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The Turner Contemporary: a catalyst for changing fortune

Having recently moved back to East Kent, Rob Wallis found in Margate a town at odds with his childhood memories. Can the Turner Contemporary, the brand new, multi-million pound cultural statement that now dominates the seafront, serve as the catalyst for change that Margate so desperately needs?

One of my very earliest memories is as a small boy walking along the pier at Margate on a bright summer afternoon. Apart from my fear at the time of falling over the edge into the sea, I can vividly recall the liveliness of the town. The seafront was packed with people enjoying the typical seaside entertainment on offer at the time. Simple pleasures, the sea and long sandy beach, donkey rides, amusement arcades and Dreamland fun park. Margate at that time was not a sophisticated place but it understood its offering and never took itself too seriously. This for many was its appeal. The natural beauty of the area, alongside a spirit of easy-going fun and entertainment made it stand out for many families as their summer destination of choice.

That was a lifetime ago. Having left the area in the mid-eighties, I recently returned, drawn back to bring up my own family by the sea. But Margate is a very different place to my memories. Time and tastes change. Long gone are the crowds of seaside visitors, tempted away by cheap package holidays with guaranteed sunshine and different expectations of how valuable leisure time should be spent. Over the past decades this has led to a spiral of decline for Margate, exacerbated by underlying serious social and economic problems. What struck me most on returning was how unloved everywhere looked; so much pride seemed to have been lost in the local area.

It is hoped by many that this is all about to change. Last month the Turner Contemporary opened in Margate with the stated ambition of using a modern art gallery to help reawaken the faded old town. Scepticism abounds among locals on this logic and for good reason. Eleven years of planning prior to opening stretched even the keenest of supporter's patience. Some £17million of construction costs is not a small amount of money to spend on any project in these times, particularly in this socially deprived part of the country. And does Margate really need an art gallery among the remnants of whelks, ice cream and 'kiss me quick' hats? The key point is that however people feel about the pros and cons of putting the Turner Contemporary here in the first place, it now has the potential to be a valuable tourism asset for East Kent and should be seen as such.

So why Turner? The new gallery celebrates JMW Turner's connection with Margate. Turner is arguably Britain's best known painter and made regular sojourns to the town in the early 1800s. Many of his works feature the local coast and Turner is said to have remarked that "the skies over Margate are the loveliest in all Europe". He would reach Margate in those pre-railway days using the steam packet boat from London, which was the fastest way at the time to reach the town. Turner stayed at a guest house which apparently was situated on the same site as the new gallery. Plenty is written about why he chose these lodgings and his relationship with the woman who owned the lodgings, one Mrs Booth. Suffice to say JMW Turner enjoyed a beano to Margate.

The building itself has been designed by the internationally acclaimed architect David Chipperfield, who has been rather busy of late, having also designed the recently opened Hepworth gallery in Wakefield. The Turner Contemporary is positioned rather awkwardly on the eastern edge of the seafront with its back rather pompously to the town. Perhaps the better, front-facing view is only fully appreciated from the beach at low tide.

The outside design looks simplistic and angular, made up of six large interlocking rectangular blocks, a stark contrast to the ornate Victorian architecture that is still very evident about the town. The outside of the building

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has no flashing neon like the nearby arcades, just a covering of pristine white panels that will do well to stand the test of time, not just from the North Sea and the changeable weather conditions but also from the temptations of local graffiti artists. Maybe it could do with a Banksy?

The gallery inside is on two floors with most of the exhibition space strangely on the second floor. The rooms are spacious with high walls and ceilings, with one of the aims of the internal design to make the most of the natural light through large windows. One of the most impressive features is the super-large, porthole-style window looking out to sea surrounded by large mirrors. It was constructed by Daniel Buren and provides a fantastic view of the ever-changing seascape it frames.

The opening exhibition, 'Revealed: Turner Contemporary Opens', is limited to a few works by a handful of artists, three of whom were specially commissioned. There was enough on show to keep my family interested for about an hour. This first show was designed to show off the light and space of the Turner Contemporary, and it just about succeeds in doing so. Highlights for us were Russell Crotty's scratchy style globes and Ellen Harvey's undeniably creative gallery-within-a-gallery, ARCADIA, that uses skilfully engraved mirrors on light boxes to show views of present-day Margate.

The intention is that one piece of Turner's work will always be on display but the mainstay of the gallery will be contemporary work. In the opening exhibition, Turner's *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains on the Island of St. Vincent*, on loan from Liverpool University, is on display along with a poem that Turner wrote about the work. It is probably not one of Turner's best and I personally preferred the impressive painting by James Webb showing a *View of Margate from the Pier*.

So what of the future for Margate and the Turner Contemporary? Separate questions, yet clearly linked. For Margate and the surrounding East Kent area the challenges are somewhat greater. Some believe that this is the last throw of the dice. It may or may not be but Margate's deep-rooted socio-economic problems will not be resolved solely by the Turner Contemporary.

For the gallery the challenge is twofold. First, to persuade the local community that a future identity for Margate can be shaped around art and culture, with the Turner Contemporary acting as a focal point for local community engagement. Second, it has to build a reputation that will attract visitors away from London's major galleries. On the horizon planned major exhibitions include Rodin's *The Kiss* going on display from October and Margate's very own first daughter, Tracey Emin, will display a collection of her work in 2012. The opening blaze of publicity has seen a reputed 79,000 visitors through the gallery doors in the first month. These are impressive numbers, aided no doubt by two long bank holiday weekends and lots of warm sunshine, but achieving significant visitor numbers all year round, particularly through the cold winter months, will be a tougher test of how the gallery and its exhibitions are being received, and whether it really can become the catalyst for changing Margate's fortunes.

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