

## Exhibition Review

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### ***Spirit of a Place*, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, Bury, United Kingdom, 18 May 2021 – 14 May 2022**

As architectural landscapes change, the citizens within form attachments to lasting landmarks that are capable of evoking emotions. Through their exhibition *Spirit of a Place*, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre aimed to represent their communities' shared experience of place. Museum curators chose a variety of new artworks created by members of the local online art group 'Sketchbook STILL Social', historic photographs and archival materials – including documents, maps and architectural fragments – as well as paintings and objects, to convey 'the rich visual, often overlooked history of the immediate surroundings of Silver Street... and [re-connect] people with [the] town centre in a way that celebrates [the] urban heritage'.<sup>1</sup>

While change is important for any place to prevent stagnation, preserving elements of architectural and social history is equally important. The exhibition takes its name from the notion of 'spirit of place', or *genius loci*. The concept is relevant to the preservation, interpretation, and experience of any location. In 2008, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), recognizing the need for a formal definition, designated 'spirit of place' as:

...the...buildings, sites, landscapes, routes, objects...and the...memories, written documents, rituals, festivals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, odours, etc...that is to say the physical and the spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place...The spirit of place is constructed by various social actors...to give it meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Despite a wealth of literature on what 'spirit of place' is (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019),<sup>3</sup> there is still little understanding of how it is best conveyed or what it means to experience spirit of place. Terms such as mood, aesthetic, atmospheres, and ambience are related to spirit of place through their shared nature of being a 'multi-sensory and unfocused quality, not merely a visual character... of a landscape, townscape and an interior space' (Pallasmaa 2019: 127). Therefore, if the experience of spirit of place is comparable to experiencing an atmosphere, it will be instinctual and emotional. Experiences of spirit of place can be fostered through movement – they can be sensory, such as running fingers along brick walls, and excited by the notion of touching history, or intuited when imagining a riotous battle while walking a now quiet field. Museum exhibitions intending to emanate spirit of place often use archival objects, recreated spaces (Labuhn 2016), technology,<sup>4</sup> and multisensory displays (Wang 2020). In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre created the online art group 'Sketchbook STILL Social'. By using the museum's collections and surroundings, the group engaged local communities and wider audiences with the idea that 'place is an important part of developing our history and keeping this heritage alive'.<sup>5</sup>

Over 2021-2022, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre organized the exhibition *Spirit of a Place*, which focuses on Silver Street – the road running through the heart of Bury's cultural quarter. When entering the *Spirit of a Place* exhibition, visitors were greeted by a white wall presenting a black and white map of Bury. On the left, display cases containing archival photographs, illustrations, and items of industry such as glass bottles, bank records, and an assortment of coloured tiles were presented. Despite the potential of the exhibited objects, the context was difficult to grasp due to the lack of labels and informational material: what was the theme, or the story being told? This feeling of high confusion would continue into the second room.



Figure 1. Map of Bury, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022



Figure 2. Display case, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022

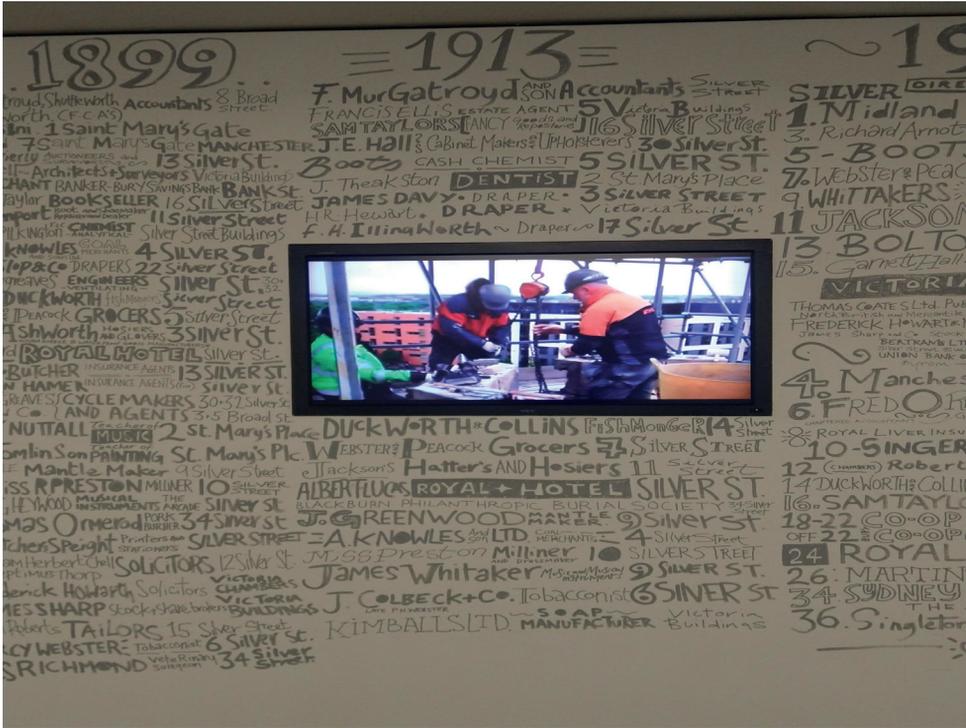


Figure 3. Portion of wall containing names and dates of Silver Street's residents, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 25 April 2022

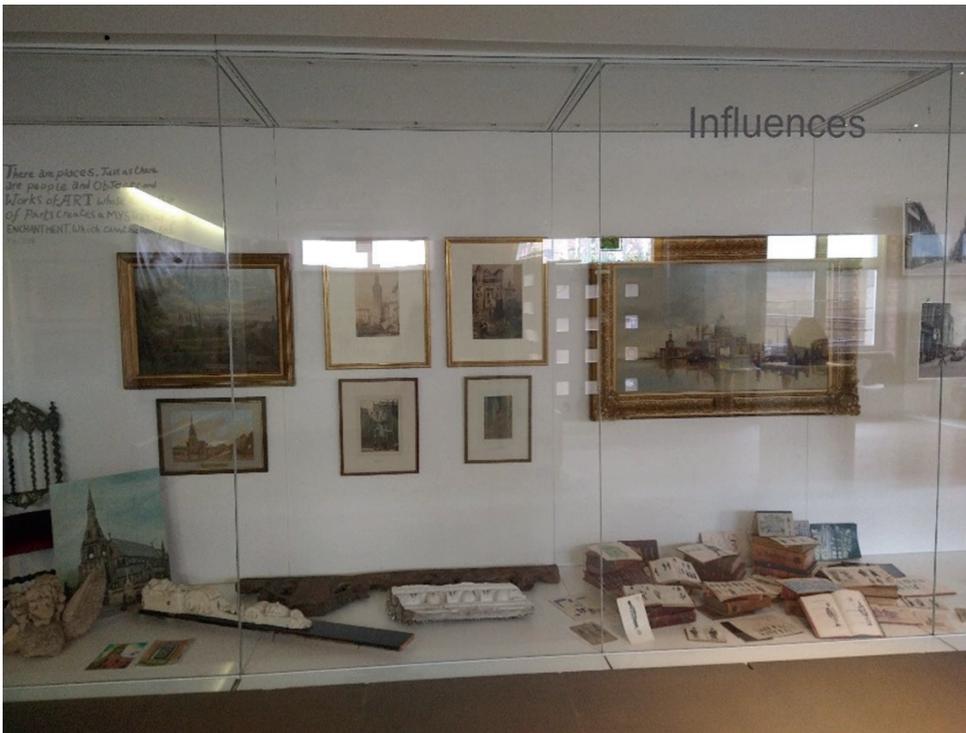


Figure 4. 'Influences', Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022



Figure 5. 'Use', Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022



Figure 6. 'Origins', Bury Art Museums & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022

The second room was composed of four display cases, introducing different themes: 'Influences', focusing on European architecture; 'Use', presenting the garment business; and 'Origins', exploring the historical Hutchinson family and their manor house, Broom Hall. The last display case contained art produced by the group 'Sketchbook STILL Social'.

The lack of labels in this second room – as in the first one – and, consequently, of objects' context led to further questions regarding the Hutchinson family and the significance of the displayed artworks within the overall exhibition's narrative (e.g., the unclear connection between a painting of Venice and Bury, a town on the outskirts of Manchester). An exhibition catalogue – laid on a table by the back door of the gallery, nearly out of sight – helped clarify the significance of the exhibited objects, but without placing them in context. This minimalistic text allowed for a purely visual visitor experience. Thus, the museum failed to meet its promise of conveying the spirit of place.



Figure 7. *Sketchbook STILL Social*, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022

The staging of the exhibition also hindered the development of an emotional connection between the visitor and the contents. The colours used in the exhibition spaces were neutral grey tones; the only sound was visitors' feet on the flagstone floors; and the space was dimly lit. Thus, it felt sterile, emotionally, and physically cold. Seeking out a connection with Silver Street was left to the visitor. On the occasion of my visit, this was done outside the museum itself.

Thanks solely to the *Spirit of a Place Newspaper*, for sale at the museum shop, I could understand all the interpretation and narrative missing from the exhibition display. I walked along Silver Street using the newspaper as my guide through an architectural scavenger hunt. I could place in context the artworks presented in the exhibition: the mysterious painting of Venice displayed in the 'Influences' section had significance only when I saw the Barclay's Bank, built in an Italian Palazzo style, lavishly decorated with red and grey granite. I walked

past the museum to find St Marie's Church, constructed in the Gothic style, sharply in contrast to the modern design of the Unitarian Church built in 1974.

The newspaper also contained detailed information about the commissioned items in the exhibition, artist memories of Silver Street, historical adverts, and illustrations of Bury's transition over time. Moreover, it introduced the Hutchinson family, whose manor house Broom Hall had once stood on the same spot where Bury Art Museum stands today. The exhibition on its own failed to meet my expectations of immersion. Only through movement did I become physically, emotionally, and experientially immersed in Silver Street.



Figure 8. Spirit of a Place Newspaper, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022



Figure 9. Spirit of a Place Newspaper, Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, photo by the author, 26 April 2022

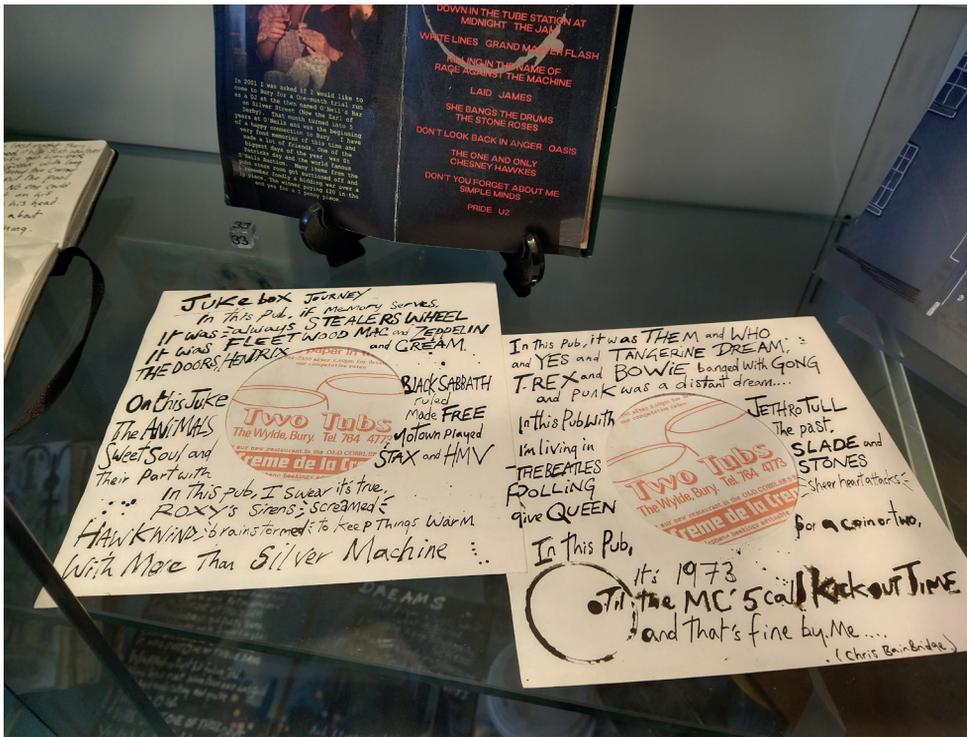


Figure 10. Lee and Bainbridge, 'Jukebox Journey', photo by the author, 26 April 2022

After establishing an emotional connection to the architecture of Silver Street, and understanding the context of the objects on display, I re-entered the gallery seeking memories, colours, and variety of textures. Sketchbook STILL Social's art filled in some of the sensory gaps. For example, sounds were not an embedded experience; however, Lee Crocker's and Christopher Bainbridge's piece 'Jukebox Journey' evoked the music that was to be heard in Silver Street's music scene of the 1970s. I could hear the authentic etching sound of the record, the medium of the piece, and the songs of Fleetwood Mac, Hendrix, or Queen. Sketchbook STILL Social's contributions fostered imagination and transportation through lived experiences.

*Spirit of a Place* was well organized, but it did not go beyond standard museum practice required to convey the spirit of place. The selected objects were intended to communicate the history of Silver Street, but it was only after combining the experience of moving along Silver Street with local art that an emotional connection was formed. The exhibition's greatest shortcoming was layering its interpretation between the catalogue, newspaper, and wall decals. This method requires visitors to dig deep to find the meaning – an effort not all visitors are willing to put in. Furthermore, the *Spirit of a Place Newspaper* was treated as a nonessential component of the exhibition – a guidebook to be purchased at the end. However, without it, so much of Silver Street's story would have been omitted, along with the real spirit of Silver Street.

I often tell people to look up when travelling, because in that way it is possible to experience the unique architectural features of a town. If travelling to Bury, spend time meandering along Silver Street, looking up at the rose-stained glass of the building that is now Verona's restaurant, looking for the frieze above the gallery building, at the medieval carving of St Marie's Church, breathing in the architectural splendour through movement, because spirit of place cannot be truly conveyed in a display case.

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### Notes

- 1 Visit Manchester, 'Spirit of a Place' [Press release], 2021. <https://www.visitmanchester.com/whats-on/spirit-of-a-place-p477111>, accessed 27 October 2022.
- 2 ICOMOS, 'Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place', 2008. <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activity-646-2.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2022.
- 3 ICOMOS, 'Quebec Declaration'.
- 4 Edwina Jans and Daryl Karp, 'Digital Technologies, the Spirit of Place and Active Citizenship at the Museum of Australian Democracy', ICOMOS 19th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium 'Heritage and Democracy', 13-14 December 2017, New Delhi, India, 2018. <http://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2029/>, accessed 27 October 2022.
- 5 Bury Art Museum & Sculpture Centre, 'Spirit of a Place Exhibition', 2021. <https://buryartmuseum.co.uk/Museum>, accessed 28 July 2022.

### References

- Labuhn, B. (2016) 'Breathing a Moldy Air: Olfactory Experience, Aesthetics, and Ethics in the Writing of Ruskin and Riegl', *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, Theory, and Criticism*, 13 (2) 103-17.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2019) 'The Atmospheric Sense: Peripheral Perception and the Experiences of Space', in Tonino Griffiero and Marco Tedeschini (eds) *Atmospheres and Aesthetics: A Plural Perspective*, 121-31, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24942-7>

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