

# The Illegal Town Plan; anecdotal speculation for coastal futures

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## Abstract

The Illegal Town Plan aims to understand and develop community-based-futures for economic and social development. This case study describes and analyses an ongoing practice based research project that began in 2015; the project, ambitious in its scope, has engaged with communities, stripped of power, to develop and present new visions of their hometown. Located in Rhyl, North Wales, the design team have developed strategies, ideas and possibilities with the people who rejected a European future. This project proposes a form of economic, architectural and design speculation that aims to reimagine regeneration in a post-BREXIT Britain.

The case study questions how we, as designers, evolve and develop processes and practices, popularised through the evolution of Critical and Speculative Design (CSD), to think through alternative social, political and economic futures. The project utilises open, interdisciplinary, diverse dialogues with the intention of building a heightened notion of engagement and agency; we hope to demonstrate practices that allow speculation to become democratised away from the gallery and into the world.

In conversation with two politicians the authors were confronted by a growing realisation that there was a deep problem at the heart of regional development. There was a gap, a schism, between the community and those charged with the future of their economic prosperity. For the last four years, we've been trying to support the people of Rhyl to bridge this gap. As a form of participatory speculation, this project aims to build a new language and discourse of speculation; where underrepresented voices become key to the ambitions of a small town; where the outlier is valued for opening alternatives.

There have been many criticisms of critical and speculative design approaches in recent years. Some highlight key problems with representation and privilege (Prado de O. Martins & Oliveira, 2014), whilst others deconstruct the foundations of the approach, rendering it useless or defunct (Nocek, 2017). This project builds on nearly two decades of CSD experience (in both research and education) to imagine the evolution of the approach.

Through a process of anecdotalization, this case study gives four semi-fictional accounts of extraordinary moments that "illuminate the ordinary flow of events", whilst utilising storytelling as a means to "interrogate the research process itself" (Michael 2012, 28). The anecdotes aim to give insight into the unseen process of an experimental design practice.

## Keywords

Speculative design; participation; regeneration; experimental practice; anecdote

### 1. Introduction - A different type of design research

This case study describes and analyses an ongoing practice based research project that began in 2015. The Illegal Town Plan (ITP) has an unusual origin story, as it began as; an unsolicited response to the crumbling infrastructure of a coastal town; a furious reaction to the arrogance of designers; as well as a personal desire to 'return home' at a time of mourning and loss. During the last five years we've seen the project move from personal inquiry into the institutional validating frameworks of University research and teaching. Due to this atypical trajectory, this article will attempt to give an account of both the personal and disciplinary findings of a work-in-progress.

Many experimental and critical design practices are driven by personal curiosity; the creative pre-occupations of the designer/researcher. This form of inquiry-based-creative-practice, more akin to a fine art practice, often lacks external solicitation, brief or early identifiable research questions. Practice based research often finds itself in tension with more established (scientific) methodologies; where clear frameworks and methods are employed at the outset of the investigation. Neidderer believes that the methodological problem has more to do with the "prioritisation of propositional knowledge" (Neidderer 2007, 5) found in such material practices, whereas Law would suggest that social science fails to capture the "complex, diffuse and messy", leaving the textures of our social realities under examined. This means that the "(p)ains and pleasures, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons" (Law 2004, 4) are either missed or dismissed. This case study aims to capture some of these messy textures whilst attempting to learn from our journey. In giving an account of the processes of production and reflection, the messy methods that have led to deeper disciplinary questions, we hope to expose some of the hidden attachments and desires driving the work. In order to do this, we shall present a series of semi-fictional stories or anecdotes that aim to connect the personal with the professional.



Figure 2. Double Fair, 2014

In *Inventive Methods* (Lury & Wakeford 2012), Mike Michael argues that the anecdote can be used not only as data, but as a form of "creative problem making" (Michael 2012, 33). He uses two anecdotes from his own career as an STS scholar to unpick how the anecdote can be seen to co-produce the research subject whilst also acting as a way to uncover the material-semiotic

dynamics within the research field. He sees the anecdote as a way of “gathering, identifying, marshalling, ordering or making” (ibid) the social. As our project developed, we have presented work to a diverse set of publics (from local and national politicians, to conference attendees and masters students, to “lay people” interested in the development of their local town), through this process (an iterative practice of sense making through performance, presentation and discussion) it has been clear that certain stories anchor meaning in our research journey. These anecdotes crystalise the ambitions, problems, trajectories and intentions of the work.

Following Fineman (1998), Michael describes the anecdote as “an openly ambiguous textual form: combining the real and the constructed, holding them in tension” (Michael 2012, 27). It is the tension between the real and constructed, the actual and fictional, that resonates with the methods employed in Critical Speculative Design (CSD).

ITP is ambitious in its scope. During the last five years we have engaged with communities stripped of power, to present and facilitate new visions of their hometown. Located in Rhyl, North Wales, the ITP team have developed strategies, ideas and possibilities with the people who rejected a European future (54% voted to leave the EU). This project proposes a form of economic, architectural and design speculation that aims to reimagine regeneration in a post-BREXIT Britain.

The following case study will be structured around four anecdotes that give access into two parts of the ITP project. These anecdotes come from our experience in the field (i.e. stories of incidents that occurred during our time in Rhyl; thinking, planning, designing and engaging with the Illegal Town Plan) and aim to illuminate the complexities and difficulties of using speculative design processes to aid community development and support collective imagination. Throughout the project we have used a wide variety of methods, a design equivalent of a method assemblage; “a combination of reality detector(s) and reality amplifier(s)” (Law, 2004:14) whilst also trying to distort and affect the future using “fiction as method” (Shaw & Reese-Evison, 2017).

## **2. Rhyl’s historical context; a tale of coastal deprivation**

In order to understand some of the motives behind the ITP project, it is first important to give some historical context. During the last part of the nineteenth century seaside towns across the UK witnessed a dramatic economic boom and growth due to the tourist industry. However, since the 1970’s there has been a severe decline in the economic and social conditions of many towns due to tourists seeking holidays abroad. Parallels to the plight of seaside towns have been made with other ‘one industry’ communities; such as the steel, coal and shipbuilding towns of the North of England. Until the last decade the conditions of coastal towns were far less researched and understood, the UK Government was slow to respond. Seaside towns have some of the highest level of poverty and claimant unemployment in the UK, Beatty and Fothergill (2003) identify four interrelated factors that contribute to the state of affairs;

- The decline of the tourist base
- Weakness in remaining employment sector
- In-migration outstripping job production
- Housing and benefits driving a move to seaside accommodation

In recent years this has changed, major moves (including the Coastal Community Fund and the House of Lords select committee - Regenerating Seaside Towns) have set out a vision for the



“renaissance” of our coastal communities (see *The future of seaside towns*, 2019). This, together with a concerted effort from local councils and arts organisations, has meant that art and cultural activity has been positioned as a key driver for regeneration. Towns such as Margate, New Brighton and East Lindsey have seen a dramatic improvement of their economic prosperity due to investment and cultural activity.

Rhyl, a seaside town in North Wales with a population of 26000, has unfortunately not seen positive results from UK and EU investment. The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation in 2019 placed two wards in Rhyl's as the two most deprived places in Wales. The index considers multiple factors including; income, employment, health, education and housing, these results demonstrate the dire circumstances the people of Rhyl find themselves and the scale of problem local politicians face.

### 2.1 Creation Myth: Farrow & Ball vs. B&Q

#### *Anecdote 1*

The email arrived the morning after they'd been drinking down the pub. He half remembered a drunken conversation about his hometown, Rhyl in North Wales, but his hangover resisted precise details. He opened the email to find a render of a new colour scheme proposed for the buildings that lined the dilapidated seafront. Tasteful shades of blue, green and pink sat incongruously with his mottled memories of childhood. The redesign of 'Rhyl's identity' felt more Farrow and Ball than B&Q, he didn't know why, but he was incensed.

“How dare they!” he raged at his computer screen.

He knew at that point, he'd return to Rhyl, but he didn't know how it would change his understanding of belonging, education and design. Slowly over the next couple of months, whilst hiding away in his office, he hatched a nefarious plan to thwart these stupid designers and their banal paint jobs. He was going to reimagine a different Rhyl, a parallel Rhyl, where the glory days had returned, where there'd been infrastructure investment and political commitment.

His mother and grandmother had died the year before and he had no reason to return to the town. Thirty years earlier, he'd been desperate to escape the town with no future, but now he felt gravity pulling him back, he felt determined to find a different role for design; a subversive one, one full of idiosyncratic optimism.

This anecdote acts as the creation myth behind the Illegal Town Plan. It has been told dozens of times to people, across the globe, over the last four years. The story describes the accidental provocation of a long term project. It speaks of the informal moments that stimulate new ideas and initiate alternative trajectories in experimental design practice. However, at the heart of this anecdote is a frustration with design; the industry; the profession and common perceptions of its role in 'finding solutions'.

On reflection, the story highlights the following concerns:

- Designers often propose aesthetic solutions to complex, structural problems arising from late capitalism.
- Designers often ‘swoop-in’ to communities and act as saviour/heroes without the necessary relationships and invitation.
- Designers commonly over simplify, misrepresent and misunderstand the complex lives of their users.
- Public sector oriented design often engages and extracts value from communities without ‘staying with the trouble’ long enough to understand the real problems and possible solutions, using communities as a resource for their portfolios.

Although we have now identified the above problems, there was a deeper, more personal reaction from the author at the time. His troubled hometown had been the subject of a design agency brief and for some reason he felt ownership and protection over the town he’d left 30 years earlier. The proposed pastel seafront seemed to lack ambition and courage, especially for a town known for its Victorian innovation<sup>1</sup>. The email provoked the author to imagine a different Rhyl; a bolder response to the current crisis.

Starting with a series of semi-architectural drawings, these speculations stemmed from a desire to re-engage with his hometown, a chance to reflect on his memories; the renders (fig. 1 & 2) aimed to insert alternatives into Rhyl’s historic timeline, breathing new life into the town through an ambitious redesign.

Each of the drawings took a memory of a place or experience and imagined a different future where the decay of Rhyl didn’t occur; where the former infrastructure was super-powered, producing an alternative Rhyl with a renewed sense of optimism. These drawings laid the foundation for the project by looking to the past; using personal memories and nostalgic imaginations to understand different possible futures. The drawings could be seen as a form of ‘paper architecture’, sitting within a long tradition of architecture and design “proposals that identify a territory for invention” (Love 2010), projects that aim to imagine “parallel but possible worlds” (Dunne & Raby 2010). However, these drawings failed to respond to the underlying issues identified above and so indicated a need for a dramatically different approach.

## **2.2 Identifying the problem - The Cob and Pen**

As practitioners, the authors have been producing work, in what has become known as Critical and Speculative Design, for twenty years. CSD is often produced outside of market dynamics in order to question hegemonic forces and normative practices (Ward, 2019). In recent years, this form of contextual isolation has been debated and criticised as a position of privilege. Some critics highlight key problems with representation (Prado de O. Martins & Oliveira 2014), whilst others deconstruct the foundations of the approach, rendering it useless or defunct; “a simple way of designers internalizing the guilt they feel for a hopeless industry and then using the imagination to pay off a debt that is ultimately, unpayable.” (Nocek 2017, 9).

The authors, through projects produced under the collective name DWFE and during their teaching experience, experimented with different participatory methods. This particular form of “participatory speculation” (Ward, 2015) aims to ground speculation in reality through the collective



imagination of relevant stakeholders. After the production of the drawings, it became obvious that we needed to plan a field trip to Rhyl in order to seek an understanding of the resident's collective vision of Rhyl's future.

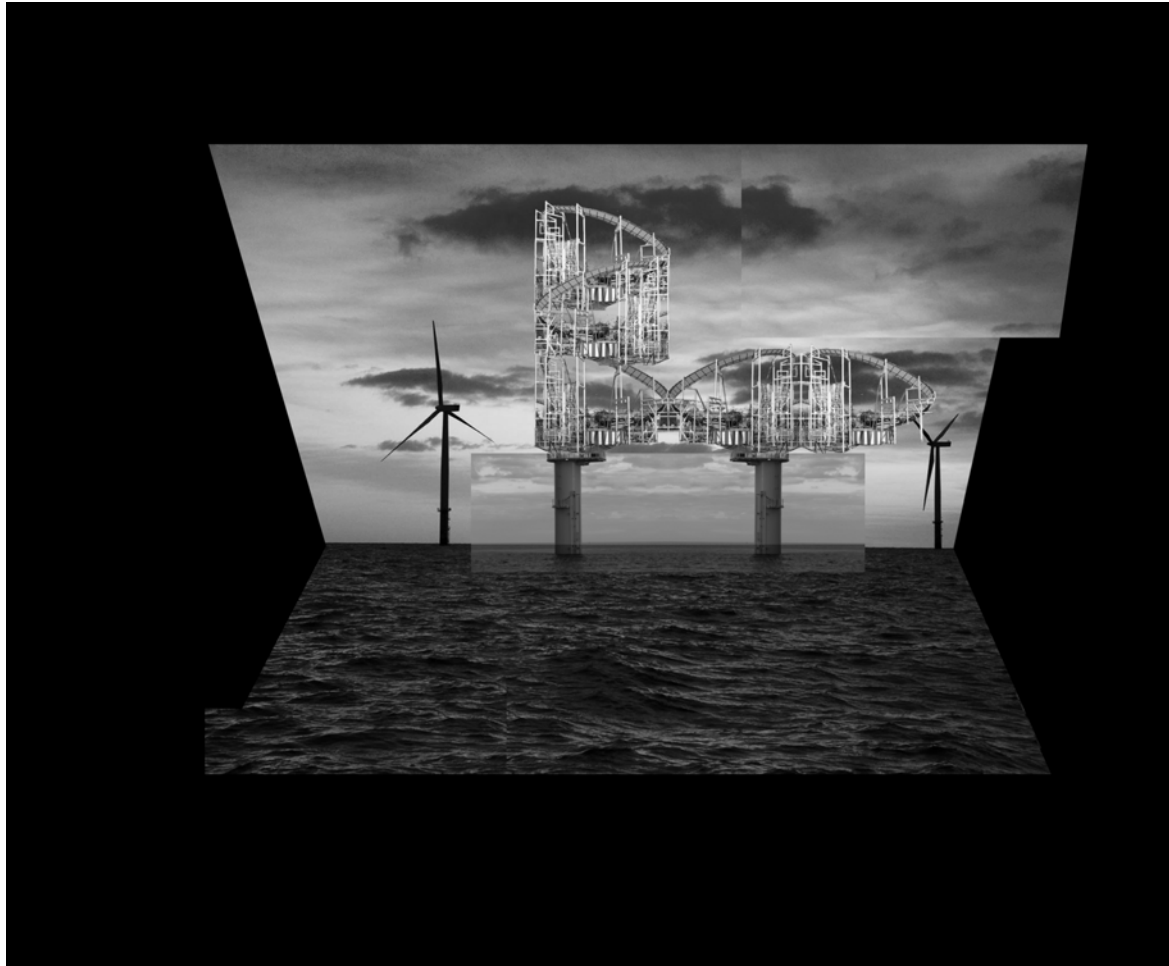


Figure 1. Off Shore Pier, 2014

### *Anecdote 2*

They were at the end of a long day. The four of them had come to Rhyl in hope to understand the state of the town. They'd ventured from London with a plan to unearth the hopes and dreams of the residents. It had been a bright and beautiful day, the early concerns of hostility and aggression had fallen away as they'd met a range of kind, generous and funny people. They'd spent time talking to shopkeepers and local pensioners, trying to distil the collective desire for a future Rhyl. Although they'd not found much inspiration in their vision, they had found some exciting social innovation; from East Parade bowling club reclaiming council property to maintain their community, to a young businessman hell bent on making Rhyl the kite surfing centre of Europe. They'd arrived at the Cob and Pen in a positive mood, ready to talk about local and national politics.

Paul was a local Councillor and Chris a Member of Parliament. We'd been introduced through Jimmy's step-father, who'd managed to broker a meeting. They sat on the sofa with





a well-deserved pint of local ale, when both men arrived. They were confident and talkative, both had an ease about them - well trained at citizen small talk. But this conversation was slightly different, the men were there to discuss the future.

After discussing the reasons behind their trip, they launched into a conversation about both the plight of coastal towns, and the mechanisms of social change. Much of the conversation revolved around access to funding; how the council could apply to the EU for regional development funds. Chris was already proud of the millions he'd managed to secure. Plans had been hatched to think about a new economic future for Rhyl.

But as the evening went on, as the drinks flowed more freely, a growing shadow dawned on them. The positive picture that they presented seems somewhat hollow. At the centre of their regional development plans there was the absence of ideas. Although they knew how to talk numbers - the spreadsheets of change - they lacked content. A seafront park, an out-of-town shopping centre, was the best they could do.

It was then that they realised there was a role for a pair of foolish designers in the town, they could return to help develop, broker and mediate the collective imagination, they could help produce a different image of the future; one free from soulless shopping arcades and call centres, full of the richness they'd felt from the residents.

Arriving in Rhyl, the authors and their two collaborators (Hefin Jones & Tee Byford) naively believed that they could solicit and capture the hopes of Rhyl's residents. Through the deployment of a creative method<sup>2</sup> they hoped to discover unusual insights; the hidden gems of creative possibility. However, the solicitation of futures is a complex process and their discussions with residents rarely uncovered anything new. On reflection, what they were seeking was an "image of the future" (Wendell & Mau 1971, 324-338); a collectively held conception of where the town was heading. They wished to understand how the residents of Rhyl understood their role in social and economic change.

In 1971 Wendell Bell, one of the founders of Future Studies, together with James Mau, put forward the cybernetic-decisional model (fig. 3). They conceptualised social change as a process influenced by "images of the future", defined as the "explicit anticipations of the shape of things to come" including concepts, images, values and beliefs (Bell and Mau 1971, 15). Although nearly fifty years old, this model is useful in positioning our understanding of our work, or more broadly, the hopeful utility of Critical and Speculative Design. At the heart of the research is the desire to disrupt or affect the collective image of the future; to insert material manifestations of the future into a feedback system in order to evoke social change. With this in mind, it is therefore essential to understand the relationship between localised images of the future (the local, collective images, values and beliefs about the future economic and social prosperity of a coastal town) and the political systems that influence and enable change, because: "Images of the future are of critical importance in influencing which of the alternative futures become present reality" (Bell and Mau 1971, 18).

Since Bell and Mau's conceptualisation of images of the future, our visual culture has changed dramatically. How images are produced, circulated and shared has shifted (or accelerated) the cybernetic model. The recursive loops, memetic cycles and cultural fragmentation of our future means that some theorists believe radical change is no longer possible.

### CYBERNETIC-DECISIONAL MODEL OF SOCIAL CHANGE

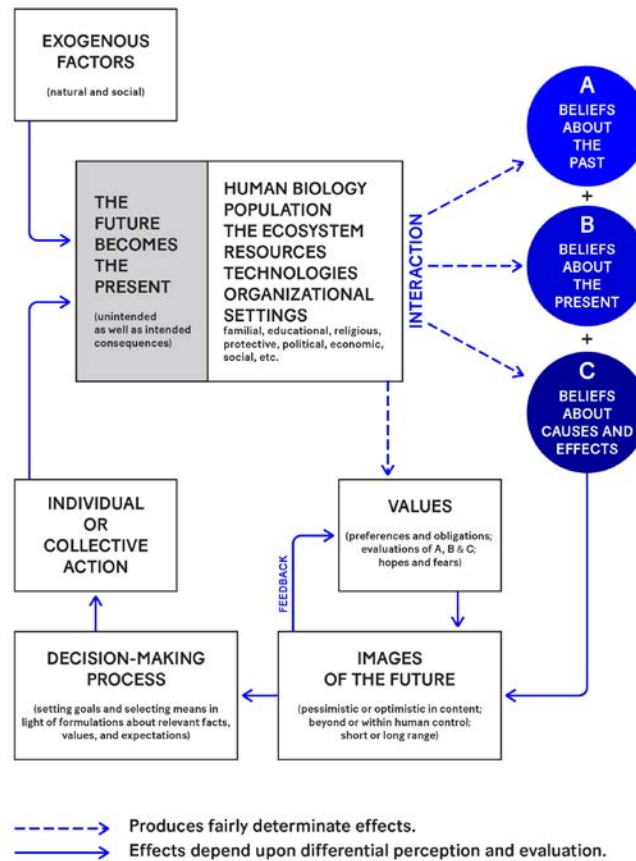


Figure 3. Cybernetic-decisional model, Bell & Mau 1971 (redrawn)

Whilst looking for the Rhylian image of the future, it became evident that many of the residents saw few alternatives in their town’s future. The images described, came from dated dystopian cinema and were accompanied with a deep seated pessimism that Rhyl’s economic status would never improve. When asked to imagine a different Rhyl, it was impossible for them to see that “another world is possible”<sup>3</sup> (McNally 2002). Many of the residents looked to the past, a nostalgic Rhyl during its heyday, to give them hope. It became obvious that some of the images of Rhyl’s future were caught in the past, and our role would be to locate, support and amplify new imaginaries from the cultural peripheries.

### 3. The World’s Longest Pier

“[T]he designer serves a dual role: as a futures researcher eliciting detailed narratives from participants, and as a kind of translator or medium, strategically reifying their thinking and concerns into experiential scenarios so that they could be seen, felt, and talked about more readily. The first stage brought futures to light; the next brought them to life.” (Candy & Kornet 2019, 4)

Candy and Kornet describe the practice of Ethnographic Experiential Futures (EXF); a means to make images of the future “more legible and concrete”. They see the experiential turn in the



2000s in future studies closely aligned to speculative design and design fiction (but with a sense of medium agnosticism). Their proposed EXF cycle tries to codify a method where “the imaginative ‘source material’ comes from the participants” (ibid, 13), this material is used to create alternative possible futures. The aim, and to some extent process, of EXF is similar to the work carried out by the ITP team, however, the following example evidences how the ‘imaginative source material’ can come from the most unexpected places.

*Anecdote 3*

He didn’t know why they were meeting Neil. Jimmy had told him that he was one of Rhyl’s ‘characters’, someone as a teenager that everyone admired. A proper punk, tough, creative... cool as fuck. When he walked through the door of The Sussex, Rhyl’s Wetherspoons, he didn’t look as vibrant as his description. However, he still had an aura of strength, an aggressive stage presence that followed him from the mosh pit into the local pub.

Neil looked at them both with suspicion, what were these two London softies doing in Rhyl? But after a few pints, the conversations and stories started to flow. Jimmy and Neil reminisced about their time at the Bistro - the venue that acted as the epicentre for Rhyl’s alternative music scene. Neil’s reserved and tough exterior, started to melt away. It was clear from the look in his eyes, that he was a man of consideration and sensitivity. Once they’d relaxed a bit, the three of them started discussing the future of the Welsh town. Jimmy talked about how he wanted to introduce a renewed ambition for Rhyl, we talked about the old days when ambition was rife; the floral hall, the monorail, the hovercraft, but that was gone now, even the Sun Centre had been demolished.

There was a long pause when they asked Neil what he wanted for Rhyl. He looked wistfully towards the seafront, gesturing towards the horizon, he said. “I want the world’s longest pier, starting here, and on it, I want a new university of music and media”. They were taken aback. It was the most surprising thing they’d heard during their visit. A wilful and possibly unrealistic ambition for a town that didn’t provide any Higher Education options for its teenagers. But Neil understood how music acted as a life line, a way to imagine a different way of being in the world. This was what he’d done for the last 30 years, now he wanted it for others. It was then, that they both realised they needed to help Neil in making his pier a reality.

Neil Crud, born in Rhyl, has been part of Rhyl’s music scene for nearly 40 years. He’s a singer and guitarist, playing for the band Spam Javelin. He hosts a weekly show on local radio and runs a website<sup>4</sup> archiving and showcasing the alternative music scene in North Wales and Liverpool. The meeting with Neil changed the trajectory of the ITP. The authors felt that Neil existed outside of Rhyl’s reality, he seemed to have built a level of resistance to the negative forces within the town. His engagement with the music scene, as a punk impresario, had built an armour against late capitalism’s loss of hope or Mark Fisher’s “slow cancellation of the future” (Fisher 2014). When Neil proposed a University of Music, on the world’s longest pier, we knew that his idea and energy was precisely what was lacking in the imagination of the politicians. This simple act of (possibly) unrealistic ambition started a project that is currently ongoing. Through imagining a different reality for Rhyl, based on his desires and interests, our interviewee set up a trajectory for us to follow; a future that needed furnishing, validating, scoping and planning.

The Pier has become a central 'object' of the Illegal Town Plan - it acts as a discursive device; a 'mythical end game'; a social and architectural ambition; a hyperstition ("a fiction that makes itself real through time travelling feedback loops" O'Sullivan, 2017); an alternative reality to gather people and their ideas around. The Pier has enabled the authors to discuss the future of Rhyl with a wide variety of stakeholders, to unpack the issues (untangle some of the wicked problems) that are affecting the town.

Although the building of the Pier seems unlikely, our dedication to the idea remains strong. The Pier, to some extent, has entered a mythic realm where the idea has transformed into different material and immaterial forms (fig. 4). Although we are yet to secure funding for the real pier, we wanted to start planning it as an architecture of possibility. In late 2018 we decided to produce an inaugural album celebrating the (fictional) opening of Neil's Pier. In February 2020 the album, 'Keeping in Rhyl - Punk Plan', was pressed on vinyl (fig. 5). The album contains twelve tracks, made by local Rhylian musicians, celebrating the music culture that has emerged and remains strong against all odds. Each of the artists on the album has been invited to become a Professor in their own department, in the University, on the pier. The departments include; the Department of Snowdonian Rock Formation; the Department of Sociological Malarkey and the Department of Psychomythogeographic Normcore.

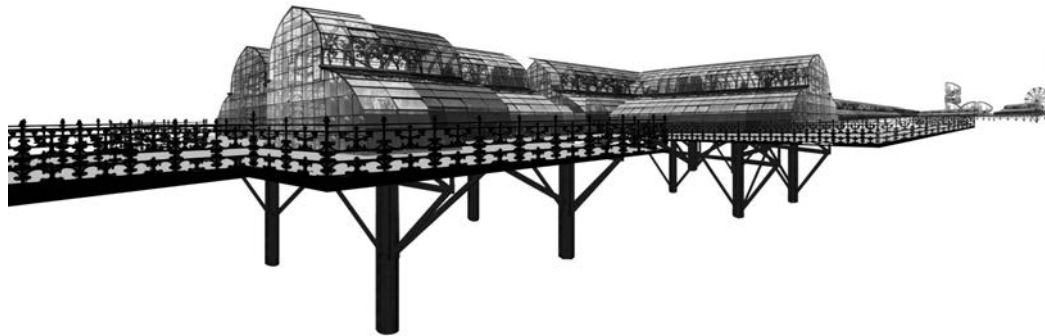


Figure 4. Floral Hall Pier Render

Choosing to produce an album, an unusual 'design outcome' requiring a set of skills beyond our normal material practice, yielded control and agency to our collaborator; placing our role as secondary to the imagination and cultural practice of Neil. But this wasn't the only reason we chose to make music. Music, as a form, has a rich cultural history in its role in political and social change. The interplay between radical politics and 'countercultural' or 'alternative' music forms has been closely examined since the rise of Cultural Studies in the 1970s (Grossberg 1992, Gilroy 1993, Fisher 2018, Gilbert 2019).

The collective production and performance of music as a medium to explore identity, belonging, history and politics has also been used by many artists and designers over the last two decades. Jeremy Deller's Acid Brass and The History of the World (1997) connects acid house music of the 80's with the traditional of Brass Bands of the North of England through a network of social,



political and cultural associations. In Stuart Hall's essay Jeremy Deller's Political Imaginary he observes that much of Deller's work aims to empower people through the idea "that people who are sometimes considered to be unimportant, or not worth listening to, matter. They are creative but often have their creativity denied or taken away from them". Giving voice, through music, to people normal silenced within our communities was also the subject of Dash n Dem's work *Grime Up The River* (2017). In this project they collaborate with local, Lea Valley, teenagers and a Grime Crew (Ruff Sqwad) to produce musical critiques of contemporary labour practices.

For the *Illegal Town Plan*, the album exists as a material manifestation of a possible future; a piece of speculative archaeological evidence of one of the many parallel Rhyls. The authors see the album as an indicator of hope; a hyperstition from an alternative timeline. The next stage of the project will see the album being (re)inserted back into Rhyl's music scene. A ripple in time, aimed at producing a sense of small-town pride.

"How we imagine the future, how we conceptualize the possibilities open to us, depends upon how we interpret our present circumstances. Too many of the stories we are telling ourselves seem to lead nowhere or to some place we would rather not go. Only If we begin to reread our own moment can we begin to re-articulate our future. If you want to change the ending, you have to tell a different story." (Grossberg 1992, 11)



Figure 5. Keeping it Rhyl - Punk Plan, 2020

### 3.1 The Nightmare of Participation

In *The Nightmare of Participation* Markus Miessen calls the form of participation seen in contemporary critical spatial practice as 'societal sedative', where the outsourcing of decisions pro-

duces an inability to hold those in power to account. Miessen links the rise of participatory art and design practices to the neo-liberal, market friendly face of the UK's New Labour movement (Miessen 2010, 42-44). Finding ourselves in Rhyl, designing a Pier with a punk, we had to ask ourselves: Is this participatory design? Or, how many people need to participate in a speculation, to make it truly participatory?

Participatory design, can be traced back to the work of Kristen Nygaard and Olav-Terje Bergo and the Norwegian Iron and Metal Workers Union in the 1970s. Their work examined the changing nature of technology within the workplace and how decisions could be democratised through a participatory design process (Bødker and Pekkola 2010). Since the 70s participatory practices have grown substantially, within a commercial design context they are most commonly found in the design and deployment of digital services. However, we have also seen a steep rise in the use of participatory processes in experimental art, architecture and design. Contemporary participatory design still engages in the process of collective decision making and the organisational implications of new technologies, and in recent years we have seen a critique of consensus based politics (Björgvinsson et al 2012).

As Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren (2012) highlight, the 'first crucial question' to ask in all participatory projects is; 'who should be included?'. Most participatory processes exclude some people, as many democratic structures (accidentally or through design) privilege certain voices. Often, within large multi-stakeholder projects, participants are sourced through 'grass roots' organisations or stakeholders defined by their engagement with a service or system. Both of these methods can ignore or omit underrepresented voices within a community. However, work has been done, especially within technology and social innovation circles, to locate the 'invisible actors' in order to challenge hegemonic domination (ibid 136-138). To take this question further, it's important for designers (and design researchers) to question and reflect on the ways they gain access to their participants.

At the start of the ITP project we found participant/collaborators through friends of friends, old acquaintances and chance encounters. This method has obvious problems and flaws. Due to the familial (step father) network of the author; our network was based on Rhyl's folk club, old colleagues and 'locals' down the pub. Therefore, our initial participants were dominated by men in their 50s-70s. However, over time this network grew, both organically and by design. Once we'd been introduced to certain 'key actors' or gatekeepers within the community (including politicians, civil servants, charity workers and shopkeepers), our network diversified in age, gender and socio-economic position. More recently the authors translated the project into a brief for our Masters students, at which point, our students helped continue to grow and diversify our network of participants.

Even with the inherent problems of representation and inclusion found within participatory practices, once a group is defined, discordant voices, unusual possibilities and alternative worlds become easily dismissed against a prevailing consensus. With this problem in mind, both Miessen and Björgvinsson et al., although coming from two different academic communities, reach for the same political solution to the 'sedating' or flattening effects of consensus decision making; the adoption of Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonism. Here a form of "conflictual consensus" (Mouffe 1999, 756) developed through an "agonistic public framework" (Björgvinsson et al 2012, 129) allowing for the transformation of antagonism into agonism in order to create a productive form of interventional practice; opening up possibilities and posing new questions.



In the case of ITP, the authors didn't feel that it was our role was to seek a 'collective vision' and for this reason, we sit slightly outside of traditional participatory design. We hoped the Pier would demonstrate that "every person contains multitudes" (Candy & Kornet 2019, 4), by inserting an idea from 'an outsider' into the normal decision making mechanisms of local politics.

#### 4. Meeting a rock legend

##### *Anecdote 4*

As Mike was a Rhylian rock legend, Chris was keen for us to meet him. A meeting had been set up for us to share our ambitious plans. Chris was convinced our ideas would resonate with Mike's desire to give back to Rhyl. Early one summer Sunday we set off from Euston on the train. Jimmy had made the arrangements (which had thrown me into domestic panic, as I struggled to find last minute child care) but the promise of meeting a genuine 80's rocker had me excited (although I'd never heard of The Alarm before I started working in Rhyl).

On the train, we started to discuss the day's plan - trying to think of our approach to the meeting. When I asked where and when we'd meet, Jimmy's face dropped. He'd forgotten to confirm. It was too late now, we were whistling through the British countryside, halfway to Rhyl, there was no turning back.

We arrived at the station, and still there was no reply from Chris. The sun disappeared behind the clouds and Rhyl was as grey as our moods. We'd travelled 255 miles to discuss a wild speculation with an aging rocker and we didn't even know where we were going to meet. As we walked through the Queens Arcade, a full scale depression descended. Were we delusional? There was no way anyone was going to take us seriously. Rhyl would continue its decline and we'd look as foolish as those designers painting the seafront huts pastels colours.

We needed lunch and, once again, found ourselves in the Weatherspoons. Packed as usual, due to its cheap lager and lunch deals, we tried to cheer ourselves up with a steak and chips. As the food arrived, Jimmy's phone buzzed with news from our favourite MP; we were to meet at his house in thirty mins. The steak and chips and good news flooded us with hope.

On arrival, Chris introduced us to two men standing awkwardly in his living room. We were a bit confused at their presence, as neither looked like an older version of Mike's youthful face on the cover of Declaration. Over the next 20 minutes new people continued to arrive, an older woman named Anne (who we were warned didn't like swearing), a well-dressed woman with a clipboard and sense of urgency... but still no-one resembled a rock legend. After awkward small talk we were ushered into the conservatory for tea.

The table had been set for 12, two seats remained conspicuously empty, but we proceeded with formal introductions. Looks of panic flashed between us, as the reality of the meeting hit us. We'd been called to Rhyl for a purpose, we'd been taken very seriously, and now we were being introduced to Rhyl's political and cultural 'movers and shakers'. There was a Member of Parliament, a Welsh Assembly Member, the ex-head of the local council, two heads of charities and to top it off a Senior Vice President of 20st Century Fox. They'd been

gathered to listen to our plans, so we opened the laptop and described our journey to date.

Half way through the presentation, there was a knock at the door and Chris nervously ran to greet Mike and his wife Jules. Arriving late was very rock and roll, Mike's hair was less back combed than I imagined, but he still had the air of 80's success. We continued with the slides, talking about Neil and the world's longest pier. We discussed the role of education and creativity in the building of hope, judging from the nods around the table, we'd struck a chord.

Over the next 40 minutes we witnessed the pier mutate and multiply. Our pier, Neil's pier, fractured into different multiple possible futures. Each of the guests grabbed hold of our impossible object and projected their own identity and hopes. For Higgy, the pier became an equestrian centre that celebrated Rhyl's famous donkey rides (a business that had been in his family for over a 100 years). For Rhiannon the pier became a film and cinema studio; bringing with it a new Golden age for Welsh cinema. Her charity, Wicked Wales, finding itself at ground zero for a visual cultural revival. For Chris, the pier instead of running perpendicular into the Ocean, ran along the seafront; Chris's speculation saw the Pier become an elevated high street for a new millennium, an opportunity for economic change. For Mike, the Pier became immaterial, a Virtual Reality walk through the histories and stories of Rhyl's rock and punk past. It didn't take long, but our fictional pier had entered the imagination of the participants; it wasn't our pier anymore, it had gone viral.

In the last 10 minutes of the meeting, a hidden agenda emerged; we'd been brought to Rhyl to discuss the site of The Bistro. Left empty for a decade, the council had finally had an offer accepted. The prime, seafront real estate had become available. In the shadow of the discussion about the pier, it made sense to be the starting point of our speculative structure, the anchorage of our imaginations. The group discussed how we'd take control over the development, how this group could become a new generator of Rhyl's cultural future. We couldn't believe what was happening. The energy in the room was electric, everyone was excited about the future, everyone could see a different Rhyl. But it was Anne, the Welsh assembly member that grounded the conversation. If Rhyl was going to have a new University, who would open it? Anne knew... it would be Goldsmiths North, the reversal of the provincial 'brain drain', a new start for the creative economy.

As we excitedly discussed the next steps, the moves needed to realise the pier, I looked down at my watch. My train to London left in 12 minutes, I'd lost track of time. Jimmy and I said our rapid goodbyes and made a run for the station. As we breathlessly ran through the back streets of Rhyl, panting, out of breath, we couldn't quite believe our luck. We'd started the morning depressed and sceptical about Rhyl's future, we left with hope and a site for change.

"Stories, by their ability to condense, exemplify, and evoke a world, are as valid a device for transmitting cultural understandings as any other researcher-produced concoction" (Van Maanen 2011, 199).

This anecdote starts to illuminate different ways in which speculative participatory practice is contingent on different contextual factors, or more precisely, how design's engagement in futures remains contingent on both presentational and performative factors:



Projects gain gravity and travel in unpredictable ways - Initially this story was told as a way to articulate how projects gather momentum. As an unsolicited project, where two designers set about an illicit plan to redesign a small town, the meeting demonstrates a moment where the idea of speculative architecture spread to a wider group of people. This is the moment where the idea went outside of discussions between two researchers and a group of residents, into the political domain of action. It was this moment, that the pier began to move closer towards reality.

Powerful and privileged voices - the anecdote can also be read through an analysis of power, voice and agency. In the initial introductions, the roles and titles of the attendees brought with them a certain weight. Although it wasn't a surprise that senior academic titles brought some gravitas, the sense of seriousness, agency and privilege it gave us was surprising. Through our performative role in the project we brought a sense of legitimate possibility. How we presented / performed the narrative was an essential factor in how seriously it was considered.

The viral nature of ideas - the anecdote also highlights the way that ideas, or indeed images of the future, move into the imaginations of those receiving future proposals. Through a series of low-res images and the telling of a story, the idea of a new Pier in Rhyl spread quickly. The notion of University of Music, a cultural instigator of regeneration rapidly became an attractive (desirable) future.

Ownership and adoption – during the meeting we witnessed the strange mutation and transformation of the pier. Each of the attendees took ownership of the idea and made it their own. Often, low-resolution representations of design work leave enough conceptual space for the audience to transform the idea into their own perception of possibility. This process, akin to Bathes notions of the power of readers, opens up a space of the imagination.

## 5. Conclusions

In this case study, we gave four anecdotal accounts of moments throughout an ongoing practice-based-research project. The aim was to illuminate some of the personal and professional drives behind the project. The first section outlined some of the problems within the discipline when engaging in urban regeneration and social change. A pastel re-design of a coastal town failed to engage the inhabitants or the problems in a deep or meaningful way. We highlighted concerns about how designers 'swoop-in' as saviour/heroes. However, as relative outsiders, we started this project from a similar position, but quickly understood that a longer, slower engagement was necessary.

Commercial design practice (in both public and private sectors), as well as academic research are funded through temporalities and delivery models built around 'quick fixes' and 'easy hits'. This form of short-termism restricts the possibility and effects of the methods used. In order to have meaningful impact, designer/researchers need to build long term relationships with people in their chosen community; committing to the relational nature of their practice. The emergence of 'living labs' in the early 2000s opened up new opportunities for place-based, open innovation (Leminen et al 2017). However, many of the labs are set up in Universities, technology companies or central government agencies and drive an agenda of 'innovation' measured only through technological novelty (Barry 2001). In order to understand, engage and transform towns with extreme economic and social problems, investment needs to be made in the infrastructure of the imagination.

The second section outlines an underlying problem in regional development; the absence of ambitious and imaginative ideas at a political level. Over the course of decades, Rhyl's economic decline has made it increasingly more difficult to create, project or define alternative images of the future. The paralysis of the political imagination can be addressed by looking further than 'models of innovation' or 'expert futurists'. A new form of 'experiential futures' can be utilised to expand the horizon of possibility by embracing the strange, edges of cultural practice. In describing our hyperstition object (the album), we put forward a new way to conceptualise material feedback loops in the cybernetic system of social change.

Designers who propose overly simplistic aesthetic solutions to deep structural problems triggered our journey to Rhyl, however, our frustration wasn't a rejection of the power of aesthetics. To the contrary, we see that affective, aesthetic experiences have an important role in opening up alternative futures; constructing new paths for the social imaginary. Our frustration lay with the ambition of engagement, creating banal renders of a cut and paste reality gave little respect or hope to the people of the town.

Finally, we aimed to adjust the resolution of our material 'images of the future' to leave space for others to imagine. The role of the designer, as a material-semiotic storyteller, is to find threads or trajectories in hidden communities, to give form to the 'weak signals', to support and aid multiple futures that are "prepared in the present" (Bell and Mau 1971). In order to do this, design education needs to expand its conception of materiality, enrich the tools and methods employed to understand complexity, and support ways to care for the lives of our 'users', maintaining hope for a different now.

"To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable. [...] Despair demands less of us, it's more predictable, and in a sad way safer. Authentic hope requires clarity--seeing the troubles in the world--and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable." (Solnit 2016)

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rhyl was home to many ambitious plans for celebration and regeneration, including; the Floral hall; a monorail; the Suncentre; a hovercraft service

<sup>2</sup> As a method of research we planned a series of Taxi journeys across Rhyl. The Taxi, a seven seat VW Sharan, equipped with audio and visual recording equipment travelled across town with the following passengers: A local historian, a local artist, a designer and an archivist. The Taxi driver was given instructions to deviate from the route if an interesting story or place of interest came to mind. The 'real fiction mobile' aimed to capture interesting local narratives, a strange mobile mapping service.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'Another world is possible' comes from McNally's attempt at finding an alternative to capitalism. The slogan has been adopted by many alter-globalization / anti-capitalism movements coming out of the World Social Forum in Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> [www.link2wales.co.uk](http://www.link2wales.co.uk)



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