BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

This article explores notions of publicness in relation to the recent history of Union Street, Plymouth, drawing on personal reflection and policy research. Until 2002, I would go 'downtown' to this street most weekends, often multiple times a week. Union Street and its many venues were notorious for DJs, cheap drinks, dancing, flirtatious or sexual interactions, violent encounters, and drugs. By 2010 most of its venues had closed, with the street and surrounding area falling into significant economic decline. Framing the street's past activities through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and Stephen Lyng's investigation of edgework, this article repositions the street's negative image in relation to theories of publicness. On this basis, I present a critique of planning policies that contributed to the physical and conceptual marginalisation of the area. Varied and pluralistic notions of publicness offer a means by which the recent activities of arts and cultural organisations in this area of Plymouth can be analysed, while also offering a way for me to reflect on my own positionality relative to Union Street – a research context and a scene of close personal memories.

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Parties, Planners, and Publics: From Memory of Nights Out to Urban Planning on Union Street

Henry Mulhall

Introduction

Growing up in Plymouth, I had a sense of remoteness to the rest of the country. This feeling was based less on geographic distance than to a conceptual notion of Plymouth as "behind" other areas of the country in terms of culture. The image of remoteness and being left behind was intensified in an area like Union Street – an area left behind in a city left behind. There is a long history to Union Street, moving from a dense collection of theatres and cinemas to nightclubs, pubs, and bars.[1] My memories of the street are based on its former life as a hub for going 'downtown', for parties and nights-out, and the bustling and intense atmosphere that characterised the nighttime economy of the street. This article focuses on a time between the late 1990s and the mid 2000s which saw many of the clubs close and the atmosphere fall silent. When I started researching art, cultural and community practices in Union Street for my PhD in 2018, I knew the street had changed but a sense of marginalisation still prevailed. I had first-hand experience of its former nightlife, but very little knowledge of what had brought it all to a close. In this article I specifically focus on the decline of Union Street's former night-time economy.[2]

Here, I reconcile a series of factors that have affected my understanding of Union Street. I move from personal and visceral memories of clubbing and combine them with theorisations of publics and planning policies. Through addressing a series of perspectives that disclose an overview of Union Street, from personal and policy positions, this article follows Waquant in combining *folk concepts* to construct *analytic concepts* in order to understand processes that have affected the area.[3] In terms of understanding and interpreting complex realities relating to policies, Frank Fischer says "the framing of an issue supplies guideposts for analysing and knowing, arguing and

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[1] The history of Union Street and Plymouth nightlife in general was explored by the project *Plymouth After Dark*: www.theboxplymouth.com/past-projects/plymouth-after-dark.
The community film group Imperfect Cinema have explored the cinematic history the street. See: www.imperfectcinema.com and Henry Mulhall*, 'Communities That Film, Watch, and Walk: On the Work of Imperfect Cinema'*, Culture Caleidoscoo*p*, 1.1 (2022).

[2] For an insight into more contemporary activities on the street see Mulhall, *Communities That Film, Watch, and Walk.*

[3] Loïc Waquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 8.

acting".[4] Following Yanow, Fischer asks what the interpretive communities and artifacts that carry significant meaning for the conception of a given policy could be.[5] By theorising my memories of nightlife I will complicate notions of publicness found in urban planning documents. Looking at my memories of drunken nights out through the lens of planning documents also offers a more sober perspective of biases I had towards Union Street.

I start by framing what I understand publics to be, using the work of Michael Warner, Hannah Arendt and Linda Zerilli to conceptualise a notion of publics based on the reception and circulation of discourse: publics formed by their performative activities of acknowledging, judging, and rearticulating.[6] I will then turn to my own personal experiences of Union Street's bygone nightlife that characterised my primary impressions of the location. Then, using several urban planning documents, primarily *A Vision for Plymouth* (known as *The Mackay Plan*) from 2003, I trace the decline of the night-time economy and a divergent vision of what publics are and how they can be addressed.[7]

Theorisations of Publics

Jurgen Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* gives a detailed account of the emergence and then transformation of Western modernity's bourgeois public sphere.[8] His work offers a "strong normative idea of publicness".[9] Habermas' ideas of the public as a space for rational exchange between equals has been critiqued significantly by feminists who question the notion of an equal footing for discourse as possible or desirable, and on the grounds of exclusion due to identity.[10] The notion of reaching consensus has also come under fire.[11] For *my* conception of publics, consensus is less important than a practice of acknowledging other people's perspectives. I aim to

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[4] Frank Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 143.

[5] Dvora Yanow, *Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2000); Fischer, p. 147.

[6] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and The Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[7] David Mackay, *A Vision for Plymouth* (Plymouth: MBM Arquitectes with AZ Urban Studio commissioned by Plymouth City Council, 2003).

[8] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

[9] Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 42.

[10] Seyla Benhabib, 'Communicative Ethics and Contemporary Controversies in Practical Philosophy', in *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, ed. by Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 330–70; Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[11] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

understand how varied judgements can inflect new perspectives in public life, rather than flatten them through collective agreement.

Warner and Arendt both outline a double nature of publicness. For Warner, the public is "a kind of social totality".[12] Arendt goes a step further, suggesting the public denotes the world as such, saying "the presence of others who see and hear what we see and hear assures us the reality of the world for ourselves".[13] For Warner, publics "exist by virtue of being addressed" which, for Arendt, holds significance as "everybody sees and hears from a different position".[14] Publics are created by the circulation of speech, text, and artefact with the potential for infinite address, acknowledgment, judgement, and readdress.[15] Zerilli says publics are culturally and politically significant not so much due to the subjects or interests they engage with but because of the "world-building practice of publicly articulating matters of common concern".[16]

What is at stake in these conceptions is not only the idea of a plural social and political discourse, but the capacity to take matters of political concern, and cultural artefacts into account, "to acknowledge them as potentially revealing of something in the world, then forming one's own opinion or judgement".[17] This is to employ representative thinking where we strive for validity by taking account of plural ordinary perspectives that alone give us a sense of an objective world that we have in common. Through an acceptance of commonality we can move from knowing that something is the case to acknowledging it to be the case, acknowledging it publicly.[18]

Zerilli's framing of judgement and acknowledgement, rather than knowledge and reason, as central to public discourse is particularly significant for me. Rather than what people know, it is their judgements shared with others, and their acknowledgements of others' judgements that form publics. In this framework, discourse, policy, and artefacts are active and performed, and these public performances of judgement are world-building. The possibility of publicly performed judgements opens the door to ideas of counterpublics where a subset positions itself in relation to a more dominant public. These counterpublics maintain an "awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one".[19]

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[12] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublic*, p. 65.

[13] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 50.

[14] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublic*, p. 67; Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 57.

[15] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublic,* p. 91.

[16] Zerilli, *Feminism and The Abyss of Freedom* p. 22

[17] Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 141.

[18] Ibid, p. 141.

[19] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublic* p. 119.

To subvert and form a counter public there needs to be a public to react against. To form groups within bigger more powerful groups, subverting powerful discourse to local, specific, idiosyncratic means is to question the very idea of a single world view. Here I use my experiences as part of a (possibly counter) public that participated in bygone night-time Union Street debauchery to question received ideas of rational publics that inform top-down planning practices.

Impressions of the Street

Between the ages of 14 and 18 (roughly 1998 to 2002) I would 'go downtown' most weekends, often multiple times a week. Union Street was the primary location for anyone going to nightclubs or night-time drinking establishments. The venues were known for DJs, cheap drinks, dancing, flirtatious/sexual interactions, excitement, drugs – all the things often associated with UK nightlife. Another significant feature of going to Union Street at this time was the threat of violence. Fights regularly broke out in some venues, and the street itself was notorious for fracas when pubs and clubs started throwing people out at closing time. Plymouth has a strong military presence, with Navy, Army and Marines all based in and around the city. It seemed that the presence of these military groupings added to the tension and possibility of violence. I moved away from Plymouth in 2003, after I had stopped going 'downtown' as much. I left with an image of Union Street that was fun, tacky, and tense. As a public space Union Street was known for both the carnivalesque and for edgework.[20] I will discuss what each term means in relation to my impressions of Union Street before outlining how these notions problematise and counter dominant conceptions of publicness found in subsequent planning documents that affected the area.

Carnivalesque

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, developed in *The Problem of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* is used to reconcile a notion of primordial, festive exuberance in a structured and classed society.[21] Bakhtin emphasises that the notion of carnival has various "nuances depending on epoch, the people, the individual festivity", and that it is played out in

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[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Stephen Lyng, 'Crime, Edgework and Corporeal Transaction', *Theoretical Criminology*, 8.3 (2004), 359–75.

[21] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* p. 122.

a language of "symbolic concretely sensuous forms".[22] He recognised that any social meeting or contact point "for heterogeneous people" like streets, pubs and clubs can be the site for carnival type interaction.[23] In the case of Union Street, although there are individual characteristics, the human interaction, on a symbolic level, bears similarities to other times and places that are the site of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin describes a theory of events that are ritualistic and therefore repeatable, but also chaotic and sensuous. This brings to mind not only the habitual binge drinking on Union Street that centred around rituals of excess, but also the way I and others dressed. All the men I knew, without exception, wore a button up shirt, jeans, and shoes (not trainers, the clubs would not allow it).

An important aspect of the events on Union Street was their containment within a specific spatiotemporal frame. For the most part, the drinking and dancing was for Fridays and Saturdays (occasionally other days during holidays), also Union Street was basically where everyone I knew went every week. For Bakhtin, during the carnival moment people and things that are kept at a distance through social norms and barriers, distance created by a "hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations".[24] On a Friday or Saturday night on Union Street "polls of change" such as sober/drunk, reserved/extrovert, young/old were turned on their head.[25] Through this "violation of usual and the generally accepted, life [was] drawn out of its usual rut".[26] The carnivalesque is permitted within contained times and locations where social hierarchy is subverted, only to return once the party is over.

It is important to note that Bakhtin is writing as a literary critic. When he says during carnival, we see a dissolved barrier between performer and spectator where "all distance between people is suspended [and] free and familiar contact among people" is permitted, he is discussing literary characters.[27] However, through his notion of speech genres Bakhtin connects literary concerns to life outside the text. He says, "language is realised in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in various areas of human activity".[28] Through these concrete uses of language, "spheres of communication" form with their own distinct styles and performative attributes, but "each

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[22] Ibid, p. 122.

[23] Ibid, p. 128.

[24] Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 123.

[25] Ibid, p. 126.

[26] Ibid, p. 126.

[27] Ibid, p. 123.

[28] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Problem of Speech Genres', in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60–102, p. 60.

sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of utterance. These we may call speech genres".[29] Bakhtin sees a link between the carnivalesque public square of the Middle Ages, filled with ridicule and abuse, to the modern speech-life of the European public square as a carnivalesque speech genre.[30] My teenage experiences of Union Street were carnivalesque. There is a family resemblance between my visceral experiences of Union Street and a conception of publicness as a space where people address each other in poetic forms.[31] It may seem obtuse to characterise the silly, insulting, funny, creative, and gross ways people behaved and spoke as poetic, but there was a world-building character to the release associated with such behaviour. To find a joke funny or not and to respond accordingly, to down a drink or not, requires an act of public judgement. Collective bad judgement is still public judgement.

Edgework

Edgework is a theory found in criminology that describes risky and/or illegal behaviour performed for thrills.[32] This notion is useful for me to theorise elements of the Union Street experience that broke laws such as fighting and drug use. For Lyng, the pleasure seeking and risk taking associated with breaking the law are forms of corporeal empowerment that subvert "regimes of work, consumption and communication that deny the creative possibilities of [workers] bodies".[33] Lyng frames these criminal, embodied practices as a feature of living in an advanced capitalist society, where bodies become alienated from their labour, disembodied by a "bureaucratic-capitalist system".[34] Edgework is embodied through the image of military personnel getting into fights on Union Street. Almost by definition, military bodies are highly disciplined and constantly subject to a higher authority. Historically, alcohol has always been strongly associated with the British armed forces, both to develop strong social bonds between soldiers and to deal with the stresses of military service.[35] Anne Fox suggests alcohol is used from the outset in

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[29] Ibid, p. 60.

[30] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 130.

[31] Warner.

[32] Lyng; Tim Newburn and others, '"The Best Three Days of My Life": Pleasure, Power and Alienation in the 2011 Riots', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 14.1 (2016), 1–19.

[33] Lyng, p. 360.

[34] ibid, p. 372.

[35] A.K. Osborne and others, 'Military Service and Alcohol Use: A Systematic Narrative Review', *Occupational Medicine*, 72.5 (2022), 313–23; Courtney Mireille O'Connor and Claire Dickson, 'Working with Culture to Prevent Violence and Reckless Drinking', in *Alcohol and Violence: Exploring Patterns and Responses* (Washington, DC: International Centre for Alcohol Policies, 2008), pp. 57–90.

military training practice to form social bonds and to separate work and play. She goes as far as to suggest,

> In pre-home-leave pep talks, it was common to hear a training corporal encouraging the recruits to get as drunk as possible, sleep with as many women as possible, and 'show the civilians what soldiers are made of'.[36]

This statement does not set military personal apart but frames them as embodying masculine practices that were common for nights out on Union Street. In terms of edgework, these nights out offered release where overbearing rules and restrictions were suspended through the chaotic interactions between bodies that could not control the other bodies they interacted with.[37] In a drunken fight the edgeworker is attracted to the indeterminacy of another body, which through violent interaction "extinguishes [their] own indeterminacy".[38] Edgework is a way to describe the *corporeal actualisation* of subversion, a physical performance going against the grain of what could be considered acceptable public behaviour. Bodily subversion seemed to be the primary motivating factor for many activities on Union Street.

Lyng suggests that these bodily expressions that subvert norms can be understood as political expressions. The body can be "a locus of political meaning, a site of both political repression and liberation".[39] The physical, possibly violent, or sexual interactions found on Union Street could be seen as a form of political expression. Lyng uses this notion to rethink Habermas' idea of publicness based on his action-theoretical framework where, at its base, all actions are theorised through communication that "presupposes language as the medium for a kind of reaching understanding".[40] Lyng's counter-argument is therefore that:

> By substituting the notion of 'corporeal transaction' for Habermas's 'communicative action' in the action-theoretical framework, life-world analysis can be expanded beyond the exclusive focus on symbolic interaction to consider other bodily transactions involved in production, consumption and social interaction.[41]

For Habermas, publics are interactions between people in space trying to find consensus through reasoned disocurse, but for Lyng, the problem with this is that it does not

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[36] Anne Fox, 'Sociocultural Factors That Foster or Inhibit Alcohol-Related Violence', in *Alcohol and Violence: Exploring Patterns and Responses* (Washington, DC: International Centre for Alcohol Policies, 2008), pp. 2–28, p. 7.

[37] Lyng.

[38] ibid, p. 369.

[39] J Ferrell and C.R. Sanders, *Cultural Criminology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), p. 314 cited in Lyng.

[40] Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and Rationalization of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p. 99.

[41] Lyng, p. 366.

consider the interaction between bodies and how they feel things in the world beyond a reasonable and/or structured set of criteria. With the overexertion of male bravado that comes along with "banter", heavy drinking, and displays of "hardness", people are structuring a public through acts of acknowledgment and judgement which do not rely on a dominant conception of rational behaviour.

Both edgework and the carnivalesque allow me to move from a space of bodily memory and anecdotal evidence to a theoretical and analytic space without disregarding my own corporeal and performed experiences. This is significant for my understanding of Union Street as the space that allowed this behaviour. However, these experiences are firmly left in the past as not long after I left, the night-time economy shut down.

Close-Down

The two biggest clubs on the street were Millennium and Dance Academy, both had been theatres and/or cinemas in their past, both having various names throughout their life. Millennium closed down in the early 2000s and in 2006 Dance Academy was shut down following a police drug raid. Due to its association with dance music culture, it was commonly known that Dance Academy housed lots of drug use. A local journalist, Carl Eve, recounts several instances of the former owner being approached by property consultants that wanted to develop the building following a large-scale regeneration scheme in 2003 (discussed below).[42] In 2004, the owner had cooperated with property consultants on a building surveyor's valuation report to assess the viability of acquisition. According to the owner this was undertaken for council chiefs, while in 2008, the council said the reports were done for the Southwest Regional Development Agency and English Partnerships.[43] In 2005, the owner said he would be happy for the building to be restored but he had invested too much money to let the building go at a low price, also pointing out that if he had not maintained the building it would have collapsed because it has been "left to rot by people in Plymouth".[44] It should be noted that in a report from 2005 outlining preferred options for the area, development of the Palace Theatre is regularly mentioned, framed as a "key feature of Union Street and an attraction of citywide

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[42] Carl Eve, 'The Full Untold Story of the Dance Academy and Its Closure', *Plymouth Herrald* (Plymouth, 27 September 2016), section News, Online. [www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/plymouth-news/full-story-dance-academy-closure-431775].

[43] Eve.

[44] Eve.

importance".[45] The building is also linked to the Millbay developments discussed below.

The idea that venues on Union Street had been allowed to dilapidate and that the nightclub closures, even if coincidental, connected to urban planning initiatives beyond Union Street seemed to follow on from Mackay's *A Vision of Plymouth* commissioned in 2003[46]. I will now outline how this plan affected the urban geography of the Union Street area before linking these concerns to further understanding of Union Street publics.

A Vision for Plymouth: Mackay's plan

In 2003 Plymouth City Council and MBM Arquitectes with AZ Urban Studio published *A Vision for Plymouth*. The lead architect, David Mackay, was known for his work on Barcelona's port area and their Olympic Village. This plan was colloquially known as *The Mackay Plan*. I was 10 at the time of its publication, and I remember my parents' enthusiasm over the possibility of some well needed regeneration and revitalisation in the city. In this section, I will describe what the vision entailed and outline its intersections with the physical and conceptual space of Union Street.

The document signals that there was collaboration between many Plymouth citizens and relevant council offices, although it offers little detail on the nature of such collaboration. It then goes on to set out its task of:

> delivering the highest possible quality buildings and public spaces to attract and sustain the highest quality business, education, living, and recreation opportunities for citizens, investors, and visitors alike.[47]

From the outset, the rhetoric found in the document relies on an abstract scale of quality, one that is not clearly defined or assigned to any group or person. The reader is not offered an empirical example of what high or low quality is. The plan is not only for citizens but also investors and visitors. Through his proposals, Mackay aims to increase economic appeal as much as raise the quality of living standards, perhaps these two concerns are intrinsically linked for the author.

As the plan continues, in a largely positive way, Mackay critiques the Plymouth city centre post-WWII reconstruction plan of Sir Patrick Abercrombie.[48] Following the thinking

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[45] Plymouth City Council, *Millbay and Stonehouse Area Action Plan: Millbay Preferred Options* (Plymouth: Plymouth City Council, 2005), p. 8.

[46] David Mackay, *A Vision for Plymouth* (Plymouth: MBM Arquitectes with AZ Urban Studio commissioned by Plymouth City Council, 2003).

[47] Mackay, p. 4.

[48] Patrick Abercrombie and others, *A Plan for Plymouth* (Plymouth, UK: Plymouth City Council, 1943).

at the time, Abercrombie separated various facets of life into geographically delineated sections like leisure, living, shopping, education etc.[49] Notably, roads were understood as undesirable but necessary to connect these various zones of use. For Mackay, this led to exclusionary spatial arrangements such as major roads blocking off housing estates from the main shopping areas. Consequently, Plymouth city centre needed "the right instruments to repair [its] urban environments and these are now being found in looking again at the quality of [its] public space".[50] Union Street is an important connecting road, named "Union" because it linked the three original towns that comprise the modern-day city: Devonport, Stonehouse, and Plymouth. However, the report notes that Union Street is spatially excluded from the centre by a "triangular traffic collar [preventing] the economic, social and cultural energies to circulate through the body of the city".[51]

The majority of Mackay's plan is based around maintaining the original elements of the 1940's Abercrombie plan while adding significant access and emphasis on Plymouth's waterfront. He says, "the whole waterfront can achieve a critical mass that both defines and drives the vitality of the city centre".[52] Since I left Plymouth there have been many developments along the waterfront. Moving from West to East, The Royal William yard, a former naval victualling yard was developed by Urban Splash in 2008; a series of developments umbrellaed under the title 'Millbay Masterplan' also got underway in 2008. The Hoe and Barbican have always been popular destinations but to the East, Queen Anne's Battery Marina has seen significant change with the neighbouring Alma Yard completing this line of development to the East of the city. Millbay, just south of Union Street, was an awkward moment in this route due to its varied buildings that included many light industrial units and disused harbour areas. Millbay has seen the most significant shift in character.

Mackay frames the ability to walk around as key to defining and developing public space.[53] For the plan to achieve its vision of a vibrant public realm, people need to be able to walk the city on foot. Here, the public realm is purely spatial and therefore is distinct from publics which are as much about the exchange of discourse as the physical environment where such exchanges happen. Due to Mackay's emphasis on walking, Millbay would need to be developed as it blocked a passage from the Royal William Yard

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[49] Harriet Atkinson, 'The First Modern Townscape', in *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating the Modern Townscape* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 72–89; *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating The Modern Townscape*, ed. by John Pendlebury, Erdem Erten, and Peter J. Larkham (London: Routledge, 2015).

[50] Mackay, p. 5.

[51] Ibid, p. 22.

[52] Ibid, p. 19.

[53] Ibid, p. 20.

to the rest of the city and waterfront. It should be noted that Union Street, although away from the water, already provided a route from West to East. Millbay Boulevard that was completed in 2020 could be seen as a spatial workaround to connect other developments in Milbay to the city centre, avoiding Union Street.[54]

The Millbay Master plan is a collaboration between The English Cities Fund, Homes England, Legal & General and Muse.[55] The council, after Mackay's vision, designated the area as "one of the greatest opportunities for transformation".[56] The *Vision for Millbay* website describes itself as:

> one of the largest regeneration projects in the south of England [that] is creating a vibrant new waterfront quarter for Plymouth [combining] residential, leisure, business, and retail development, with high quality public spaces and direct access to the waterfront.[57]

The area offered space to develop without the need to renovate older listed buildings such as those found on Union Street, while also allowing for a less broken path along the sea as per Mackay's plan. I have little memory of the area before it was developed but Millbay Road was heavily associated with drugs and sex work which is framed as a major reason for reducing the night-time economy on Union Street.[58] In two council documents from that period, the Union Street area is characterised as having significant issues relating to drugs, violence, and poor housing.[59] The preferred solution to this problem seems to have been to shut down or curb the night-time economy rather than look to any root causes to such problems.

In 2003, the government published *The Evening Economy and the Urban Renaissance*, a report into national night-time economies. While it acknowledges that pubs, clubs, and bars offer economic income to cities, "spontaneous, unplanned growth focussed around a heavy drinking culture can have a negative effect, creating crime and disorder".[60] The report suggests that the UK should look to Europe for inspiration where city centres hold a range of activities for all ages, whereas in the UK they are focused on young people drinking. It goes on to frame public activity as a series of economic exchanges rather than a set of cultural interactions. Young people "drink standing up, in crowded,

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[54] For more information see: www.awpexeter.com/news/millbay-boulevard-plymouth.

[55] Vision for Millbay, 'Masterplan', *Millbay*, 2006 <https://www.millbayplymouth.com/about-millbay/millbay-masterplan/> [accessed 18 August 2023].

[56] PCC Department of Development, *A Vision For Plymouth: A Past with a Future* (Plymouth: Plymouth City Council, 2003).

[57] Vision for Millbay.

[58] Department of Development, *Millbay and Stonehouse Action Plan* (Plymouth: Plymouth City Council, 2006).

[59] Department of Development; Plymouth City Council.

[60] ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee, *The Evening Economy and the Urban Renaissance* (London: The House of Commons, 2003), p. 8–9.

bustling environments where music is played at high volume", which leads to clubs, more drinking and later, takeaway food.[61] Older people avoid city centres due to this behaviour. Although my experiences of Union Street were predominantly of young people, I also had friends' parents who went to the same clubs. Also, binge drinking was part of a certain UK culture and happened in parks and people's homes as much as in city centre venues. The report frames an admittedly problematic aspect of British public life and culture as a planning, policy, and licensing issue. Theories of edgework and the carnivalesque help to move beyond framing problematic aspects of nightlife as a series of economic actors interacting in space to a cultural formation that manifests a series of more embedded social dynamics. It is less a question of what young people do in city centres when they drink than why young people drink in city centres. The report does comment on binge drinking, but in terms of something that can be educated out of young people rather than a longstanding endemic characteristic of UK life. [62] In the report's call for "Bologna in Birmingham, Madrid in Manchester" it brushes aside what is specific about places, people and cultures.[63] Bologna is not Madrid, just as Birmingham is not Manchester – none are Union Street.

From Public Space to Publics

Mackay adopts a language that describes cities as entities that are passed down between generations through civic involvements as well as through the visions of past planners.[64] Following Camillo Sitte, Mackay positions urban planning is an artistic and technical task that considers "the city as a work of art [that is] repeated by critics and commentators every now and again".[65] Moving from Lewis Mumford (a key influence on post-WWII planning) to Abercrombie, to himself, Mackay presents his ideas as part of a masculine chain of creative, removed experts as arbiters of the urban landscape.[66]

The main thrust of the plan's rhetoric is to enhance the public realm in Plymouth. The public realm is described as a space for free association and "unexpected encounter [between] those that belong there with those that pass through".[67] Strikingly, for Mackay,

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[61] Ibid, p. 7.

[62] Ibid, p. 30.

[63] Ibid, p. 4.

[64] Mackay, p. 12.

[65] Ibid, p. 12.

[66] Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Modernism, 1928–1960* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000); Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1940).

[67] Ibid, p. 10.

this also involved conflict. He says, "to remove conflict, and its opportunity for tolerance, is to strike a death blow to the vitality of the street".[68] This has strong similarities to Chantel Mouffe's ideas of an agonistic public sphere.[69] She claims that an avoidance of agonistic exchange insulates politics from the effects of pluralism.[70] However, it is in ideas of Margaret Crawford's everyday urbanism that the notion of conflict becomes more significant in relation to Mackay's position.[71]

For Crawford, urban planning should consider everyday space as important and must start with an understanding and acceptance of the life that takes place there. Mackay's "unexpected encounter" is reminiscent of Crawford's discontinuous and spontaneous moments that "provide the key to the powers contained in the everyday and function as starting points for social change".[72] Rather than looking to past plans and planners, she advocates for "the utterly ordinary reveal[ing] a fabric of space and time defined by a complex realm of social practices-a conjuncture of accident, desire, and habit".[73] The plans I have discussed respond to economic aims as much as existing social practices. Crawford's emphasis on the ordinary aligns with Zerilli's publics that have a world-building potential when they form and articulate their concerns and positions.[74] But this is counterposed by a world built for an already existing public that is understood to be a collection of predictable and stable economic actors. The key distinction is between space used by people as they go about being a public (in the many forms that can take) and a removed planning from above or outside that sees public space as the solution to forming desirable publics.

Conclusion

Although the Mackay Plan was published in 2003, there has been a slow implementation that is still taking place at the time of writing in 2024. It coincides with the closure of Union Streets nightclubs, to money spent on Millbay, and very little money spent on the

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[68] Ibid, p. 7.

[69] Chantal Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, 1.2 (2007); Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*; Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically.*

[70] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox,* p. 93.

[71] Margaret Crawford, 'Everyday Urbanism', in *Everyday Urbanism: Margaret Crawford vs. Michael Speaks*, ed. by Rahul Mehrotra, Michigan Debates on Urbanism (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2004), I, 16–32; Margaret Crawford, 'Introduction', in *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), pp. 8–15.

[72] Crawford, p. 13.

[73] Crawford, p. 9.

[74] Zerilli, *Feminism and The Abyss of Freedom*, p. 22.

crumbling Dance Academy along with other buildings along the street.[75] Mackay's plan coincided with a national shift in urban drinking policies. This was a moment of urban renaissance where city centres would become a "more attractive and vibrant" amalgam of living, working and leisure environments.[76] To be sure, my experiences of nights out on Union Street did not align with this image, but my intention has been to show that the former activities on Union Street were still, for better or worse, public manifestations of cultural expression.

I have tried to move from a set of personal experiences to critique Mackay's notion of public space. By theorising my personal memories of Union Street as a site of the carnivalesque, where the world is turned upside down and the "impenetrable hierarchical barrier" of society is suspended on a Saturday night, I was able to frame Union Street's past character as an instance of public formation.[77] Further to this, Lyng's edgework offered a means to substitute notions of reasoned exchange for a corporeal "production, consumption and social interaction" that forms publics in public space.[78] The carnivalesque and edgework allow me to develop a far messier public than envisioned by Mackay's new "vibrant" and "high quality" public spaces. Rather than engaging with a set of publics that already used the street and the urban environment, Mackay's plan worked around it, adopting an exterior perspective that facilitated the construction of new sites, rather than supporting already existing buildings, leaving some in desperate need of investment.[79] This speaks to wider notions of who is responsible for public space and who can afford or has motivation to develop cultural spaces. Perhaps to alter the public of a place like Union Street, investment cannot be primarily motivated by profit and development should be conducted with the involvement of communities that already inhabit a place.[80]

The documents I have looked at seem to understand publics as static and empirically evident. From Warner's perspective that such framings miss an important point about publics: the discourses that frame and sometimes form them also produce

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[75] This has changed since 2017 with the founding of Nudge Community Builders: www.nudge.community, although Dance Academy itself is still in dire condition.

[76] ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee, p. 3.

[77] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* p. 123.

[78] Lyng, p. 336.

[79] For example, Dancy Academy (Palace Theatre) appears on Heritage England's at risk list: www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/search-register/list-entry/48286.

[80] Although not developing a night time economy as such, Nudge Community Builders (formed officially in 2017) have been working to reinvigorate Union Street by putting empty buildings to community use. They focus on the history of the street and the people who inhabit it rather than an abstarct notion of high quality publics. For more information on Nudge see: www.nudge.community.

speech and judgements that are performed and therefore form publics.[81] They are irreducible and active. There is a disconnection between the professionalised conception of a planned urban public realm and the normal, everyday interactions where people can acknowledge and make judgments about each other's cultural interpretations. Crawford describes such planning as an undialogic approach to urbanism where "language remains authoritarian or absolute".[82] She recommends understanding urban settings through the people that are already there, making it possible to interpret an urban environment, rather than simply propose interventions.[83] Union Street is a specific context and should be understood as such. As Zerilli implies, publics are negotiated in the ordinary as much as anywhere.[84] Night clubs and drinking are a part of UK life, even if problematic, they should be considered as constitutive of public culture.

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[81] Warner, p. 115.

[82] Crawford, p. 30.

[83] Ibid, p. 36.

[84] Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, p. 141.

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