

Hey for Lubberland!
Simon & Tom Bloor

Ikon Off-site Project
Birmingham and Fazeley Canal Towpath, Brindleyplace, Birmingham
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Hey for Lubberland! takes its title from a popular 17th century ballad whose lyrics tell of a land of pleasure where roast pigs roam the streets squealing 'eat me', rivers are filled with wine and rosewater falls from rain clouds. Thought to be a satire on the New World of the Americas, the song creates an image of utopia that could only ever be a fantasy. Humanity's repeated attempts to realise 'utopia', in one form or another, has been a continued source of fascination for Simon and Tom Bloor, Birmingham born artists who have worked together since 2003.

Their project for Ikon conflates two radical design proposals - dazzle painting and geodesic design - that each turned the conventional thinking of the day on its head. Geodesic building techniques were promoted by the visionary thinker, designer and ecologist Buckminster Fuller in the 1950s. Triangular sections are repeated in a tessellating pattern, creating the strongest, lightest, most efficient building technique ever devised, with the lowest ratio of material used to space enclosed. Fast and simple to construct, the process enables large areas of ground to be enclosed without supporting pillars or beams. Fuller anticipated mass production of the system, seeing in it a solution to housing shortages, particularly for developing nations. Yet the domes often leaked and much interior space was wasted as the result of furniture designed for rectangular spaces. As disadvantages emerged general disillusionment set in, though domes did become closely associated with American 1960's counterculture. A group of students who had heard Fuller speak founded Drop City in 1965, an artists' colony in Colorado that was the first rural hippy commune. The desire to 'drop out' and found a new society as an alternative to the one in which we live accords with the choice of many of those who choose to live on canals and waterways, adopting a nomadic way of life beyond the mainstream.

Fuller believed that technology could offer answers to all mankind's basic needs. Partly fuelled by his romanticism, geodesic domes became associated with visions of the future, being used on the cover of science fiction books and in films. Dazzle painting similarly emerged from a fascination with technological prospects. The *Vorticist Manifesto*, published in 1914, had called for 'vivid and violent art' to reinvigorate British culture. Inspired by the dynamism of the new machine age, the British painters behind Vorticism evolved a style typified by jarring colours, thick lines and geometric composition. One of the earliest manifestations of modernism in Britain, the movement was cut short by the outbreak of the First World War. Many Vorticists became official war artists, and Edward Wadsworth, a founder member of the group, worked on the development of dazzle painting, a new approach to military camouflage. The argument behind 'Razzle Dazzle', as it came to be known, was that camouflaging a huge ship against the ever-changing shades of sea and sky was impossible; better to create a design that would confuse enemy gunners by making it difficult to read the direction in which the craft was travelling. Thousands of ships were subsequently painted using the optically challenging technique, yet like Fuller's domes, success was limited. British commanders reported no reduction of

losses to enemy submarine fire and as technologies such as radar were developed the advantages of Dazzle were lost.

Birmingham's waterways themselves represent a marvel of design and engineering, dating from the very beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, the decisive turn that led, ultimately, to modernity. Superseded by motorways and railroads, they in turn fell from favour, being re-imagined in recent years as places of leisure, for barge holidays and weekend walks.

A library of books, provided for passengers to browse while onboard, suggests links between ideas of utopia and seemingly disparate developments in design and engineering as dazzle, the canal network and geodesic design and lays out the wider context within which such ideas have proliferated. Drifting away from Birmingham's centre, to post-industrial landscapes, one encounters the multiple legacies of quests for utopia.