space-age’ covered walkway, which snakes on attenuated piloti (piers) towards the leisure centre. This bridge is made of gleaming white prefabricated panels of glass-reinforced

plastic, adorned with a multi-coloured pop-art script advertising the centre. Out of the walkway's rounded windows we see a large pyramid, containing the leisure pool. It consists of a galvanized steel space-frame, glazed with double-skin dark-bronze faceted acrylic panels, which glint in the sunlight. There is a plan to landscape the area around the leisure centre with lakes and planting, but, at the moment, it is a wasteland – making visits by foot even less appealing.

From the confined space of the walkway, we enter a generously proportioned foyer, naturally lit. On this floor are several places to eat and drink, where the visitor can relax and watch the physical exertions on the ground floor below through floor-to-ceiling windows. A café to the right is top lit, carpeted, and decorated with exuberantly fringed beach-style parasols, and wire Bertoia chairs. The chic Keyhole Bar has Victorian style ironwork furnishings – alongside brickwork with trendy bubble-like openings. Dining at the restaurant is a rather grand affair, and the tables are currently set for four courses, with three knives and a soup-spoon, as well as wine glasses.⁶³ Returning to the foyer we look at a display of posters advertising everything from yoga clubs to orchestral concerts. The multi-purpose hall is currently being used for several games of five-a-side-football, divided by net curtains, but in the evening more cultural events take place. The London Symphony Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, and Yehudi Menuhin and his orchestra have all played recently. The last concert was by André Previn, who performed to an audience of over fifteen thousand. It is not only highbrow events though; the centre recently held a ball presided over by Joe Loss and His Orchestra.⁶⁴ The Compass Club provides discos, and later in the decade will become a fulcrum of Bletchley's thriving Punk scene.⁶⁵

After paying an entrance fee at the main desk we descend to the ground floor.⁶⁶ The facilities on offer include a projectile room for archery, a sauna, squash courts, a full-size indoor bowling green, a youth centre, a solarium, a crèche, an arts and crafts room, and even a municipally run hairdresser. The main event though is the pool, located within the pyramid. It is reached through unisex changing rooms lined with cubicles. The pool is free-form, lined with unglazed mosaic tiles, and is 1.5 metres at its deepest. Two promontories into the pool contain tall Portuguese palm trees. There is a precipitous slide into the pool, although it is not as impressive as the flumes that will grace many later centres. Looking up, we see hanging from the lattice of the pyramid's steel structure red-painted heating-duct pipes, keeping the room temperate. Flush grills around the pool mean it is roughly at the same level as the surrounding

floor, which is carpeted with a special material impervious to mould. There are deckchairs, from which adults can keep an eye on children without getting wet (there is a window onto the pool from the bar above too). Suggestions that they might be able to read a book at the same time are probably wishful though, as the ‘noise in the pool – as in virtually *all* modern pools – is deafening, like some electronic aviary; but then, when you are screaming yourself, fit to burst, you do not notice everyone else is screaming too’.⁶⁷

Kenneth Clark wrote about Victorian architecture that there were several stages towards seeing it as beautiful. First it was detested, then it was funny, then it was academically understood, and finally it was beautiful. The response to somewhere like Bletchley, from an era shrouded in a mix of revulsion and nostalgia, is just getting to the funny stage. It is a silly place and the idealism strikes, at best, as space-age kitsch.⁶⁸ But what if Bletchley Leisure Centre is as evocative of the human condition as Stonehenge, the Parthenon, Chartres, or the Crystal Palace? In the eighteenth century the French utopian architect Étienne-Louis Boullée envisioned a great black pyramid as a mausoleum for Isaac Newton; it was to be a monument celebrating the Enlightenment. Two centuries later a gleaming black pyramid, formed out of steel and plastic, was built in North Bucks – and it housed a leisure centre.

GILLINSON BARNETT AND PARTNERS

Although they narrowly missed out to Bletchley in designing the first completed fun pool, Peter Sargent and Clifford Barnett of the Leeds-based practice Gillinson Barnett and Partners (GBP) were architects who took the challenge of leisure deeply seriously, and the history of the firm is almost synonymous with the early years of the British leisure centre. Alongside Faulkner-Brown, GBP were the firm most active in producing leisure centres. As the partnership was described in 1972: ‘

Gillinson Barnett and Partners are the architects whose name first springs to mind in connection with the shift from ‘sport’ to ‘leisure’; or, if you like, with that subtle transformation of ‘sport’ as a worthy thing which can fittingly go on the rates, to ‘sport’ as a fun thing which can jolly well pay for itself. They bring a robust, North Country promotional spirit to the sporting enterprise.⁶⁹

Sargent's own eclectic and good-humoured approach to the subject is indicated in how he would have liked to spend his own leisure time, if he had more of it: 'A languid game of golf, chatting up prospective clients – a study tour of lesser known French medieval fortified towns – a quick devastating game of squash followed by three hours of serious drinking.'⁷⁰ In a slew of articles and reports Sargent and Barnett sold the idea of leisure centres to local authorities. Their writings on the subject are surprisingly cerebral, but also democratic and unashamedly populist. The firm provides a useful case study through which to explore the subject of the early history of the British leisure centre – and also to show some of the international influences that fed into it.

The partnership had been set up in the 1950s. It initially specialized in work for commercial-entertainment clients: ballrooms, pubs, ice-rinks, bowling alleys and so on.⁷¹ They practised a cheerful and colourful commercial modernism, and the multi-disciplinary firm employed architects, planners and interior designers. The vast New Bristol Centre exemplifies the type of commercial scheme from which their interest in leisure centres grew. Built for Mecca Entertainments, it opened in 1966 at a cost of £1.3 million. It comprised a dance hall, cinema, nightclub, bingo casino, numerous bars, and an ice rink, and the firm later imported features from it into their public-sector work. Working on ice rinks led them to think about large-span structures, and complicated interior environmental conditioning. The striving for new and innovative means of enclosing space led to disaster in one case, at Summerland (Fig. 8) in Douglas on the Isle of Man, where Gillinson Barnett and Partners were associate architects, working with the principal designer Michael Lomas. It was opened in 1972. The following year fifty people lost their lives when the building burnt down. After a comprehensive inquiry the disaster was attributed to misadventure, poor circulation, and lax Manx building regulations, and the architects were exonerated.⁷² It is very surprising that this didn't spell the end of the firm.

In the mid 1960s, at their own expense, GBP set up the Leisure Research Unit. The most striking fact that came up from their research was that only seven percent of people using pools could swim as far as twenty-five metres without a break; far fewer could dive.⁷³ Something more easy-going than the current sports centres was clearly required. They therefore did research into international leisure trends – 'we decided to put together all the ingredients we had found in other countries, to try and get the right

social mix'.⁷⁴ They were setting out very purposefully to invent something new, something attuned to public desires.

The main point of the research that this practice has carried out over the past six years has been a concentration on finding out what the public want in a leisure centre... the leisure pool movement [didn't just happen], but in fact it was the result of intensive research and every item in the pool hall has deliberate planning intent to provide a more interesting and attractive leisure environment.⁷⁵

The research included visits to leisure facilities around the world. They found that countries on the West European continent gave much more money for sport and leisure provision than Britain. At a date when Britain had about a hundred centres, Holland had 250 for a population of only thirteen million, whilst in Hamburg alone there were 200 centres.⁷⁶ Formally though, Western European centres did not excite GBP. Peter Sargent thought West German pools were little better than 'tiled urinals' – he was also doubtful that the British public would take kindly to the nudism prevalent in Germany.⁷⁷ Nonetheless Germany led the world in wave machines, although as Sargent could point out, wave machines were apparently a British invention – the first wave machine had been located at the Portobello open-air pool in Edinburgh in 1936. The firm funded research from Newcastle University and private manufacturers to create wave machines, and all of their built leisure centres included a wave machine, producing waves almost a metre high.⁷⁸ Rotherham, for example, 'had its magic German wave machine which, at the throw of a switch and an apparently alarming surge of electricity, sends high waves beating across the pool to break on a ceramic foreshore and up to the loungers in the sun lamp area'.⁷⁹

On their research trips it was the hotel pools of Mallorca that seemed most likely to 'offer what people want' – 'We found that people like to go to Spain, so we looked at those pools, and those pools are always free-shaped, they always have moving water, waiters at the side of the pool, palms, shallow water'.⁸⁰ This was a period of growth in Mediterranean travel, previously the preserve of the rich. The promise was to give everything Spain could offer alongside the pleasures of home: 'To create the beach in protected surroundings provides the opportunity for all day every day promenading in just a swim suit, to bathe in the warm surf or just bask

under a palm tree sipping real English beer.’⁸¹ The growth of foreign travel stimulated investment in leisure centres for two reasons. Not just did it offer a model of ‘what people wanted’, package holidays abroad were damaging the local economy of Britain’s seaside resort towns. Many of the first leisure centres were therefore located in these towns, and it was hoped to revive these beleaguered communities, many of which Clifford Barnett thought ‘little better than shanty towns’.⁸²

Other international exemplars that GBP looked to included the Agora at Dronten in the Netherlands, a multipurpose community centre, which prefigured many of architect and theorist Cedric Price’s ideas about flexibility and fun.⁸³ Sargent cites the influence of Price, ‘a great ideas man’.⁸⁴ Flexibility was a keynote of the firm’s approach:

It cannot be too strongly stressed that, as far as holiday recreation is concerned, many of the activities of the moment are fads and fashions. Their popularity tends to wax and wane and from time to time a new form of entertainment appears to enjoy its period of fancy only ultimately to dwindle and fade.⁸⁵

The United States was looked to primarily for its ability to finance leisure – and they admired American theme parks. Sargent visited the Houston Astrodome, with its vast dome, in 1965, the first year of its opening. Also influential was Summerland in Japan, a preposterously large leisure centre outside Tokyo. GBP’s design work was also heavily influenced by the space frames from Expo 1970 in Osaka.

The firm got their first chance to build a leisure centre in Whitley Bay. ‘We had time to think in the late 60s. Just when we were about to give up this research, the client of Whitley Bay came along. Whitley Bay is by the sea, it had many nearby swimming pools – so it was a perfect place for a leisure pool.’⁸⁶ They were initially asked to do a feasibility study. They submitted a vast stepped pyramid, built around a solarium with viewing platforms (Figs 9 and 10), and a dizzying array of facilities, of which they boasted: ‘Just as Blackpool has its Tower, it was felt that Whitley Bay should have its particular feature. We therefore decided to design the whole structure within a very large pyramid.’⁸⁷ The completed centre, not quite as ambitious as the initial scheme, but containing Britain’s second leisure pool, opened in 1974.

The completed leisure centre at Whitley Bay set off a string of others, many with remarkably grand intentions. By 1974 GBP’s clients included South Shields,

Sunderland, Ayr, Hunstanton, Havering, Rotherham, Swindon, and Pudsey. Swindon Oasis, opened in 1976, was covered by a forty-five-metre glazed dome, the largest of its type in Europe, and incorporated an extensive flume, which snaked outside and back into the centre. At the Crowtree leisure centre in Sunderland, twelve concrete piers supported a red-painted space-frame, created out of fifteen miles of steel tube, weighing 8,000 tonnes and spanning an area equivalent to three football pitches. The architects had to devise a computer programme to deal with the large number of components, and the 'frame analysis' was handled by a NASA computer at Houston.⁸⁸ *The Architects' Journal* saw Sunderland, completed in 1977, ten years after the Billingham Forum, as indicative of 'quite a definite change in thinking, a change from the premise of providing centres for sporting excellence to the concept of sport as a social activity for the whole family linked with a wide range of cultural and leisure pursuits'.⁸⁹ A concourse led through the building, which the architects described 'as a shopping centre for leisure activities and the concourse successfully provides inviting shop-window displays at a glance'.⁹⁰ Leisure centres shared much with the contemporaneous growth of the American style shopping mall (Brent Cross was opened in 1976), both offering the escapism of an inward-looking total environment.

The Sun Centre in Rhyl (Figs 11 and 12) was the most ambitious of the first wave of British leisure centres, and opened in 1980. It had what was reputedly the world's only internal rooftop monorail, as well as electronically controlled boats for children, three pools, including Europe's only artificial surfing pool, creating 13,000 square foot of water, with beaches, all beneath what was described as a 'Fosteresque glazed shed'.⁹¹ It cost £4.25 million (of which £500,000 came from the European Union's regional development fund), and did 'its best to recreate a South Sea palm beach'.⁹² The centre was conceived for the Borough of Rhuddlan in the hope that it would revitalize tourism in a fading resort and that it would extend the relatively short summer season: 'the Sun Centre provides everything a Liverpoolian holidaymaker could ask for, excluding accommodation which is amply provided by Rhyl's expanse of traditional boarding houses.'⁹³ The admission charge was £1.20 (70p for children), and was calculated to be self-financing as long as 2,500 tickets were sold each day. It was open from ten in the morning till eleven at night. By 1985 it was attracting 500,000 visitors a year, and was described by the *Economist* as 'the most successful tourist trap in Wales'.⁹⁴

CONCLUSION

In a multitude of ways, the world prophesied by these buildings has not come to pass. Predictions about free time have proved largely utopian. By the early 1980s it was recognized that much of the leisure these centres were catering for was the enforced leisure time of the unemployed: 'Leisure is much more socially important than accountants think. One underrated contribution of a leisure centre is that it gives people somewhere to go when they have time on their hands. Yes, I mean the unemployed.'⁹⁵ The language of optimism associated with leisure increasingly drained away, as was recognized in 1986:

As we move towards the end of the twentieth century, through a disappearing industrial landscape, the language of consensus and opportunity formerly associated with leisure is gradually giving way to the more dissenting and politically charged discourse of social problems. Leisure and youth; leisure and the state; leisure and social control; leisure and unemployment; leisure and juvenile delinquency and combinations thereof are amongst a range of concerns central to the current state of the art in leisure studies.⁹⁶

As this article has argued, many of these issues had always been lurking around the dialogue surrounding leisure centres, but they became progressively more pronounced over time. In the 1980s leisure funding was increasingly targeted at areas in need of 'urban regeneration'.⁹⁷ The Local Government Act 1988 however forced local authorities to offer the management of their sports and leisure centres up to competitive tendering.⁹⁸ The chipping away at municipal government means that the leisure centres one can visit today tend to be rather drab tatty places.⁹⁹ Almost all of the pioneering leisure centres mentioned in this article have been demolished – many recently. Swindon Oasis remains, and it should be listed as a matter of urgency.

The long-term trend of people spending more and more of their spare time and money in the home continued.¹⁰⁰ Gardening, cooking and DIY were all examples of growing home-based leisure pursuits. The growth in a multitude of specialist hobbies and sports also undercut a one-size-fits-all conception of leisure provision, as people increasingly formed networks of voluntary association through activities ranging from board games to book groups, canoeing to craft circles, mountain biking to metal detecting. In their early years, leisure centres had been criticized for catering

excessively to middle-class constituencies. For example, one leisure centre in a poor inner London area had been colonized by ‘white-collar professionals’, eighty percent of whom came by car. They had put off the local population: as a social worker put it, ‘People have a sense of exclusion. They say “people like us don’t go”. They’re very easily put off. People with middle class manners are foreign territory’.¹⁰¹ But as working-class constituencies continued to expand their horizons through affluence, travel, and television, the once aspirational forms of activity provided by leisure centres began to look *déclassé*, even embarrassing. Elites increasingly favoured more traditional pastimes. This process, and the snobbish associations that became attached to leisure centres, are easily discernable in a 1985 article:

Television and travel primed the ready and rapid embrace of the leisure centre. From Dallas and Benidorm have been gained new ideas as to what is with it, desirable and even normal. Traditional ways and the reassurances of the past that Post-Modernism and Neo-Vernacular assume are craved for are being sloughed off for the new conventions of all-over sun tan, trendy three-toned designer leisurewear sporting conspicuous logos, and quiche lorraine with Beaujolais nouveau or cocktails sipped in ultraviolet-lit jungles of tropical plants through which disco music perpetually pulses. The ethnic authenticity of donkey jackets, real ale and bangers and mash will soon only be for affluent aristocrats and urban sophisticates.¹⁰²

Municipal leisure centres would of course continue to be built during the 1980s and beyond. By 1994 there were nearly two thousand sport, recreation and leisure centres in the UK.¹⁰³ In 1980 Peter Sargent left GBP, alongside Mark Potiriadis, to form Sargent and Potiriadis (S&P).¹⁰⁴ Their Coral Reef, Bracknell (completed 1989), is at least as ambitious as anything built in the 1970s, and with its large pirate ship replaces sleek modernism with postmodernist fantasy. But other early S&P projects suggest that municipalities were beginning to have to compete more with the private sector for people’s leisure time: S&P designed the Treasure Island area for the theme park at Thorpe Park, which had been opened in 1979. The Dutch company Center Parcs opened its first British UK resort in 1987 in Nottinghamshire.¹⁰⁵

In the long term, places like Rhyl failed to reverse the decline of its tourism through its investment in leisure. A dyspeptic account of Rhyl and the Suncentre was written in 2012, and captures some of the sadness of this failure:

Hence, the Sun Centre, Rhyl's attempt to 'bring the seaside inside', opened to great hurrahs in 1980. Permanent summer! Tropical storm effects! Europe's first indoor surfing pool! But even from the outside I could sense the excitement hadn't been sustained. A massive plastic barn, weathered and anonymous, the Sun Centre looked less like a climate controlled aquatic paradise than the sort of place where you might find yourself losing an argument with customer services about a faulty leaf blower... Poor Rhyl. They'd drained the civic coffers building this place, only to see its attractions swiftly matched, then trumped, by every other suburban leisure centre in Britain.¹⁰⁶

In retrospect neighbouring Llandudno, which did not demolish its Victorian seaside buildings, and invested in a contemporary art museum, the Mostyn, has better positioned itself to benefit from Britain's internal tourism than Rhyl, where the Suncentre was demolished in 2016. Cities hoping to attract visitors increasingly invested in 'heritage' and culture-led regeneration rather than leisure. The partial renovation of St Katherine's Dock in London, completed in 1977, with its mixture of residential, retail, restaurants and heritage was an important indicator of this fashion.¹⁰⁷ Leisure pursuits would increasingly cease to be contained within a single building, but would come to inhabit the spaces left behind by the decaying industrial infrastructure of Victorian Britain:

Canals, after their workaday past, can be turned into waterways for cruising, canoeing and angling; their towpaths into routes for walking and nature study; their warehouses into museums, hostels and field-study centres. Disused railways can become private steam railways, bridlepaths or cycle-tracks. Disused gravel pits can become water-sport centres or be landscaped as the setting for waterside restaurants. Open-cast coal workings can be sculpted to form lakes, stadia and artificial ski-slopes. Disused engine houses, maltings and dock warehouses can become arts centres, opera-houses and studios.¹⁰⁸

Referring to the enclosed leisure centres that had popped up across Britain over the previous decade, Jonathan Glancey speculated in 1981: ‘As examples of architecture serving popular desires and as examples of an architecture designed to win back sun seekers from Andalusia and Catalonia, the current leisure pools will be of particular fascination to the social historian of the future’.¹⁰⁹ The leisure-centre boom that this article has described is eloquent of a moment in British history, but not necessarily in ways that would have been predicted at the time. Leisure centres were clearly built responses to the concatenation of local and national economic and social crises that continue to structure our narratives of the long-1970s. Yet it is open to question whether splashing about in a pool was ever going to ameliorate let alone solve urban decline, sectarian and intergenerational strife, or a profoundly shifting economy. Nevertheless in its optimism, creativity and ambition, the leisure-centre boom sits awkwardly with our current accounts of the 1970s state, and might therefore help us to reconceptualize the period not as one of moribund decline for a hopelessly sclerotic social democracy, but one in which the purview of social democracy was actually expanding.

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The Lost World of the British Leisure-centre Boom

by Otto Saumarez Smith

Abstract

This article presents the first historical account of the spectacular growth of British leisure centres throughout the 1970s. The first section explains why the concept of leisure became so prominent, and emphasizes the extent of the boom in construction of centres. The second section offers a tour of a pioneering leisure centre in Bletchley, Buckinghamshire. The third provides a history of a firm of architects, Gillinson, Barnett and Partners, who were particularly active in producing leisure centres. The article argues that leisure centres help us to revise a view of municipal government in this period as being sclerotic and moribund; instead the social democratic state is seen as expanding its purview and adapting in response to a range of issues.

