Kitsch geographies and the everyday spaces of social memory

David Atkinson
Department of Geography, University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, England;
e-mail: David.atkinson@hull.ac.uk
Received 26 February 2005; in revised form 17 January 2006

Abstract. Given recent developments in retheorising the spatialities of memory, in this study I move beyond established foci upon monuments and fixed sites of memory to consider some of the more ordinary places where memory erupts. In contrast to the high-profile, waterfront regeneration projects that often draw academic attention, I focus upon one of the more routine docklands that are less regularly analysed—namely ‘Victoria Dock Village’ in Hull. I discuss the ways a maritime-heritage aesthetic was employed by the developers to brand and market this site. Thereafter, I discuss how residents negotiated these aesthetics and a sense of local heritage through two planning debates. To do this I adapt recent reconceptualisations of kitsch in critical and material culture studies. These reconceptualisations take a category that academics have dismissed traditionally as vulgar, banal, ‘low’ culture, and suggest that the repetitive familiarity, reassuring predictability, and nostalgic sentimentality of kitsch prove comforting in an increasingly uncertain, disembedded world. I explore the degree to which residents engage with these kitsch landscapes, and whether they feel more rooted as a consequence. I also suggest that a greater emphasis upon everyday understandings of more ordinary places may contribute to wider analyses of how place identities are constructed and continually remade by the quotidian practices and negotiation of social memory.

Introduction
The spatialities of social memory have occupied increasing swathes of the social sciences and humanities in recent years. However, most discussion has revolved around higher profile heritage sites and places of commemoration. At a time when critics have started to think more laterally about social memory as a spatial process, I suggest we might further centre the focus upon privileged, bounded sites of commemoration to think more fluidly about the ways that social memories are constituted throughout society at different scales and in mundane, everyday places. To this end, in the paper I engage with the production and negotiation of memory in a routine residential place. The example I use is a regenerated, waterfront development: ‘Victoria Dock Village’, Hull, England.

Victoria Dock is immediately recognisable as one of the maritime-themed, waterfront developments that litter the contemporary West. I argue that their generic landscapes are often characterised by a ‘maritime-kitsch’ aesthetic: an assemblage of forms and symbols that reference a maritime past in a simplistic, nostalgic manner. I interpret these landscapes in the light of recent theorisations of kitsch aesthetics which suggest that their comforting familiarity may account for the persistent popularity of kitsch throughout societies. In the pages that follow, I ask whether conceptualising waterfront developments as maritime kitsch allows us to explore their popularity, and the construction and reproduction of social memory through these places. I consider how the developers of Victoria Dock Village inscribed a maritime-kitsch theme into the site and, subsequently, how these landscapes—and ideas of appropriate docklands aesthetics—were negotiated and reinvested by some residents who sought to preserve and improve the appearance and identity of their ‘village’ during two planning disputes.
I therefore explore the continual production of places, place identity, and social memory, and the potential role of kitsch aesthetics in understanding these processes.

**Spatialising memory**

Despite the recent flurry of work exploring the spatialities of memory and nostalgia, some corners of the humanities and social sciences lacked the conceptual frames to address these issues until relatively recently. Whereas French theorists of quotidian urban life such as Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1984) touched upon memories in the city, one of the few British engagements with social memory emerged from the ‘heritage debates’ when authors such as Wright (1985) and Hewison (1987) focused upon sites of social memory as they scorned the partial versions of history commodified at English country houses, restored mills, or redeveloped docklands. Although critiqued in turn as overly simplistic and elitist, and for their failure to acknowledge the popularity of ‘heritage attractions’ with visitors (Samuel, 1994; Urry, 1990), these polemics nevertheless prompted broader discussion about sites of memory. Subsequent debates also established that ‘heritage’ is not a fixed, singular narrative, but a series of socially constructed interpretations of the past. It is also a pliable resource: often exploited by interest groups and offering ideologically laden histories to serve capital, tourism, or the local or national state. Thanks to this interest, social memory has become more established on academic agendas.

Our understandings of the spatiality of memory have developed significantly since then. We are more familiar with critiques of the production and consumption of heritage places, and of the undulating topographies of social memories. Scholars have also exposed the plural, dissonant voices that intersect and collide in the constant reconstitution of the spaces of social memories (Graham et al, 2000; Johnson, 1996; 1999; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Likewise, early accounts of monuments also evolved to incorporate the complex and freighted ways that these sites of memory are constructed, negotiated, and understood (Atkinson and Cosgrove, 1998; Johnson, 1995; Till, 1999; 2005). Others considered how gender, class, and national affiliations inflect the design and production of memorial forms (Heffernan, 1995; Johnson, 1996), and how the intended, official narratives of memory can be contested and disputed (Cooke, 2000; Forrest et al, 2004). In terms of broader memorial landscapes, studies exposed how conflicting memories may be projected onto these by different interest groups (Charlesworth, 1994; Hayden, 1995), and how this contestation bleeds into the present through the moral geographies of appropriate behaviour and commemoration at such places (Azaryahu, 2003; Dwork and van Pelt, 1996). Even the rarefield realm of museums has been reconceptualised from a spatial perspective (Duncan, 2003; Hoskins, 2004; Maddern and Desforges, 2004) as scholars question how the spatialities of memory are enfolded into places as continuous and constitutive processes.

Yet, despite these advances, there is still a tendency for accounts of memory to focus on fixed, bounded sites. At the largest scale, some studies still address the nation-state and collective ‘national’ memories as an unproblematic unit (Shannan Peckham, 2003). Perhaps inevitably, work on memory at smaller scales, particularly by geographers, has also tended to focus upon demarcated sites. In part this is because such work often draws upon thinkers such as Halbwachs (1992)[1950], whose emphasis upon places and sites of memory provided a convenient entrée for geographical studies. More particularly, Nora’s multivolume project Les Lieux de Mémoire (1984 – 1992; see also 1989) underpinned further spatial takes on memory due to its emphasis upon the ‘realms’ and physical ‘sites’ or ‘places’ of modern, collective memory (Legg, 2005). When Young’s magisterial biographies of memorials and their contestations (1993; 1994) also emphasised the grounded, demarcated spatiality of monuments, this further
reinforced an emphasis upon bounded sites of memory. Throughout the disciplines, therefore, scholars recognised, and reinforced, the significance of space, place, and landscape in the business of memorialisation and commemoration.

However, an excessive focus upon bounded sites of memory risks fetishising place and space too much; it threatens to obscure the wider production of social memory throughout society. One way forward may be to loosen the more strident aspects of this spatial fetishism in order to recognise the constant reconstitution of social memory in all kinds of spaces—discontinuous in some, overlapping in others, but never bounded exclusively within particular sites. Of course, memory is brought into sharper focus at foci such as monuments and museums where it is produced in excess, where it accrues and sediments. Yet, it is also produced in less obvious places than these more orthodox sites that de Certeau dismissed as “the dogmatic borders of a supposed ‘national heritage’” (1998, page 137).

All of this resonates with more recent writing on the spatiality of memory. Moving beyond the focus on representation that informed many earlier discussions of memorial spaces (Rose, 2002), some authors reconceptualise memory as a more dynamic and shifting phenomenon: as a continuously productive process, evident throughout society rather than merely within demarcated sites (Bruno, 2003; Terdiman, 2003; Thrift, 1999). Echoing de Certeau, Benjamin, and Lefebvre, these perspectives see the city (for example) as a topology of memories: as a sedimented, folded, undulating terrain of associations and memories—and as one continually reconfigured by new eruptions of memory (Crang and Travlou, 2001; Moran, 2004). The metaphors of nomadology also proved popular in these discussions. Landzelius (2003) talks of undermining essentialist heritage representations with a ‘rhizome heritage’ that accommodates multiple pasts and the continual remaking of memorial sites. Boym (2001) also hints at a more nomadic sense of heritage in her discussions of a ‘restorative’ nostalgia that temporalises space by embracing the myriad histories of places (Legg, 2004). At another scale, other studies have shifted the focus of memory work inside—to domestic spaces and the routine material cultures and daily practices that nevertheless also produce memories (Anderson, 2004; Blunt, 2003; Lorimer, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Taken together, these initiatives shift our gaze from a social memory captured within officially sanctioned museums, monuments, and heritage sites, to a fluid, shifting phenomenon that is constantly reconfiguring all kinds of different places at numerous scales. Whether we call such ephemeral, fragmentary memories the ‘ghosts’ or ‘hauntings’ of the city after de Certeau (1998; Pile, 2002) or the ‘cinders’ of past existences after Derrida (Thrift, 1999), this focus disrupts singular, rigid narratives of place histories and the conceit that memory might be confined to particular sites (Bruno, 2003; de Certeau, 1984; Game, 1991; Moran, 2004). By contrast, in this paper I investigate how social memories are produced, negotiated, and reinscribed beyond high-profile waterfront projects in one of the more ubiquitous developments that now smother redundant docklands. To this end I enlist recent reconceptualisations of kitsch aesthetics and nostalgia.

Theorising kitsch

Kitsch has its origins as a pejorative term for mass-produced, poor-quality imitations of artwork and luxury goods that were directed at ordinary consumers in 19th-century Germany (Binkley, 2000). Since then it has become much broader in its reach and more pointed as a term of abuse (Calinescu, 1987). For most 20th-century cultural commentators, all things kitsch were dismissed as low culture: as vulgar imitations of ‘art’, lacking any taste or value. For the guardians of ‘high culture’, the cliches, sentimentality, derivative motifs, and formulaic aesthetics of kitsch rendered it a...
corruption of ‘genuine’ art. For example, to Greenberg—America’s self-appointed arbiter of ‘good taste’—kitsch was ‘parasitical’, signifying “all that is spurious in the life of our times” (Binkley, 2000, page 139); Greenberg, 1984 [1939]). And, as these perspectives filtered through society, kitsch became widely synonymous with ‘bad taste’ (Dorfles, 1969). Indeed, this association endures in some quarters. In 1988 one philosopher tackled the conundrum of the popularity of kitsch and its simultaneous artistic ‘deficiencies’ by trying to “show what it is that disqualifies kitsch as respectable art despite its apparent aesthetic appeal” (Kulka, 1988, page 19; 1996; compare Calinescu, 1987). More recently still, a cultural critic commented that for many: “Kitsch is to taste what superstitution is to religion—somebody else’s mistake” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, page 276).

Consequently, although ‘kitsch’ is a label employed widely throughout modern cultures, its associations with poor taste and banality mean that it has been curiously undertheorised in the academy. To most scholars, the stigma of low culture and the perceived anti-intellectualism of kitsch meant it deserved little, if any, attention. Indeed, in the only serious mid-20th-century analysis of kitsch, the Frankfurt School damned it as synonymous with totalitarian aesthetics and the duping of the masses (Calinescu, 1987; Dalle Vacche, 1992; Goodman, 2003; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). By contrast, the analysis of kitsch has progressed more promisingly of late. First, writers commenting on the postcommunist transitions of 1990s Eastern Europe found kitsch a useful frame to explore the fading aesthetics of communism and the fleeting nostalgia for this vanishing order (Boym, 1994; 2001; Lindquist, 2002; Sabonis-Chafee, 1999). Kundera, in particular, transcended discussions of ‘poor taste’ to theorise kitsch as a more active cultural process. It was, he wrote: “the absolute denial of shit ... [for] kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence” (1991, page 242). In his conceptualisation, kitsch aesthetics elide nasty, unwanted problems and mask them with a pleasant, safe, and sanitised world. They soothe the individuals by transcending their realities. In extremis, Kundera continues, we encounter ‘totalitarian kitsch’ when the ultimate act of excluding unwanted others is their elimination. Although the case study I will discuss is not totalitarian in intent or purpose, Kundera’s theorisation does allow us to rethink kitsch as the pursuit of simple, unthreatening, mundane pleasures—as an elective aesthetic rather than an empty category of artless, imitative bad taste.

At the same time, a handful of critics from cultural studies and sociology were also addressing kitsch aesthetics as part of their reevaluation of our quotidian cultures and spaces (Binkley, 2000). In parallel with the wider cultural studies project (Fiske, 1989; Grossberg, 1992; Hall, 1996), they were keen to dismantle long-established ‘high culture’—‘low culture’ dualisms to undermine critical hierarchies of taste. In this spirit, they exposed the elitism that labeled kitsch as worthless, retrogressive, or just plain ‘bad’, and reappraised the category to suggest reasons for its persistent popularity. For them, this success was evidence of the creative critical choices of consumers, of the knowing symbolism and irony they invest in the spaces around them. This position also resonated with contemporary postmodern thinking for, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett states: “To the extent that kitsch is understood as all effect, all surface, depthless, it is the aesthetics par excellence of postmodernism” (1998, page 278).

Yet, although the deconstruction of cultural hierarchies is welcome, still more recent work has seen further rethinking of kitsch which again transcends simplistic dualisms to engage more seriously with the phenomenon and its consumers. This position argues that celebrating the creativity of kitsch uncritically also risks misinterpreting the phenomenon just as much as do lazy accusations of vulgarity and tastelessness. Rather, and echoing Kundera, it suggests that some consumers favour kitsch simply because of its
undemanding, banal ordinariness—because its formulaic motifs are easy, repetitive, comforting, and familiar. The sociologist Binkley, for example, sees kitsch as:

“a unique aesthetic sensibility that spurns creativity per se while it endorses a repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday, something akin to what Pierre Bourdieu has called ‘the taste of necessity’: an aesthetic expression that endorses the sense of conventionality, rhythm and meter of aesthetic forms, and their embeddedness in daily life” (2000, pages 134–135).

Binkley pursues Giddens’s (1991) notion of disembeddedness further to argue that, for some, kitsch aesthetics are simply a way of rendering an unstable, risky world—one full of options, choices, and bewildering change—more familiar, more comforting, and more stable. Its easy nostalgia and reassuring predictability help to counter the modern condition of disembeddedness, and of the wrenching of:

“social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time–space. This ‘lifting out’ is exactly what I mean by disembedding, which is the key to the tremendous acceleration of time–space distanciation which modernity induces” (Giddens, 1991, page 18, quoted in Binkley, 2000, page 135).

By contrast, Binkley continues:

“Kitsch ... glories in its embeddedness in routines, its faithfulness to conventions, and its rootedness in the modest cadence of daily life, [it] works to re-embed its consumers, to replenish stocks of ontological security, and to shore up a sense of cosmic coherence in an unstable world of challenge, innovation and creativity” (2000, page 135).

Moreover, Binkley’s ideas resonate with other contemporary reconceptualisations of kitsch. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1998, page 278) also sees kitsch as increasingly reassuring in our modern world, for it “requires the abdication of critical judgement because it tells us what to think and feel” (page 278). Even its detractors admit this ‘easy catharsis’ may be “a pleasurable escape from the drabness of modern quotidian life” (Calinescu, 1987, pages 228–229). Likewise, other commentators note the solace of kitsch sentimentality, nostalgia, and its visions of idealised pasts. Dalle Vacche (1992), for example, understands nostalgic kitsch as a way of aestheticising the mundane present. Lindquist also points to its intrinsic sentimentality and nostalgia, and highlights the “quintessentially populist and popular” way it can be “employed by the populace to soothe, to give hope, to nourish sentiment, to naively beautify drab and brutal life” (2002, page 341). In sum, this nascent perspective suggests that imitative, familiar kitsch aesthetics are popular because they conjure unchallenging, nostalgic visions of modern worlds. Here, kitsch is neither vulgar nor ironic, but simply an elective aesthetic whose easy and immediate pleasures help people get by in their daily lives. I will develop this argument by outlining my understanding of ‘maritime kitsch’.

**Maritime kitsch**

As traditional heavy industries declined in the West, their residual, derelict landscapes posed particular challenges to the planners and development agencies charged with their regeneration. Former docklands—abandoned when they proved inadequate for modern shipping—were especially problematic as their remnant basins, locks, wharfs, and warehouses could not be reclaimed easily (Bruttomesso, 1993; Hoyle and Pinder, 1992; Hoyle et al. 1988). One distinctive response emerged in North America in the 1970s. Declining docklands in Boston, Baltimore, and San Francisco were converted to housing, retail, and leisure functions, or into bases for emergent service industries (Hoyle et al. 1988). These places proved highly successful: their waterside locations, their ‘character’, and their ‘postindustrial chic’ (Haughton and Counsell, 2004, page 147) appealed to both gentrifying developers and the middle-class, urban lifestyles...
they served (Bruttomesso, 1993; Graham et al, 2000). In the high-profile cases cited endlessly by planning theorists, vibrant leisure districts emerged. Although these initiatives were contested by some (Goss, 1996), the new wisdom held that both visitors and residents ‘animate’ the area, reinforcing its ‘liveability’ and making it still more attractive to other tourists and high-earning migrants (Tiesdell et al, 1996). Indeed, the perceived success of pioneering developments such as San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf meant that this model—a ‘waterfront Renaissance’ to some—was parachuted into localities all over the developed world (Marshall, 2001).

This global trend produced numerous ‘historic waterfronts’: sanitised docklands, designed to appeal to a wide constituency through a sentimental, nostalgic vision of a maritime past. Further, despite their proponent’s claims that each development is distinctive, these places are often characterised by a surprisingly uniform aesthetic that I call ‘maritime kitsch’. Typically this entails old docklands—traditionally enclosed by high walls—being exposed to the public gaze as spectacles. Their reworked landscapes emphasise ‘historic character’ and ‘original features’; they focus upon restored dock basins and make features of the original buildings and the cobbled wharves that surround them (see figure 1). Public spaces adopt nautical names and are marked by artefacts such as cranes, derricks, or ships’ anchors (Steinberg, 1999). They highlight remnant infrastructure such as capstans, bollards, and mooring rings as “signatures of the past” (Edensor, 2005, page 131). Disused railway lines remain embedded in the quaysides to remind stumbling pedestrians of their historic surroundings. Historic vessels often provide further evidence of the erstwhile business of a dock. Samuel grumbled about this “relocation of historic ships [that allows] every port in the country to lay some special claim to maritime heritage [and gives] a kind of instant antiquity to even brand-new marina-like developments” (1994, pages 173–174). Others note the uniformity and increasing ubiquity of these spaces. They are, comments Graham, “a global cliché as restaurants, craft shops and leisure spaces replace working harbours”, and he adds, highlighting their relentless spread: “If the model is successful in San Francisco, then why not in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Wellington, New Zealand, Singapore or Cape Town, South Africa?” (2002, page 1009). More plaintively, Hilling asks: “Is there a limit to the number of former seaports that can viably sustain maritime heritage industries?” (1988, pages 35–36).

Figure 1. Dockland aesthetics: Albert Dock, Liverpool.
Although these are all too often anonymous, identikit spaces—lands without *place*—they are increasingly prevalent features of modern urbanism. In 1980s Britain alone, 233 major waterfront development projects were undertaken or proposed (Jones, 1998), and this strain of maritime kitsch is increasingly familiar across the world. Yet for all the academic attention directed at these sites—and there is plenty written on the ‘waterfront’ model as regeneration policy, as planning strategy, and as an element of gentrification (Bruttomesso, 1993; DeFilippis, 1997; Marshall, 2001)—few authors have disaggregated the high-profile, pioneering docklands conversions from the more routine, residential waterfronts that have mushroomed subsequently. Likewise, few authors show much interest in everyday ‘dockland’ living and its aesthetics; few wonder how these brownfield sites are textured with meanings by their new residents. The caustic ‘heritage’ debate, for example, dealt with ‘bogus’ histories and social exclusion rather than with the subjectivities of middle-class residents. More recently, Edensor’s compelling discussion of industrial ruins is counterposed with these sanitised sites, caricatured as nothing but “chic dockside restaurants [in a] post-industrial, re-invented city [of] wine-bars, flats and offices” (2005, page 154). Even a rare engagement with the popular consumption of Liverpool’s postindustrial dock nevertheless retreats into high culture^low culture dualisms, and reproduces anxieties about “the jaunty sea-faring mood ... in the theme dock”, the kitschy souvenir shops, and the nautical-themed restaurants (Mellor, 1991, page 101).

Lowenthal escaped this elitism to caution that: “Tourists find no fault with heritage kitsch at Liverpool’s Albert Dock; they have come for a good time, not for a history lesson” (1998, page 164). But he does not wonder about the residents either. Despite this blanket oversight, there is value in exploring the production of identity and memory in places that are simultaneously extraordinary spectacles and everyday residential spaces (Franklin and Crang, 2001). We can also ask if kitsch style and its easy nostalgia help to make people feel more grounded and settled amidst a transient world.

At this point I will reemphasise that I do not label regenerated docklands as kitsch places in the traditional, pejorative use of the term. For sure, ‘historic waterfronts’ may deserve critique for their uniformity, their commercial orientation, and their sanitised versions of maritime history. To some, Victoria Dock might qualify as ‘kitsch’ thanks to its maritime styling and its simplistic invocation of a docklands past. However, adopting this label in its traditional, condescending sense simply reproduces the unhelpful elitism outlined above. If kitsch aesthetics are an enduring aspect of our modern world, should we try to understand them rather than dismiss them (Elkins, 2004)? Should we extend the perspectives outlined above to consider kitsch as a popular, mass aesthetic? Many generic waterfronts are marked by stock motifs and formulaic decoration. Most offer sentimental, nostalgic visions of a maritime past rather than the more complex, nuanced narratives that academics would prefer. Therefore, if we rethink these kitsch landscapes as comforting and familiar rather than vulgar and tasteless, we can start to explore how kitsch is configured and contested in different contexts through grounded case studies.

**The port of Hull and its maritime landscapes**

Hull has been one of Britain’s leading ports since the 13th century. It grew wealthy through importing timber and other commodities from the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe, and by exporting the coal, wool, and manufactured goods of Yorkshire and the East Midlands. Whaling and fishing interests throughout the North Sea and Arctic waters augmented this trade from the 17th and 19th centuries, respectively (Credland, 1995; Lazenby and Starkey, 2000). The city was also a major node for passenger shipping and international transmigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe and the Baltic.
By some estimates almost 8% of 19th-century and early-20th-century European migrants to North America traveled through Hull, to Liverpool, and on to New York (Evans, 2001). At their height, Hull docks stretched for 7 miles and occupied over 200 acres. Although whaling, fishing, and transmigration have disappeared, Hull remains the primary eastern seaport for the North of England.

This varied maritime legacy prompts an undulating topography of memory, although not all aspects of this nautical heritage are celebrated. Whereas visiting ‘tall ships’ attract enthusiastic marketing from the local authority (Atkinson, 2005), whaling goes practically unmentioned as a result of its contemporary stigma. Similarly, the fishing industry—deemed dirty and smelly by the city’s image consultants—is also shunned by ‘official’ articulations of Hull’s identity. Indeed, recent plans for a leisure and retail development on the redundant fishing dock proved controversial because of a maritime-heritage theme that, to critics, was too indistinct from other reclaimed docklands around the world. For a community still smarting from the decimation of the fishing fleet in the 1970s, the plans showed scant regard for the memory of the industry and the 8000 fishermen lost at sea (Atkinson et al., 2002; Lazenby and Starkey, 2000). In some parts of Hull, therefore, the international maritime-heritage style was deemed inappropriate for the city’s distinctive history. Yet, at Victoria Dock, such generic landscapes found greater favour.

Maritime kitsch at Victoria Dock
Victoria Dock is now a residential development of 2500 homes spread over 60 ha to the east of the city centre. It was a commercial dock from 1775 to 1970. It also incorporated a shipyard that built around 2000 vessels between 1851 and 1931 (McNicol, 2002). Through the 20th century it specialised in timber imports from Scandinavia, becoming known locally as the ‘Timber Dock’ (figure 2). In 1970 the timber trade was moved elsewhere, the dock was closed to traffic, and all but one of the basins was filled in. Regeneration began when the area was purchased from Associated British Ports (ABP) (a government holding company) by Hull City Council in 1987. They forged a partnership with housing developers Bellway to develop a residential ‘urban village’. Work began in May 1988 and continued to 2004. The dock is currently home to 3500–4000 people.

Figure 2. Victoria Dock, Hull, while still a working dock.
Only a few minutes walk from the city centre, Victoria Dock was planned as a high-quality residential development. Most of the apartment blocks are built around the remaining dock basin and many of the houses overlook a mile-long promenade, boasting spectacular views of the Humber estuary. The blend of apartments and houses was supposed to guarantee a mixed social profile. The developers also promised some social housing (with 40% council owned and 20% run by housing associations), although these low-cost homes never materialised (McNicol, 2002). Nevertheless, the project won awards from local and national organisations, including the best urban development of 1993 (McNicol, 2002). It also proved popular with residents. House prices and rents were soon among the highest in the city, and one corner boasts the highest average household incomes in Hull (Hull Daily Mail 2004). The area fares well on other criteria too: the police categorise it as ‘low-risk’ for crime, and the primary school achieves comparatively good results. Consequently, it houses an increasingly narrow social range of middle-class professionals, young families, and retired people. Some of these moved from other parts of Hull or, like the many young professionals occupying rented properties, were migrants to the city.

In addition, the site is isolated physically from the rest of Hull—by water on two sides, working docklands on another, and a busy highway to the north (figure 3). From the start, it was marketed as a distinctive ‘urban village’, and this sense of a self-contained, exclusive enclave has developed further since then. The class dimensions of this differentiation were demonstrated in a petty debate rehearsed through the local press in mid-2004. One resident objected to a newspaper report that referred to Victoria Dock as ‘an estate’ (a term with lower class connotations in the United Kingdom):

“We are not and never have been an estate. We are a village. It’s on the road sign as a village. We don’t wish the tone to be lowered and tied in with the rest of the estates around the city” (Jerrum, 2004, page 12).

Predictably enough, this elitism provoked a slew of criticism from other readers, but it also reveals how notions of class difference informed some residents. More politic was the local member of parliament and Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. Nevertheless, he also reinforced the reputation of the area as a distinct, elite space when he wrote that Victoria Dock had become:

Figure 3. Victoria Dock ‘Village’ under construction.
“A vibrant community of people living in surroundings where they feel at home, enjoying the atmosphere and amenities of a real village ... very different from the stereotyped image of an anonymous housing estate” (Prescott, quoted in McNicol, 2002, page iv).

By contrast, the aesthetics of the dock were not well received by architectural commentators. Fitzgerald complained it was typical of the “rather crass development that has spoilt [many] docks” (1995, page 22). He continued: “[this] modern housing estate ... could be anywhere; it does not exploit the proximity of the sea .... There is no response to the unique character of Hull, nor to the problems and opportunities of its specific location” (page 23). Another critic damned the project as:

“appalling, completely at odds with the rest of the city. It is isolated and has no real connection with the rest of [Hull]. The council seem to hold it up as a style of building to aspire to, but if that is the case I would be seriously worried for the future” (Monahan, quoted in McNicol, 2002, page 81).

Arguably, these critics are also ensnared within elite reactions to the aesthetics of these new-build developments. Indeed, a local councillor hit back, emphasising the popularity of the development:

“Victoria dock was developed to give ordinary people access to affordable, traditional housing in the city, not for architects to come up with arty-farty designs which are totally impracticable. When Prince Charles visited the dock recently he was very impressed and said it was the type of traditional housing he favours. I think most people would agree with him rather than the architect” (cited in McNicol, 2002, page 93).

Clearly, issues of elitism and social distinctiveness pervade these debates. I do not have space to pursue these here. Rather, I will note how these critics conflate the aesthetics of the development with its waterfront location—again, sneering too easily at a generic docklands landscape. Rather than immediately condemn the dock as unimaginative and tasteless, perhaps we might think more carefully about the creation of this landscape and how it is interpreted by its residents.

**Designing maritime kitsch**

Victoria Dock meets most of the criteria for maritime-kitsch docklands. The developers pursued a range of strategies to brand it as a waterfront development, to invoke its past, and to distinguish it from adjacent districts to attract wealthier residents. Street names such as ‘Sailor’s Wharf’, ‘Admiral’s Court’ or ‘Trinity Quay’ write maritime signifiers across the dock, capstans and cranes mark public spaces, and ships’ anchors guard the main entrances (figure 4). The developers also commissioned a 9 ha park to include references to the heritage of the dock. Artists Susan Disley and Paul Mason contributed by incorporating maritime and navigational themes into a large marble sundial and pavement mosaics. Meanwhile, the park entrance is flanked by two ornamental columns bearing the names and tonnages of ships built on the site (although no signage explains this). The public house on the dock was also designed to reflect the heritage of the site (figure 4). It was named The Timber Dock and the interior designers were directed to “create a pub with a distinct atmosphere and identity recalling the old days of the dock [so that it] ... would reflect the heritage of the village” (McNicol, 2002, page 93). Its rooms were decorated with photographs of the dock in its prime, and represented the timber-seasoning sheds or merchant’s offices that once stood around the basins. Indeed, when it first opened, one resident told me, it even included two life-sized dummies dressed as dock workers (Andy, interview, 14 April 2004).(1) We might allow that this was kitsch in the pejorative sense.

(1) I have anonymised my respondents.
However, I am also interested in the comforting, sentimental, kitsch styling we might also identify. I explored this through a series of thirteen semistructured, in-depth interviews (and one small-group interview) with residents and recent residents of Victoria Dock, including five homeowners, five shorter term tenants, and three key figures in two local debates. This work also draws upon my observations as a resident on the dock throughout 2003 as these debates developed.

All my interviewees talked about the dock as an exclusive district that was distinct from the surrounding city. Their views on the landscapes and heritage of the area, however, were more varied, and were inflected by age and length of residence. For example, one couple, a young professional and a mature student, were particularly exercised by the role of The Timber Dock in the ‘village’—especially after it was refurbished in early 2005 and lost its ‘heritage’ design in favour of a uniform, minimalist style common to the pub chain:

**Iain:** “I was concerned when the pub changed, where’s it gone? It’s all modern, I really don’t like it! I don’t know ... I think [the old design] fitted in with Timber Dock well.”

**Emily:** “But on the outside it was all modern bricks and then you went in and it was trying to be something it wasn’t.”

**Iain:** “No, it was good, I liked it, and it did give you a subtle sense of Vicky Dock village, but now it’s like a modern pub with a few little pictures.”

**Emily:** “I liked the old photos, it makes you look at them and say ‘God is this where I live now, that’s what it used to look like’”

**Iain:** Yeah, but it’s like your average, er, average yuppie pub now, it could be anywhere, it could be called anything, there’s no similarity whatsoever, it’s totally different ... It doesn’t fit in with Victoria Dock any more, where the old style fitted in with the image of Vicky Dock.”

**Emily:** “I think the pub now reflects what Victoria Dock is about, about people not from Hull, so they’re not really going to be concerned with the heritage of the place ... they won’t care too much” (Iain and Emily, interview, 25 October 2005).

This exchange illuminates the largely ambivalent engagement with Victoria Dock of the five transient, younger professionals I spoke to. They were aware of the distinctive contemporary status of the dock within Hull, especially as the main site of modern,
high-quality rented accommodation. However, they felt little sense of community, with some attributing this to their temporary residential status in contrast to longer established, owner-occupiers who seemed to have a greater investment in the dock. Iain noted that:

“I think, maybe, there’s a clear difference between people who own property and rent property. If you’re renting property you’re not as concerned with the heritage and holding on to it as you are if you own somewhere” (Iain, interview, 25 October 2005).

These younger respondents also acknowledged their ambivalence towards the history of the dock, and were seldom motivated enough to uncover more themselves. They were usually more interested by the maritime aesthetics, but also noted their contrived nature:

“It feels like a bit of weak attempt at looking like it’s historic. It’s not like a finished project, they’re trying to make it look more maritime and historic ... but it’s not real, its not really right is it? It’s not the same, its not original. It’s all been designed, hasn’t it? Not made” (Hannah, interview, 8 July 2005).

Equally, they were bemused by the more subtle (and unexplained) references written into the site:

“That sundial is rubbish, I’ve never figured out what the use is, I always look at it though” (Emily interview, 25 October 2005).

Meanwhile, Hannah commented on:

“That spiral thing you walk round and there’s an anchor round there that looks a bit weird, like it’s just been placed there, there’s nothing else to explain it ... it’s like someone’s just dropped an anchor there” (interview, 8 July 2005).

Yet, despite a clear recognition of the fabricated nature of this kitsch aesthetic, all five younger people still claimed to like it. For example, Chris, another professional in his thirties, added:

“Yeah, I still liked it, it gave you a sense of history, I never thought ‘that’s a bit crap’, I just accepted it, a pretty anchor there—just walk along and accept it—it adds to the image of the place, to the surroundings ... It does add to the place .... If you take out the artefacts, if you moved Victoria Dock to somewhere else in Hull, it wouldn’t hold the same appeal” (Chris, interview, 24 June 2005).

This casual, knowing acceptance of the contrived landscape was reiterated several times—with some residents such as Chris, stating explicitly that they liked these maritime features and the ‘character’ they contributed. This suggests that some residents at least accept kitsch as a ready, comforting, nostalgic aesthetic. Indeed, some reinscribed it by decorating their gardens with driftwood and maritime paraphernalia; for a period, a business selling nautical art and memorabilia was also located on the dock. In the final sections I consider this engagement with kitsch further through two recent planning disputes that prompted residents to debate the heritage and aesthetics of the dock.

Preserving maritime kitsch: The Winding House

The first dispute was prompted by a council decision to sell the only original building on the dock. The 1860s ‘Winding House’ (figure 5) is located near the main entrance to the development and once contained a steam engine that hauled ships into dry dock. It was initially preserved as the site for a proposed ‘maritime museum’, although, like other social provision promised by the developers, this failed to materialise once planning permission was granted (McNicol, 2002). Instead, the structure was partially renovated in 1990 and offered for sale. It found no buyers and was scheduled for demolition in 1997 when the local Residents’ Association lobbied to have it protected.
They were driven, writes their chair, by a sense of the ‘heritage’ of the site and by the ‘need’ to preserve the only remaining building from the original dock (McNicol, 2002). In 2003 the city council again decided to sell the building, with suggested uses including a café or restaurant. This time a community group called ‘Aspire’ became involved. Composed of local community members and church members, the group proposed a multipurpose community resource including a museum, a café, and a permanent home for their church. They also mobilised ideas of the ‘heritage’ of the dock, with promises of an educational ‘heritage and environment trail’. It is their articulation of memory, heritage, and belonging that interests me here.

Aspire presented their bid as a community-centred initiative, implying that they would safeguard the heritage of the building in contrast to the economic interests of rival commercial bidders. They sought support through a vigorous campaign that included public meetings, a newsletter, a website, and a questionnaire. The questionnaire drew upon nascent interest in the heritage of the dock (or, at least, the widespread sense that heritage is important) by asking: “As this is the only original building from the Victorian era would you accept its demolition?”; and “Do you support the idea of a trail which promotes and brings to life the historical and environmental features of the dock?” (Aspire, 2003). These were leading questions, but their sentiments seemed to resonate with popular opinion. Of 320 questionnaires returned, 95% welcomed the idea of a heritage trail and 93% of respondents said they would visit the café and museum (The Winding House, 2003). For Hull City Council, this popular mandate proved compelling and in April 2004 it awarded Aspire a 125-year lease on the Winding House, with a peppercorn rent. The group also secured £50 000 from the UK Lottery ‘New Opportunities’ Fund towards restoration—final costs are estimated at £600 000 – £700 000 (Juncar, 2004). To publicise their plans, Aspire held two ‘Heritage Open Days’. These events, their organisers held, were about preserving ‘heritage’ for the community (Juncar, 2004), about “maintaining character and keeping buildings alive” (Ostler, 2004, page 3).

Providing a sense of place and heritage for Victoria Dock is a persistent theme of the project. Peter, a key figure in Aspire and a retired owner of one of the larger houses on the dock, told me that this is partially inspired by the transient nature of some of the dock community:

---

*Figure 5. The Winding House.*
A lot of the people have moved from various parts of the country where everything has gone ... people come here for a year, eighteen months, but in that year, eighteen months, they want to know why it is called Victoria Dock. What is that Old building? Why are there chimneys outside the shops?”

And for some, he continued, the desire to belong was surprisingly strong:

“It’s a desperation to be ... to be a part of that area as soon as possible, so you can start to feel at home ... and you get a sense of belonging” (Peter, interview, 17 December 2004).

By contrast with most of the younger people I interviewed (and my recollections as a former resident), Peter talked about a strong community spirit on the dock. He saw The Winding House as a place to develop this spirit further. He emphasised that a sense of belonging is produced through the small, everyday business of community—through saying ‘hello’ at the shops, for example. If Aspire are successful, he added, more of these ordinary, quotidian acts will take place at The Winding House. Through sharing a coffee or attending meetings, the community would absorb their heritage through everyday encounters within the new centre. For Aspire, he continued passionately, this is about enabling a local memory to take root, about providing a space to stop, meet, talk, and reflect amidst the pace of modern society, about creating somewhere where lasting memories will be produced and circulated:

“[The Winding House] will tell you everything you want to know about what this area was like ... and you need knowledge to belong, this is what [the project] is doing, it’s giving you a sense of belonging .... So it’s not only to show our generation, your generation [that we’re doing this] ... it’s to bring the history back to life for people like the kids next door” (Peter, interview, 17 December 2004).

Binkley would suggest that The Winding House and its celebrations of the past are about embedding transient residents in place. Not all Peter’s younger neighbours share this vision, though. One told me that heritage was for these older people ``with more time on their hands'' . Emily, for example, commented that:

“The heritage centre won’t make it a better community, I don’t think people will be that bothered about [it] ... not everybody is interested in the past, and what [The Winding House] was really used for” (Emily, interview, 25 October 2005).

By contrast, though, Iain admitted a sneaking interest in these attempts to forge a shared memory. I asked him if he had been to any of the ‘Heritage Open Days’:

Iain: “I wouldn’t have felt right [there]. I was at work anyway, but I wanted to [go] actually, just to see that it was like. Actually, subconsciously I wanted to go to it, just to get involved”

David: “What, to engage with this heritage initiative?”

Iain: “Yeah, just to be part of it, to see that it was about, what it was like” (Iain, interview, 25 October 2005).

Although to my mind a nondescript building, The Winding House, with its articulations of nostalgia and identity, has already attracted much support. Former dock workers have contacted Aspire with their memories and photographs, and the group talk of archiving these. The project has also attracted significant public money. This signals how easily a derelict building—left isolated by the developers as cursory evidence of the dock’s past—can be invested with significance as a focus of heritage. Moreover, this is not a unique, spectacular heritage site: decaying industrial fabric is ubiquitous throughout parts of Hull. Yet, amidst the ersatz, new-build anonymity of Victoria Dock, these Victorian bricks are celebrated unconditionally as some residents produce and celebrate memory in this ordinary space. Further, Aspire hope to embed younger, transient residents—those living among ‘the contours of high modernity’ and ‘lifted out’ from traditional social structures and patterns (Giddens, 1991)—by preserving
Defending maritime kitsch: Quay 2005

When Victoria Dock closed in 1970, the adjacent Alexandra Dock continued to function although it was hindered by the dimensions of the 19th-century dock entrance. To facilitate modern container ships, ABP sought planning permission to construct a deep-water quay on the foreshore outside the old docks in 1995 and 1997 (figure 6). In 2000 they again requested an 18 ha development (Quay, 2005) costing £40 million. This bid raised objections from the residents of Victoria Dock and in 2003 a public enquiry was established to rule on the application. This debate exposed how other residents mobilised to preserve their vision of how regenerated docklands should appear.

Figure 6. The Quay 2005 site.

The eight-day enquiry began with ABP, their legal team, advisors, and expert witnesses on one side, and a loose association of residents lacking legal advice and relying upon petitions, protest letters, and information gleaned from the Internet on the other. To the local press this was a ‘David versus Goliath’ struggle. From the start, ABP argued that the quay would safeguard the future of the port and 18 000 jobs (Hull Daily Mail 2003a). By contrast, the residents insisted that the development would be too large and too noisy, and that its container ships would dwarf the surrounding area. They also challenged the legality of the proposal by arguing that sufficient container capacity existed elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and that the implications for local road traffic had not been addressed. They also claimed that their quality of life would be ruined, and produced 270 letters and three petitions to demonstrate opposition. The enquiry revolved primarily around these axes, and the reputation of Victoria Dock as a gentrified enclave soon became significant. According to Paul, a community leader who represented the residents at the enquiry, ABP immediately portrayed the protesters as wealthy, middle-class ‘Nimbyites’,(2) living in ‘prestige homes’ and ‘luxurious shore-front properties’, and more concerned about noise, unsightly ships, and house prices than about Hull’s economic well-being. He continued:

(2) Nimby—‘not in my backyard’.
“[Their] attitude was very clearly, look, you bought a house near a dock on a working river, what do you expect?” (Paul, interview, 13 January 2005).

In turn, the residents and sympathetic city councillors reversed this argument, claiming that this middle-class district was critically important to a city like Hull where most of the wealthy live beyond the city boundaries. Alienating the middle classes of Victoria Dock would “seriously undermine the whole concept of urban regeneration”, claimed one councillor (Hull Daily Mail 2003b; 2003c).

Without doubt the development would impact upon the amenity value and prices of homes in this corner of Victoria Dock—and local opposition was entirely understandable. What I want to emphasise here, though, is how residents also invoked the appearance of Victoria Dock to argue against the visual threat of new industrial development. The proposed quay and its 76 m high cranes would stand less than 200 m from some houses. This radical change to the scale and aesthetics of views prompted anxiety. One resident complained: “We have a beautiful view of the [river] Humber and enjoy looking at the ferries and the docks [but if the quay is built] our view could be blocked” (Hull Daily Mail 2003d). The irony of this position was clear to some. The city council leader wondered why residents did not anticipate seeing ships when they bought houses by a working dock; another correspondent admitted that:

“all that there will be situated at the new terminal is a quay, two cranes and a jetty ... you could argue this may affect the view of residents adjacent to the proposed site, but all you would see up the Humber [are docks] anyway” (Hull Daily Mail 2003e).

In this aspect of the residents’ argument, ships and port business are deemed picturesque at a distance (in time and space), but are unwelcome closer by: the traffic, noise, smells, and workers of a modern dock would compromise the kitsch, nostalgic aesthetic of these ‘historic’ docklands. By this reckoning, the ‘abandoned’ anchor and flotsam of a public garden (figure 7) are acceptable, whereas adjacent modern maritime equipment is unsightly. In essence, some locals mobilised arguments to stop ‘historic’ Victoria Dock from looking like a dock.

After long, unexplained delays, the public enquiry reported in May 2005. The inspector recommended that the quay be rejected due to its impact upon residents but, to the surprise of commentators, the government’s Department for Transport overturned this advice. At one level we could read this as the continuing machinations

![Figure 7. A public garden of flotsam and an anchor, Victoria Dock, Hull.](image)
of capital: with the sea and waterfront commoditised as aesthetic until required for more productive uses (Steinberg, 1999; 2001). However, on Victoria Dock it is not just capital that produces maritime kitsch. Some residents also defend kitsch docklands to ensure they look different from contemporary docklands, which demonstrates again in passing, how memory is negotiated beyond orthodox heritage sites.

Conclusions
Rethinking memory as a less bounded and continually reconstituted process steers attention towards the less spectacular places where social memory is produced and mobilised. For waterfront projects, this means moving beyond San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf, Baltimore’s Inner Harbour, and Liverpool’s Albert Dock to relatively quiet backwaters such as Victoria Dock. We can explore how these more routine docklands are constructed by their developers and negotiated by their occupants as we trace the contours of social memory across society. At the same time, new approaches to spatialising memory also acknowledge that these landscapes are dynamic and negotiated. Since I began this study, for example, The Winding House project has been established and awarded lottery money, The Timber Dock pub has abandoned its maritime kitsch, and Quay 2005 has been approved. So, although the initial design of these sites is part of the story, we also need to consider their reconfiguration over time, and how they are understood, contested, or reinvested by those who articulate their sense of place, social memory, and appropriate aesthetics through these spaces.

Amidst all this, new theories of kitsch suggest that maritime kitsch might prove popular with the residents of Victoria Dock not because they are vulgarian lowbrows or sophisticated ironists (or both) but because they find simple, ready comfort in kitsch aesthetics. Arguably Victoria Dock was designed with enough sanitised, ‘historic’ waterfront kitsch to make it distinctive and saleable to its middle-class market. My interviewees acknowledged this process and its contrived nature, and were initially ambivalent about maritime kitsch. They saw Victoria Dock as a pleasant, safe, and appealing place, although nobody admitted to feeling more ‘embedded’ as a result of maritime kitsch. However, in further conversation, most revealed they were interested in, or liked, these maritime aesthetics—especially younger, transient professionals. Some residents even extend this theme to their gardens. Moreover, when their kitsch landscapes were threatened, others invested in celebrating or defending these landscapes. The Winding House, for example, was preserved for community use and aims to provide space for local social memory to develop. Likewise, the ‘Quay 2005’ debate found residents defending the aesthetics of faux, sanitised docklands against the prospect of contemporary shipping and port business. However simplistic these landscapes are according to established academic critique, some people feel their kitsch landscape is worth preserving. Therefore, taking kitsch aesthetics more seriously in social understandings of place, and shifting our studies towards everyday spaces, might help to develop more comprehensive understandings of the complex and spatialised social memories of our contemporary worlds.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to my interviewees and for the helpful comments of three referees. Thanks also to Stephen Legg, and to audiences at: the First International Conference in Social Geography, Gdansk 2003; The Association of American Geographers Annual Conference, Philadelphia, 2004 (and the ‘Mundane Geographies’ session organisers); the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow; and the Department of Geography, University of Hull.
References


Binkley S, 2000, “Kitsch as a repetitive system” Journal of Material Culture 5 131 – 152


Boym S, 2001 The Future of Nostalgia (Basic Books, New York)


Bruttomesso R (Ed.), 1993 Waterfronts: A New Frontier for Cities on Water (Grafiche Veneziane, Venice)


Credland A, 1995 The Hull Whaling Trade: An Arctic Enterprise (Hutton Press, Beverley)


de Certeau M, 1984 The Practice of Everyday Life (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA)


DeFilippis J, 1997, “From a public re-creation to a private recreation: the transformation of public space at South Street Seaport” Journal of Urban Affairs 19 405 – 417


Edensor T, 2005 Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality (Berg, Oxford)


Fiske J, 1989 Reading the Popular (Routledge, London)

Fitzgerald R, 1995 Buildings of Britain (Bloomsbury, London)


Game A, 1991 Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology (Open University Press, Buckingham)


Hallwachs M, 1992 *On Collective Memory* translated by L Coser (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL); first published in 1950
Hoskins G, 2004, “A place to remember: scaling the walls of Angel Island Immigration Station” *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 685 – 700
Hoyle B, Pinder D (Eds), 1992 *European Port Cities in Transition* (Belhaven, London)
Hull Daily Mail 2003a, “Jobs loss warning if terminal plan sunk”, 3 July, page 4
Hull Daily Mail 2003b, “£40m port plan will ruin estate”, 12 July, page 3
Hull Daily Mail 2003c, “Residents are urged to pack public enquiry”, 27 June, page 4
Hull Daily Mail 2003e, “We’ll fight to save view across the river”, 15 May, page 4
Johnson N, 1999, “Framing the past: time, space and the politics of heritage tourism in Ireland” *Political Geography* 18 187 – 207
Kulka T, 1996 *Kitsch and Art* (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA)
Kundera M, 1991 *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* translated by M Heim (Faber and Faber, London)
McNicol C, 2002 Hull’s Victoria Dock Village (Highgate, Beverley)
Nora P, 1984 – 92 Les Lieux de Mémoire 3 volumes (Gallimard, Paris)
Ostler S, 2004, “City heritage goes back in the future” Hull Daily Mail 19 October, page 5
Samuel R, 1994 Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (Verso, London)
Steinberg P, 1999, “The maritime mystique: sustainable development, capital mobility, and nostalgia in the world ocean” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 17 403 – 426
The Winding House, 2003 Newsletter number 3 July, page 2
Till K, 2005 The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN)
Urry J, 1990 The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies (Sage, London)
Young J E, 1993 The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT)
Conditions of use. This article may be downloaded from the E&P website for personal research by members of subscribing organisations. This PDF may not be placed on any website (or other online distribution system) without permission of the publisher.