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Topophilic tendencies at Birmingham's Flatpack Film Festival

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Described variously in the media over the years as 'one of the most idiosyncratic film events in the UK'[1] and 'willfully eclectic',[2] the eleventh edition of Birmingham's Flatpack Film Festival (Flatpack)[3] took place 4-9 April 2017.[4] Situated in the UK's second city, Flatpack[5] has come to embody a specific representation of its home city that can be directly attributed to Birmingham's unique physical and cultural environment in the contemporary moment.

At first sight Flatpack might more appropriately be described as a boutique, multi-media, or arts festival rather than being strictly confined to the classification of film festival. In fact, in 2013, *Sight and Sound* went as far as describing Flatpack as being 'an agreeably eccentric' festival that brought interactive events to 30 venues in the city 'few of which involve actual movies'. [6] Instead Flatpack's programme consists of a diverse array of animation, shorts, exhibitions, live audio-visual events, television, documentary, walks, talks, AV sets, and parties that largely take place in non-cinema or pop-up venues, creating an interactive and sometime unusual engagement with its host city. In this festival format then film can more aptly be considered a jumping off point for the programme rather than the festival's core activity.

The very first Flatpack unabashedly declared its experimental nature through the use of an idiosyncratic strapline film and then some. The strapline, still in use until 2016, proves equally applicable today as a way of summarising the festival's distinctive nature. Janet Harbord contends that a film festival's meaning 'is inseparable from its location'. [7] Taking Harbord's contention as a departure point this article focuses on how Flatpack uniquely articulates, represents, and celebrates Birmingham's contemporary moment.

The article proposes that to date, Flatpack's innovative programming and alternative use of space has acted as a unique and agile cultural agent – part researcher, part archivist, and part curator of the city that bears witness to its shifting image and urban landscape. The article uses two key examples from the 2017 edition of the festival to demonstrate how Birmingham continues to act as a curatorial driver for the festival and how the changing physical city impacts the shape of the festival environs each year.

Transitional city

Often considered to be a city in transition, Birmingham is currently undergoing the latest phase in a long history of dramatic physical transformation. Urban studies scholar Liam Kennedy proposes that Birmingham's on-going thirst for physical reinvention is the singular defining factor that makes the city unique. The city's wholesale embrace of spectacular postmodern architecture since the 1980s pays testament to this assertion. The emergence of a raft of iconic buildings that have come to define the city's physical landscape such as Selfridges department store, Birmingham Library, and the city's new train station, Grand Central, have resulted in an exaggerated manifestation of the Bilbao effect, that would perhaps be more aptly described as the Birmingham effect.

TOPOPHILIC TENDENCIES AT BIRMINGHAM'S FLATPACK FILM FESTIVAL



Fig. 1: Selfridges



Fig. 2: Birmingham Library



Fig. 3: Grand Central

Conversely, there is an equally important and less talked about face of contemporary Birmingham. The city's redevelopment has not been a linear process and vast tracts of city space have been under construction since the late 1980s, making it a site of rupture and instability. Since then, a walk through Birmingham's city centre is just as likely to result in an encounter with the interstitial sites of demolition, construction, and wasteland as an encounter with the spectacular leisure domes of the city's most recent iteration.



Fig. 4: Birmingham Central Library – demolished in 2016

A DIY ethos

Established in 2006 by festival co-founders Ian Francis and Pip McKnight, Flatpack came about as an extension of a series of monthly film nights entitled 7Inch Cinema. Both initiatives were established as a direct response to the city centre's challenging cinematic infrastructure and the resounding lack of opportunity for social engagement with film. Indeed Francis presents a grim picture of cinema-going in the early 2000s. He describes his own experience of visiting the cinema in Birmingham as being, 'quite a solitary pursuit, to just go to a fleapit cinema with three other blokes and watch a film a bit out of focus'.^[8]

At the time of the festival's inception only 30 screens operated across three cinemas located within the city centre environs. Eleven years on the cinema landscape within the city is only slightly improved with 38 screens operating across 6 sites. To put this figure into perspective, the Birmingham region is home to 1.1 million people; it is the predominant retail hub for the wider West Midlands region that has a combined population of 2.4 million people, and in 2015 the city recorded a staggering 38.1 million visitors

throughout the year.[9] These figures alone suggest a clear gap in the cinema market still far from unfulfilled in a city of this size.

Initially the festival was conceived to counter Francis' experience of cinema-going and provide an alternative social experience outside of the framework on offer. However, the key to understanding the festival ethos is writ large by its name, Flatpack. Not only motivated by the constraints of the city's limited cinema infrastructure but also the ever-changing physical environment of the city, the festival was developed using a do-it-yourself (DIY)[10] ethos. The lack of independent cinema venues, a natural antipathy to using featureless multiplex venues, and the ever-changing physical environment of the city has caused Flatpack to prove the old adage that necessity is the mother of invention. By dint of constraint the festival has made a virtue of bringing its audience to unusual or off-the-beaten track venues to create enhanced or extraordinary cinematic experiences. To this end Flatpack has presented events in venues as diverse as art galleries, buses, churches, warehouses, inflatable cinemas, pubs, nightclubs, shopping arcades, and outdoor locations, to name but a few, over the years. With no obvious cinema venue to provide a natural home or central hub Flatpack has been consistently forced to mirror the city's mutability by reinventing and reshaping the festival environs depending on whatever space is available for use each year.

In addition to harnessing alternative space within the city the festival has progressively positioned Birmingham, the place, as an essential curatorial imperative. To date, Flatpack's programming team have mined the city's history, its surrounds, and more specifically its little-known cinematic history to inform and inspire its programming content. As Festival director Ian Francis states in the 2013 edition of the festival brochure,

one of the recurring themes of our work is Birmingham itself. Not out of navel-gazing but because it's a fascinating place and so little of its past has been talked about or properly documented. [11]

Flatpack's Odeon Bus Tour in 2010 provides a pertinent example of the festival's impetus to step outside of the confines of the cinema and its topophilic fascination with the city's history. The bus tour transported audiences to the city's northern suburbs to visit a selection of the chain's landmark super-cinemas from the 1930s. As with cinemas the world over many of these are now closed or have been relegated to the realm of the bingo hall. The event was designed to both celebrate the chain's entrepreneurial local founder, Oscar Deutsch, and to celebrate the influential role that the Odeon's iconic art deco

architecture played in transforming high streets across the UK. In addition the event drew attention to the fact these iconic modernist architectural structures were originally designed by Birmingham architects the Weedon Partnership.

'Flatpack will rise again' – Flatpack 2017

In 2017 Flatpack's ongoing preoccupation with the city was immediately evident through the festival's visual identity. On first encountering the festival's website, brochure, and promotional material, audiences were met with a striking cherry red depiction of a futuristic city reminiscent of the modernist skylines featured in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and the tagline 'Flatpack will rise again'.



Fig. 5: Flatpack visual identity – 2017

Designed by graphic designer, Justin Hallström, the concept conjures a streamlined notional Birmingham of the future while at the same time evoking the modernist architecture of Birmingham's past reminiscent of the Odeon's early years. Rather than presenting the more realistic and anarchic Birmingham of the present, Hallström's non-realistic representation of the

city skyline effectively captures the aspirational spirit of the city while at the same time foregrounding Flatpack's ongoing fascination with the city's past. Commenting on the launch of this year's identity the festival website further asserted the synergy between the festival and the city, stating 'we go hand-in-hand with the city and its eclectic mix of modern high-rises and Victorian heritage'.[12]

While it has become de rigeur for festivals to host special or novel filmic events at site-specific locations, Flatpack has differentiated itself by making these sorts of activities a core curatorial driver rather than an occasional practice. In 2017 Flatpack's opening night event set the tone for viewing Birmingham as a living and evolving cultural artefact that is consistently connecting the past, present, and future. The evening celebrated the work of pioneering silent filmmaker Segundo de Chomon. A contemporary of Georges Méliès, the Spanish filmmaker is renowned for his beautifully hand-painted and mechanically-tinted films and filmic optical illusions.



Fig. 6: Opening night 2017

Complementing the filmmaker's work, the event took place in the Grovesnor Suite of the Grand Hotel, a landmark icon of Victorian Birmingham. Fittingly, the evening featured a selection of the filmmaker's work from 1903 to 1912, coinciding with the ballroom's heyday and accompanied with live music by

silent film accompanist Steven Horne. One of the highlights of the evening was de Chomon's *El Hotel eléctrico* (1908) demonstrating Flatpack's aptitude for aligning programme and space designed to create parallels between the content presented and Birmingham's cultural legacy. More importantly, a factor that demonstrates the festival's special relationship with the city relates to the fact that the Grand Hotel has been closed since 2002 and is due to reopen this year, marking a new chapter in the hotel's history. The event represented the first opportunity for the public to revisit the hotel's perfectly intact opulent ballroom. Adding to the extraordinary nature of the event, it was necessary for the audience to walk through a part of the hotel site that is still under construction in order to enter the venue. This added dimension created an inadvertent sense of occasion and prompted an unexpected interaction with Birmingham's ongoing reconstruction – typical of Flatpack's bent for creating inadvertent dialogues with the city.

A less cohesive ode to the city came in the shape of the festival's day-long celebration of Birmingham's canal system, entitled Gongooozling Day. 'Goongoozling' is a term used to describe a love of canals, and the programme of events surrounding this initiative was designed to shine a light on Birmingham's canals as a key part of the city's heritage. Although an urban myth, it has long been suggested that Birmingham's canal system is more extensive than its counterpart system in Venice. Undisputed however is the fact that the canals represent an important part of Birmingham's identity and cultural history. Once an integral part of the city's industrial history the canals have now been regenerated into a highly-developed waterfront site reflective of contemporary post-industrial Birmingham.

The programme of events consisted of a selection of floating shorts, archive film, talks, open-air film, and even free bike rides for those wanting to explore the canals. One of the venues used during the day was the National Trust's site, the Birmingham Roundhouse, where a selection of archival footage of the canals was screened. Built in 1874, the horseshoe shaped building was formerly considered a city landmark but has fallen into disrepair in recent years. While not wholly successful as a screening venue it nevertheless served to draw attention to a little-known former Birmingham landmark now tucked away in a quiet corner of the canals.

One of the highlights of the programme was an open-air screening of the musical *Take Me High* (1973) directed by David Askey. The screening took place at Regency Wharf close to many of the locations originally featured in the film. Described by Birmingham fiction writer Catherine O'Flynn in

Flatpack's programme notes as 'a cinematic love song to Birmingham',^[13] *Take Me High* is somewhat of a peculiarity, not least for being the last film that Sir Cliff Richards acted in. However, in this moment of hyperbolic regeneration it seems a timely decision for Flatpack to cast an eye back to the Birmingham of the early 1970s. The film's depiction of Birmingham's concrete city phase is a pertinent reminder of a rapidly disappearing earlier stage of the city's urban development that also proudly proclaimed a brave new world, albeit one of motorways and brutalism. The film features Richards as a hot-shot banker Tim Matthews who is transferred to Birmingham, chooses to make his home on a canal boat and start an entrepreneurial gourmet burger business, serving the legendary 'Brumburger' also located on the canal. This presents a bizarrely prophetic vision of recent changes wrought in the city, foreshadowing Birmingham's waterside regeneration. As O'Flynn also notes, while the redevelopment of canals was initiated in the early 1990s, 'Cliff had started the whole process off almost two decades earlier'.^[14]

Conclusion: What's in a name

In many ways the festival has freed itself from adhering to normal film festival expectations by not using 'Birmingham' in its name. By using a name that does not obviously align itself with the city Flatpack has allowed itself to relate to the city on its own terms. In fact the name 'Flatpack' can be considered a more apt reflection and articulation of the city than the name Birmingham itself. The festival's name offers an alternative expression of Birmingham's tendency towards collapsing and reforming its buildings in much the same mode as easily-constructible flat pack furniture.

Considering the example of Birmingham's recently demolished Central Library, featured in *Take Me High*, the building only existed for a mere 40 years before being razed to the ground last year in order to be replaced by the more spectacular Birmingham Library. While perhaps not the most beautiful example of architecture, Central Library nevertheless represented an alternative and iconic architectural signifier of Brutalist Birmingham before its untimely demise.

Birmingham's ongoing drive towards redevelopment often makes the city seem ephemeral or even disposable. Taking this example as Birmingham's habitual modus operandi then, it is easy to consider the city of Birmingham as a Flatpack city rather than Flatpack as a Birmingham festival.

The festival has created its unique identity by interacting with the shifting physical environs while at the same time recalling and celebrating Birmingham's unique heritage. In this configuration of the city then it can be concluded that Flatpack could not be more aptly named and works more precisely as interlocking agent of the city capable of responding, reacting, and representing it.

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Notes

- [1] Sélavy 2015.
- [2] Rose 2015.
- [3] <http://flatpackfestival.org.uk/>
- [4] About Flatpack Film Festival: The festival was established in 2006 and takes place over six days in April each year. In 2017 festival audiences reached over 14,000 attendees, coming predominantly from the Birmingham and wider West Midlands region. The festival programme consists of an eclectic mix of features, shorts, animation, live performance, and multi-media events. The festival is renowned for hosting events in non-cinematic and site-specific locations rather than in cinemas.
- [5] Flat pack furniture is furniture such as shelves and cupboards which you buy as a number of separate pieces and assemble yourself. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/flat-pack>
- [6] Sélavy 2015.
- [7] Harbord 2009, p. 40.
- [8] Ian Francis, Interview with Sarah Smyth, (Birmingham, 4 December 2016).
- [9] Marketing Birmingham, 'The Birmingham Story', [birminghamtoolkit.com](http://birminghamtoolkit.com/the-birmingham-story), <http://birminghamtoolkit.com/the-birmingham-story> (accessed on 10 January 2017).

- [10] DIY is the activity of making or repairing things yourself, especially in your home. DIY is an abbreviation for 'do-it-yourself'. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/diy>
- [11] Flatpack Film Festival Brochure, 2013, p. 16.
- [12] New Year, New Design, <http://flatpackfestival.org.uk/2017/01/new-year-new-design/>
- [13] Flatpack Film Festival Brochure, 2017, p. 6.
- [14] Ibid., p. 7.