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Creators	Cooper, Emily, Cook, Ian and Bilby, Charlotte

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# **Sex work, sensory urbanism and visual criminology: Exploring the role of the senses in shaping residential perceptions of brothels in Blackpool**

Authors

**Author 1: Dr Emily Cooper**

**Author 2: Dr Ian Cook**

**Author 3: Dr Charlotte Bilby**

## **Abstract**

Urban studies and criminology have much to offer each other, but the links between the two have so far been under-explored. This paper is an illustration of how aspects of both can, and should, be brought into conversation: namely the literatures on sensory urbanism (in urban studies) and visual criminology. The benefits of doing so are evidenced by a case study exploring the ways in which the senses shape residents' perceptions of brothels in Blackpool. Three key findings emerge from the case study. Firstly, the residents interviewed tended to focus on the visual aspects of brothels rather than other sensory aspects. Nevertheless, touch and smell (and their interaction with the visual) also played small but important roles in shaping residential perceptions. Secondly, residential perceptions of sex work and brothels are linked to, and encompass, a plurality of emotional responses. Thirdly, while the residents could see or hear little of what was happening inside the brothels, they often sought out sensory clues from outside, typically drawn from the architectural features of the brothels. Such insights, we argue, are made possible by, and highlight the possibilities of, the bringing together of urban studies and criminology.

Key Words: Sex work; sensory urbanism; visual criminology; residential communities; urban studies

## **Introduction**

In 2012, one of us (Emily) interviewed Judith, a 55-year-old resident of the seaside town of Blackpool in the North West of England. The interview was part of a project exploring the impact of brothels in the town on residents, and Judith lived in one of the red-light districts. It was a wide-ranging interview and a key theme that ran

through Judith's narrative, as with the other interview accounts, was the role played by the visual and the sensual in shaping the opinions and emotions of residents. A memorable moment was when the interview moved on to discussing a brothel, only accessible via an alleyway, and situated above a non-sex work business. Here, Judith commented on a pair of plastic hand-shaped stickers placed on the door: "It had shiny handprints on the door, which were presumably for decoration, but it just made me think of greasy men's hands all over the women." The sight of the stickers seemed to trigger associations with forms of touch, clearly contributing towards, as well as being informed by, Judith's opinions about sex work and the locality.

The brief example above suggests that the visual and sensual might play important roles in how sex work within the urban environment is interpreted by those outside the industry. It is, therefore, somewhat surprising that this issue has not been explored in depth within academic research. This paper will address this lacuna in relation to brothels in Blackpool, with brothels defined here as premises that house more than one sex worker offering sexual services. A focus on brothels is important, given that street sex work has dominated academic literature, the media and public policy alike – despite indoor sex work being the more common form. That being said, scholars are beginning to investigate sex work in brothels (Sanders, 2005; Brents and Hausbeck, 2007; Cooper, 2016), residential homes (Hubbard and Prior, 2013), hotels (Kempadoo, 2002) and other spaces. Not only is there much for academics to explore about brothels and other forms of indoor sex work within cities, but there is even more that needs attention when it comes to the relationship between the visual/sensual, brothels and cities.

As well as addressing the aforementioned lacuna, the paper also has a wider purpose; it advocates for the field of urban studies to converse more with elements of criminology. In particular, it asserts that our understanding of the role of the visual and the sensual in relation to brothels in the urban environment can be greatly enhanced by engaging with ideas within the urban studies literature on sensory urbanism, as well as emerging research on visual criminology. Urban studies scholars and criminologists often study similar issues – such as sex work – and there are indeed scholars that actively draw ideas from both urban studies and criminology (e.g. Hayward, 2004; Herbert and Brown, 2006; Atkinson, 2014; Millie, 2016).

Nevertheless, the bonds between urban studies and criminology are not as strong as they could be. Within criminology, little has changed since Hayward (2004) noted the indifference of criminology towards studying the city. Urban theory is still not a central focus within much of criminology and there remains an over-dependence on the Chicago School if theoretical discussions of urbanism arise. What is more, the city in much criminological research is positioned, perhaps inadvertently, as a convenient site in which to conduct research and a passive backdrop to the (seemingly more important) processes, actors and institutions involved in crime and criminal justice systems. In contrast to much of the work in urban studies, the city in criminology is rarely an active object of study (Lippert and Walby, 2013). Relatedly, Campbell (2012) and Hayward (2004, 2012) point out that criminological studies often draw upon superficial understandings of space and place – like the city, it seems that they are not seen as being that important in the study of crime, policing and punishment in society. This is, of course, a cause for concern.

Aspects of urban studies are problematic too. While it could also be argued that a number of scholars in this interdisciplinary field do engage with criminology, engagement tends to take the form of drawing on a very narrow range of texts, scholars and theories, albeit often critically – Wilson and Kelling's (1982) broken windows theory being a clear example here. Vast swathes of criminological thought remain untouched in urban studies. Bringing together sensory urbanism and visual criminology, we suggest, could be a stepping stone in building new and much-needed links between criminology and urban studies.

In exploring the ways in which the senses shape residents' perceptions of brothels in Blackpool, the paper is structured as follows. It begins with an exploration, and bringing together, of the literatures on sensory urbanism and visual criminology. It then provides a description of the sensory methods used. Following this, it gives an overview of the manifestations and governance of indoor sex work in Blackpool, before exploring the multi-sensory perceptions of the brothels by residents. The paper concludes by drawing out three key findings from the research project and calling for further dialogue between urban studies and criminology.

## **Sensory urbanism**

“City life, comprising the everyday rhythms, humdrum of activities, events, routines, and other un/expected urban encounters, comes with a range of ‘multi-sensory bombardment’... emanating from both human and non-human sources. Motor vehicles, horns, voices, music, nature, and tactility are but some of a wide range of possible examples that together form the sensuous character of cities. In essence, there is a superabundance of sensory affordances that are situated in the city.” Low (2015, p. 295)

We open this section by looking at three urban sociologists. The first is Kelvin Low who, in exploring the senses and urban life in the quote above, echoes a second sociologist: Georg Simmel. Writing over 100 years prior, Simmel (2012 [1903]) was interested in the sensory experiences of urban life and, in his paper ‘The metropolis and mental life’, he argued that urbanisation altered the social relations and senses of those living and working in the city. With vast numbers of people migrating to cities – the centre of what Simmel calls the ‘money economy’ – more and more people developed increasingly impersonal social relations based primarily on the buying and selling of goods. Furthermore, he reasons that the intensity of city life brings an “*intensification of nervous stimulation*” (ibid, p. 25, emphasis in original). A coping mechanism for many is to withdraw into oneself and develop a ‘blasé attitude’ towards other people and things around them.

Although Simmel is widely regarded as one of the founding figures in urban studies, in the decades following the paper few scholars followed his lead in examining the relationship between the senses and the city. Nevertheless, as the third sociologist, Michael Ian Borer (2013, p. 965), has correctly noted: “[t]here has been a recent resurgence of studies depicting the experiential dimensions of city life as lived and felt through the body’s five senses” (that is, hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch). It is not just sociologists involved in this revival; scholars from other disciplines are also involved. Geographers are particularly noteworthy, a number of whom have been influenced by Rodaway’s (1994) text *Sensuous Geographies*. While this book does not have an explicitly urban focus, it provides a useful starting point for understanding the geographies of sensory urbanism. Rodaway makes the case that the senses are often overlooked, but are important as they provide us “with

both information about a world around us and, through their structure and the way we use them, the senses mediate that experience” (ibid, p. 4). He highlights how the senses are inherently “geographical in that they contribute to orientation in space, an awareness of spatial relationships and an appreciation of the specific qualities of different places, both currently experienced and removed in time” (ibid, p. 37). For Rodaway and others, studying sensory urbanism necessitates a geographical approach.

The recent multi-disciplinary literature on sensory urbanism has a number of commonalities. Five are worth noting here. First is the emphasis on ‘lived experience’ or ‘everyday life’ in the city by individuals. The second is that while many of the studies explore particular senses or ‘sensescapes’, the authors usually note that the senses are interconnected and typically used alongside one another by individuals when experiencing urban life. Following on from this, the third commonality is that scholars have tended to note and bemoan a hegemonic hierarchy of the senses in western societies and within the academic literature. Rodaway (1994, p. 148), for instance, argues that sight and hearing are atop of the socially constructed hierarchy of the senses with touch, smell and taste beneath them. However, Rodaway reasons that, in practice, the role of each sense and the relationship between senses always varies depending on the context. Other scholars have differed slightly from Rodaway by pinpointing a fixation with sight (and not hearing) and they have sought to move away from a sole focus on sight to explore either a range of senses within the city (e.g. Urry, 2000; Shantz et al., 2008; Borer, 2013; Degen, 2014) or particular senses or sensescapes that are neither sight nor seescapes (e.g. Atkinson, 2007 on sound in the city; Henshaw, 2013 on smell in the city). This leads onto the fourth commonality in the literature, which is a focus on the regulation of the senses in the city; studies explore the ways supposedly ‘inappropriate’, ‘discomforting’ or ‘out-of-place’ sights and forms of touch, smell, taste and noise are governed (Cook and Whowell, 2011). The fifth and final commonality is that research has tended to concentrate on the sensory experiences of public spaces in the city.

Embodying all five of the commonalities above, Tan (2013) provides a thought-provoking account of the smellscapes and olfactory politics of Singapore

through an analysis of smoking. Here, Tan begins by examining the ways in which smoking in public and smokers are framed by non-smokers and policymakers as transgressive and harmful acts and bodies. The study then moves on to explore how smokers are socially and spatially segregated from non-smokers (e.g. banished to smoking areas) and the engagement of smokers in practices of impression management and considerate smoking in the city. Sensory urbanism, as Tan rightly points out, is more than just about sight.

Nevertheless, sight and the politics of visibility remain important and cannot be overlooked by urban scholars. This is illustrated through Cook and Whowell's (2011) analysis of the ways in which visibility and invisibility underpin the policing of public space. They note that the bodies (e.g. police officers) and technologies (e.g. CCTV cameras) doing policing are selectively visible or invisible to their targets and other audiences. Furthermore, certain individuals and groups are selectively rendered visible and invisible by those governing public space. For instance, marginalized groups such as the homeless and sex workers are often discouraged from using, or are heavily policed in, certain areas of the city (often city centres or gentrified and wealthy residential neighbourhoods). This links to Mitchell's (2003) argument that the central goal of much urban policy in an era of intensified inter-urban competition is to attract inward investment. The 'beautification' of public space and the removal of 'unsettling' and 'out-of-place' bodies, Mitchell argues, is an often-used means through which to achieve this. Irrespective of whether Mitchell is too money-focused in his arguments, we can see that sight and the politics of visibility are vitally important in shaping the spaces and lived experiences of the city. These, of course, have to be understood in connection to the other senses and the ways in which they are governed.

### **Visual criminology**

Visual criminology is not a fully-fledged theoretical or methodological approach, but encompasses instead a series of overlapping ideas and conversations. The ideas are still in development and the conversations are somewhat unresolved, but they have opened up a number of possibilities for criminologists and non-criminologists alike.

Much of the work within visual criminology appears to be motivated by a desire to “develop a more sophisticated understanding of the visual and confront the ways in which contemporary societies are saturated with images of crime” (Carrabine, 2012, p. 463). The focus of the work is typically on how offenders, criminal justice agencies and, less regularly, victims are portrayed visually. The images studied are often static. Examples here include documentary photography (Carrabine, 2012), court drawings (Barlow, 2016), police mugshots (Linnemann and Wall, 2013), street art and graffiti (Halsey and Young, 2006; Young, 2014), and comic books and graphic novels (Yar, 2016). Others have looked toward moving images, with studies on crime films and television programmes (e.g. Rafter, 2006; Nellis, 2009; Rafter and Brown, 2011), revenge porn (Dymock, 2016), and the self-recording of crimes by offenders (Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2016). The tenor of much discussion within visual criminology has been about correcting stereotypical, unflattering and inaccurate reporting and portrayals of characteristics, behaviour and processes. However, in recent years, this has started to change, with criminologists seemingly spending less time bemoaning misrepresentative images and more time thinking through how our world is infused with the chatter from multi-media outlets.

Visual criminology encourages us, then, to think about the impact of the image or object on us as either active subjects (as offenders, victims or criminal justice agency professionals) or passive subjects (as part of the non-offending population). Given that crime and punishment is often “secretive and socially invisible” (Garland, 1990, p. 186), images can shape societal understandings of them (Rafter and Brown, 2011). They can “move us, to feel and to act, in unforeseen and sometimes surprising ways” (Valier, 2004, p. 253). This speaks to a wider concern of visual criminology: the power relations in which the criminal image is situated in. Questions arise, therefore, about how the state and other bodies seek to shape access to images of crime and criminal justice, how and we produce and consume such images, and how we are *encouraged to* produce and consume them.

In a thought-provoking paper, Alison Young (2014) develops many of the above ideas within visual criminology. Here Young encourages visual criminology to avoid object-centred analyses. Instead, she makes the case for studying the



*encounter* between objects and their spectators and the multiple meanings produced through these encounters. Such encounters, Young reasons, are underpinned by affect which “marks the moment at which connection to something seen, heard, experienced or thought registers in the body and then demands that it be named or defined” (p. 162). Young demonstrates her argument through a case study exploring the different interpretations and reactions by criminal justice agencies to an unauthorized ‘painting out’ of an advertising panel in a Melbourne bus stop. The example of the interpretations of, and responses to, the painting out captures Young’s nuanced point that visual criminology should not be about describing static images; instead it needs to explore “the processes of interpretive contestation governing our encounter with the image” (Young, 2014, p. 172).

Young (2014) positions her approach as “a more fruitful paradigm” termed “criminological aesthetics” (p. 162) which appears to be closely connected to visual criminology. Millie (2016) coins a similar term ‘aesthetic criminology’ in his study of the aesthetic order of the city. Millie draws on ideas in visual criminology as well as cultural criminology, urban studies and philosophy and in so doing describes aesthetic criminology as a “new orientation” which would “supplement” existing work within visual criminology (p. 14). An important part of this new orientation is Millie’s ambition to study “the visual, but also broader *sensory*, affective and emotive experience” (p. 2, emphasis added). In doing so, Millie hints at visual criminology’s limited engagement with the senses beyond the visual. That said, Millie does not explore the senses beyond the visual in much depth beyond this statement. Another key aspect of Millie’s work, and that of Young (2014), is their centring of the city as an important object of study in contrast to much of visual criminology where the city tends to be hidden in the background. A focus on the city and sensory encounters, therefore, would greatly advance visual criminology as Millie and Young demonstrate.

One weakness of visual criminology still needs addressing. That is its excessive focus on two-dimensional images. These are of course important to study but attention to three-dimensional objects and places should also be encouraged. One such three-dimensional example is a building; visual criminology can help us better understand the production, iconography, use and perception of a variety of

buildings that both criminologists and urban scholars are interested in, such as police stations, prisons, or 'illicit' premises such as brothels. Such a focus would build on Millie's (2012) earlier exploratory research on how the architecture styles of police stations shape people's perceptions of the police station and what happens inside, and of policing more generally. It would also strike a chord with the expanding work on the cultural geographies of architecture which has explored issues of power and inequality in relation to the built environment, as well as the dynamic ways in which people inhabit, maintain, make meaning out of, and are shaped in some way by, buildings (e.g. Lees, 2001; Kraftl and Adey, 2008; Kraftl, 2010).

It is possible and beneficial, therefore, to develop a more nuanced holistic approach towards the study of the senses, liminality and the city. This approach takes from sensory urbanism an emphasis on the lived experience and spatial practices of those inhabiting and working in the city, as well as a commitment to exploring how the senses – including, but not limited to, sight – shape and mediate these experiences and practices. This can work alongside an emphasis, taken from visual criminology, on the criminalisation of sights (and sounds, tastes, smells and forms of touch), the encounters between objects and spectators, the power relations that underpin such encounters and the meanings that are produced through them.

### **Utilising a sensory methodology**

In recent years, visual methodologies and methods have become increasingly popular across the social sciences (e.g. O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010; Carrabine, 2015; Rose, 2016), particularly by scholars researching the sex industry (e.g. Desyllas, 2013; Sanders and Hardy, 2014). The research project on which this paper is based, however, utilized a sensory rather than a visual methodology as it aligns better with the ontological underpinnings of sensory urbanism; it is attentive to the multi-sensoriality of the urban experience (Low, 2015; Pink, 2011, 2015; Phillips 2015). Sensory methodologies also have the potential to highlight the unexpected, invisible and unspoken aspects of life in the city (Pink, 2015).

The empirical examples discussed in this paper draw upon data collected as part of Emily's doctoral thesis exploring the impact of brothels in Blackpool on

residents. Regarding methods, the project involved a combination of participant observations and interviews. Participant observations were conducted over the course of one year (2011-2012) around the two main clusters of brothels in Blackpool – referred to in this paper as the Cookson Street and Central Drive areas. A ‘resident at leisure’ dynamic was adopted whereby the researcher spent time walking and driving around the areas at systematic time intervals (morning and night), using local facilities. As part of this, the visual and sensual aspects of the brothels and the surrounding spaces were carefully observed and recorded in a research diary. Here, observations about smells, noise and aesthetics were noted, with careful attention paid to the architectural features of the brothels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 53 residents living and/or working in non-sex work premises in or nearby (<0.5 miles) to the two locations. Interviews were also conducted with three sex workers, three police officers and two Blackpool Council officers. Interviews were more conservative than some sensory interview techniques suggested by Pink (2015, pp. 73-93). However, through verbal communication primarily, the interviews explored the sensory perceptions of brothels by the residents, and the sensory aspects of running, working in and governing the brothels (with the sex workers, police and council officers). In this paper, we will refer to several the interviews conducted. The interview participants have been given pseudonyms, while the brothels have not.

### **Manifestations and governance of sex work in Blackpool**

Blackpool is a seaside town in the North West of England, with a population of around 140,000 (Lancashire County Council, 2015). According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2015), Blackpool contains 15 neighbourhoods that are highly deprived in at least six of the criteria – two of which are where the main brothel clusters are located. The population of the town is 96.7% white (JSNA, 2011).

During the fieldwork period (2011-2012) the sex industry in Blackpool comprised of street sex work, brothels (mainly described as massage parlours locally), private flats, independent escorts, lap dancing venues and sex shops. The brothels were mainly clustered in two areas: Central Drive and Cookson Street and their adjacent streets. These could be found on the outskirts of Blackpool’s central

business district. Both locations had mixed land uses, with several non-sex work premises and residences surrounding them. Many of the surrounding residences were rented properties and largely comprised of flats next to or above shops. Central Drive and Cookson Street are main driving thoroughfares in and out of the central business district, and experienced continuous traffic and footfall during the day, but become quieter in the early evening. There were two main differences between the two areas in the appearance and type of sex work present. First, while both have off-street sex work, on-street prostitution took place in Central Drive but not Cookson Street. Second, the brothels in the Cookson Street area were higher in numbers, and were more publicly visible on-street than Central Drive. Brothels on Central Drive mainly had back-alley entrances and were above other non-sex work premises, whereas Cookson Street brothels occupied the whole building with on-street entrances.

Blackpool's brothels were not licensed by the local council, although the council and police were generally tolerant towards brothels and sex work in the town. As we shall note, the police and council intervened in certain matters but overall, as one Blackpool Council officer interviewed stated, they operated a "turn a blind eye... until too many people complain" strategy. Such an approach was the result of a mixture of local discretion and the national legal system in which it is embedded. In England and Wales, the exchange of sex for payment between consenting adults is legal, although several activities related to sex work are illegal. These include: the operating of a brothel, soliciting, kerb crawling, and paying for sex with someone who is either under 18 or coerced into sex work (see Sanders, 2012). In many towns and cities across England and Wales, the primary focus of the police has been on-street sex work. Here, street sex work has often been equated with being a predominantly visual public nuisance. Sex workers, their clients and the detritus of sex work, such as used condoms and needles, are framed as sights which passers-by and neighbouring residents might find discomforting or offensive (Kantola and Squires, 2004). The noise of sex workers and clients is also sometimes deemed to be anti-social (Scoular et al., 2007). It is noted in Cooper's (2016) work that the legality of brothels is not always well-understood by the public, which is not aided by inconsistent approaches to regulation by local authorities. This generates differential interpretations of them by individuals.

Where sex work is more private and hidden within brothels, there has been less concern from most police forces nationwide about the visual and aural aspects of indoor sex work. Despite this, local authorities have often made restrictive decisions about the location of sex premises in a precautionary (moral) manner, designed to mitigate the presumed offence taken by residential communities – regularly with limited or unsubstantiated impact evidence from such communities (Prior and Crofts, 2012; Prior et al., 2013). To borrow Valverde’s (2010) phrase, local authorities such as those in Blackpool have engaged in ‘optical governance’ tactics, effectively policing ‘the aesthetic’. These are based on what should or should not be seen on or around the premises, how vibrant or prominent certain characteristics are, and who can or should see them. As Prior and Crofts (2012) state, these concerns often refer to aspects which might impede on the amenity of the neighbourhood, such as noise, parking issues and brothel visibility. Governing the visibility of sex work has also been underpinned by a moral discourse of protecting the sacredness and innocence of family-orientated spaces. Indeed, it was noted in several of the interviews with police officers and Blackpool Council officers that a key objective of Blackpool’s sex work regulation was to protect children from harm (although harm could not be defined conclusively). Here, it was assumed that exposure to certain ‘adult’ aesthetics can oversexualize children.

In part influenced by radical feminist ideas around sex work – where sex work is seen as being inherently violent, abusive and coercive – police forces and other agencies have been increasingly focused on the sex worker as a victim of sex work (see Raymond, 2013 for an illustration of radical feminist thought on prostitution). Touch has played an important part here; not so much in terms of the tactile intimacy of sex work, but the physical violence that sex workers can experience from clients, third parties and other individuals. Authorities in Blackpool exhibited concern about violence within the brothels, and a nominated police officer has been responsible for monitoring the welfare of the sex workers but suggested that violence was a regular occurrence. Smell and taste played little role in the governance of sex work in Blackpool. Loud noise – such as sex workers having arguments with clients stood outside the brothels – was mentioned in the interviews as something that has triggered conversations between authorities and the sex workers in the brothels. It is

clear, therefore, that governing sex work in Blackpool was predominantly focused on shaping the visual landscape of the town, but the authorities also paid some attention to other sensory aspects of sex work (notably touch and noise).

### **Sensory perceptions of brothels by residents**

A key finding of the research is that the residents interviewed tended to focus on the visual aspects of brothels rather than other sensory aspects. However, this is not to say that the senses beyond sight were neither important nor interconnected. The example of Judith, detailed in the introduction to this paper, illustrates this point. Here, the sight of plastic hand-shaped stickers placed on the door of a brothel evoked in Judith mental images of men touching women. This example shows that the visual can evoke wider sensory imaginations and emotions. Given the predominance of the visual in the perception of brothels by residents, we shall focus on the visual in this section. In particular, we will concentrate on a small number of recurring architectural features of the brothels whose aesthetics were widely commented upon in the interviews with residents, brothel owners, and the authorities. These are lights, signage, doors and windows.

#### *Lights*

Echoing other retail premises in the town, lighting is a prominent architectural feature of the Blackpool brothels. At the time of the research, all brothels had some sort of light burning. Some premises had the lights switched on at certain times while others had theirs on 24 hours a day. The colours of the light would usually be white, neon blue, pink or (less often) red – the latter being a colour often associated with sex work. There was variation in the types of lighting also, ranging from neon bar lights to those resembling Christmas fairy lights, table lamps and illuminated text. Both the brothel owners and the authorities believed that the lights influence the way in which others – residents and potential customers – perceive the premises. This resonates with the literature on lighting in retail environments, which posits that emotions, ambience and consumption patterns of shoppers can be altered by the form of lighting deployed inside and outside stores (e.g. Custers et al., 2012).

Indeed, as these quotes highlight, the lights of the Blackpool brothels were a source of contention with the authorities taking up a 'plain white light' purification campaign:

*"They aren't allowed to have neon coloured lights anymore; they have to be plain white. We've told them they need to be more inconspicuous"* (Police Officer)

*"Hopefully the reduction in the more obvious coloured lighting will make it less obvious to the public"* (Council Officer)

*"It's so unfair that we've had to take our lights down and our sign – [another brothel called] Jade's has the name lit up and no-one says anything"* (Cindy, brothel owner)

White lights were seen by the authorities as being more conspicuous, less garish and less unsettling for passers-by. This feeds into the wider societal association between the colour white and purity. Cindy, a brothel owner in Central Drive quoted above, was also asked by the council to change the type of the lighting used in one of the internal windows of the brothel, from a lamp with an image of a woman on it to a plain white bar – despite her concern that the alterations would reduce the number of new clients. She noted in the interview that she adopted a Victorian style erotic table lamp in the window instead, in order to indicate to potential clients that they were still open and to give a "good impression" to residents and potential customers.

Sometimes the lighting was interpreted by residents in ways that the brothels were not intending. This point resonates with Krafft's (2010) observation that while buildings are often designed to produce particular affective responses from users, these are not always realized in practice. The 'Christmas lighting' style adopted by one Blackpool brothel, for instance, was referred to by one interviewee as "barbed wire" (Carl, 24, resident in Cookson Street area). Its presence reminded another resident of "that Liam Neeson film [*Taken*] where his daughter was kidnapped and sold into the sex trade" (Hayley, 26, resident in Cookson Street area). Several residents mentioned 'trafficked girls' in interviews. This speaks to the often-occurring conflation between trafficking and sex work, while also highlighting the role of the

media in shaping public perceptions of sex work. The theme of imprisonment also came through in discussions about the non-illuminated parts of the brothels and led to speculation as to what occurs in these spaces. Paul (58), a resident near Cookson Street, stated for instance that “blacked out windows don’t send the message that the girls are being looked after; [they] aren’t as reassuring”. We will return to the issues of windows and imprisonment later.

### *Signage*

There was notable variation in the signage between the two areas in Blackpool. Signage is considerably more prominent in Cookson Street than Central Drive, where brothels are more conspicuous. Signage in both areas would change regularly, often due to changes in occupation and ownership, and without planning permission. Most of the signs had a degree of ambiguity about the nature of the business inside, although some were more explicit (in both senses) than others. None of the premises stated outright on their façade that they sell sex but many were suggestive in terms of their lighting (as noted previously), their business name and imagery used. In terms of business names, Twilight Babes on Cookson Street, for instance, opted for more sexually-suggestive terminology and imagery on the front of its premises (Figure 1). Thai Paradise in the Cookson Street area, meanwhile, drew on the stereotypical geographical association between Thailand and sex work. Others such as Natalie’s Sauna (Cookson Street) and Jade’s (Central Drive) opted for the ‘name’ (or pseudonym) of the brothel owner. In contrast, some brothels – especially those that, according to the local Council, temporarily ‘pop-up’ – only featured a street name and number and not a business name. The ambiguity of the signs, echoing other localities in the UK, was based on an unwritten understanding between the brothels and the authorities that their signage could be suggestive but not explicit.





**Figure 1** Twilight Babes, Cookson Street (Source: Emily Cooper, 2011)

The signage was often a focal point of discussion from residents. Many residents demonstrated some unhappiness at the ambiguous nature of the signage and some of the misunderstandings that could result because of this. Pat (64), a worker in the Cookson Street area, for instance, reasoned:

“That one next to us, Thai Paradise, it’s dangerous actually as some customers of ours went in there thinking it was a Thai restaurant. What if some youngsters did that too? We can sometimes smell their cooking too, so it’s an easy mistake to make”.

Here, Pat speaks to a wider fear associated with sex work: that it could shock and upset unknowing passers-by and, specifically, children. Furthermore, through linking sight and smell, Pat also points to the way sight works alongside other senses in shaping our perceptions of places; here, the positive food smells would not

necessarily be associated with a sex work venue and are, as such, labelled as deviant in this context. For others, though, ambiguous signage was not necessarily a problem; it was less conspicuous, but still managed to discreetly attract those who knew where to go (e.g. through prior visits or understandings of the visual codes).

The use of external images varied between brothels. Many had no images, especially those in Central Drive. One brothel near Cookson Street had a banner saying 'you are welcome' and a photograph of a woman underneath the text. However, the use of photographs on the building façades was limited to this one example; those using images typically opted for cartoons of voluptuous, seductively posed women. Tabu on Cookson Street, for instance, had an illustration of woman with the words 'Hello Boys! XXX PLEASE COME INSIDE' written on a door inside the porch visible to those passing by. Discussing Tabu, Max (22), who works nearby, mused that "[t]he pictures and that are self-explanatory, especially that "hello boys" one – no mistaking what that is saying". Here, the images of women on the exterior of Tabu and other brothels are deployed as exaggerated 'previews' of what you might see and touch if you step inside. Several residents, however, did not like suggestive imagery being used on the exterior of the premises. This was deemed to be too inappropriate – that is, too sexualising and too conspicuous – to be displayed in public space.

In addition to business names and images, a number of brothels in the Cookson Street area displayed phone numbers and a few listed business hours – but most did not. For Paul (58), a resident in the Cookson Street area, these aspects created an impression of professionalism and of good working conditions:

"I think the Natalie's Sauna one looks more like a business, with the opening hours on the side and the banner, as opposed to Tabu with the barbed wire and blacked-out window. It sends a message that the women are being looked after and perhaps the business is cleaner."

The example of Paul here speaks to a recurring theme in the interviews that the external façade of the brothels can give visual clues about the mysterious and secretive goings-on inside the premises; something that the residents would often

speculate on in, and away from, the interviews. None of the residents interviewed either directly stated, or hinted, that they had actually entered any of the brothels, but some did discuss browsing the brothel websites. Their limited knowledge of the interiors of the brothels meant, therefore, that they had to rely on the exteriors of the brothels for clues as to what was happening inside.

### *Doors and windows*

Alongside lights and signage, doors and windows contributed towards the brothels' "aesthetics of concealment and seduction" (Hubbard and Colosi, 2015, p. 790). They were important architectural features that shaped the way residents thought about the brothels. These acted as sensory clues, conduits and barriers for residents attempting to gain an insight into the activities inside. The doors and windows were a source of intrigue and a frustration. For some, they were also welcomed screens and containers hiding what should not be seen or heard in public space.

Most of the Cookson Street area brothels tended to have an exterior door that was positioned on-street, with a short corridor leading to an interior door that has an intercom (see Figure 2). In contrast, most of the Central Drive brothel entrances were in alleyways behind the main thoroughfare and up some stairs (see Figure 3), with one brothel doorway being on-street but slightly below street-level. In both areas, it was not possible to see much, if any, of the interior of the brothels from outside. In both Central Drive and Cookson Street, the view inwards was often obscured by curtains, net curtains or blinds and these were never removed during the periods of observation. Transparency, in short, was deemed undesirable by those working in the brothels. Nevertheless, the use of an exterior door (typically open during working hours) and locked interior door in the Cookson Street brothels provided a small insight into the premise from the outside. Although it was only a view of the corridor, such a layout was used to give the impression that the brothel was welcoming *and* secure, public *and* private. The corridor also acted as a space of curiosity and invitation for those passing by. Importantly, these were not purpose-built brothels but buildings having relatively inexpensive and creative alterations done to them, in order to enhance privacy and send out a visual message to potential clients that they would not be on public view when inside.



**Figure 2** Example of a Cookson Street brothel entrance (Source: Emily Cooper, 2011)



**Figure 3** Example of a Central Drive brothel entrance (Source: Emily Cooper, 2011)

As noted above, the accessibility of the brothels on Central Drive was typically via alleyway entrances and not the main road. This had the positive effect of reducing the often unwanted ‘public gaze’ on those entering the brothels. However, access via alleyway entrances did prompt speculation from one resident of Central Drive, Mary (25), about what happens inside:

“It has a back-alley entrance, very confined and isolated, away from the main street. You automatically get the impression that they are doing something wrong.”

The usually closed doors and windows of brothels in both areas meant that relatively little noise (e.g. voices, music) or smell emanating from the brothels ‘escaped’, with the exception of the smell of Thai food from Thai Paradise mentioned earlier. This is in stark contrast to many (legal) retail outlets who seek to entice customers through certain smells and sounds (Soars, 2009). Some residents

welcomed the relatively self-contained nature of the brothels, such as Brian (35), a worker on Cookson Street who said:

“Well, the images are suggestive but at least there aren’t actual women hanging around outside which would make it more real. The door protects the public from knowing what is happening, from seeing the reality really”.

While some residents were keen for the activities of the brothels to be hidden away inside, many would still speculate on what was happening inside, using the architectural features of the brothels as indicators. The safety of those working inside was an issue that some residents pondered over from a distance using these visual indicators. For instance, another resident who lived near Central Drive, June (55), mused about the intercom of one brothel:

“The intercom suggests that they don’t just let every Tom, Dick or Harry in. I guess it’s a comfort knowing that there is some vetting before a client is allowed in”.

Another brothel was subject to much speculation. Situated on Central Drive, it had an entrance below street-level on the main road. It also had no clear telephone number or opening hours on the façade and no internet presence. As displayed in the quotes below, for some of those interviewed its relative secrecy and unusual architecture evoked sinister and even dangerous images.

*“That one on Central Drive with the pink door has a weird contrast of images – it’s bright pink but has an iron gate outside like the entrance to a prison... [it] makes me shudder”* (Bruce, 38, worker on Cookson Street)

*“It looks like the entrance to a basement, I can’t help but think there is some poor girl trapped down there”* (Anne, 40, worker on Central Drive)

*“Walking past the black gate makes me think a bit about school, it never used to open until we were free from it!”* (Mary, 25, resident near Central Drive)

The quotes above speak once more to the theme of imprisonment, a sense that these premises were holding women captive. Once again, this echoes wider media portrayals of sex work but jars to some degree with the relatively small number of reported incidents of trafficking and underage sex work linked to the Blackpool brothels (interview, Police Officer). It is important to note, however, that low levels of reporting maybe indicative of a lack of intelligence rather than no activity occurring.

### **Encountering and creatively observing the brothels**

For many residents, the Blackpool brothels were part of their daily lives; buildings they walked and drove past regularly. Their repeated sensory encounters with the exteriors of the brothels brought about a variety of emotional responses. It is worth reflecting here on these, as well as those responses and feelings that went unspoken in the interviews conducted.

In his research on sex work in other western cities, Phil Hubbard has regularly framed societal attitudes towards sex work through the often-simultaneous responses of disgust and desire, “so that the prostitute is both repudiated and desired” (Hubbard, 2004, p. 677). In their work on public attitudes to lap dancing clubs, Hubbard and Colosi (2015) develop this further. Here they make the case that the participants on guided walking tours that they organised were often vocal in their disgust towards the clubs and their clientele while also articulating disgust as well as pity for the women working in them. Here there appears to be a resonance with our research in Blackpool in that some, but certainly not all, of the residents seemed to pity those working in what they perceived to be poor conditions in the brothels. Pity melded with feelings of discomfort and unease but was framed within a spatial understanding of the problems as being somewhat self-contained inside the brothels with little contagious effect on the wider neighbourhood. Yet the emotional responses to the brothels did not seem to centre on desire and disgust in the way Hubbard posits, although it is important to acknowledge that some of the interviewees may have considered desire and disgust to be unspeakable. A key emotional response was in fact intrigue; not necessarily sexual intrigue but in terms of wondering what was happening inside the brothels close to where the interviewees lived and/or worked. The ambiguous appearance of the brothels, their

unclear legal standing and media reporting on the problems of sex work all sparked intrigue in the residents.

The ways in which residents watched the brothels are also important to consider, and such practices were cited many times. As the quotes below demonstrate, the residents made judgements about the working practices inside the premises based on the inanimate architectural objects outside, as well as any movement or noise spotted within or nearby:

*“I sent Stu to look into the window of that one the other day. It used to have a sign saying ‘Red Hot Blonde’ and ‘pussycat’ in the window... now ‘The Gaff’ sign has been moved and it’s just a red curtain. You wonder why they change. Have they been caught?”* (Marie, 24, resident in Cookson Street area)

*“I never know what that one’s going to be called tomorrow [referring to Dolly Babes on Cookson Street]. My husband is a taxi driver too and he points a different one out every time. You can’t help but look at it from then on, even if it just looks like an ordinary house! I only do it when I’m in the car though!”* (Pat, 64, worker in Cookson Street area)

*“I’ll always go outside on my break and people-watch. It definitely makes my breaks more interesting. I’ll strategically stand with my cigarette so I can see everything. It’s different every day”* (Jim, 52, worker on Cookson Street)

Residents also posed questions to themselves and made judgements based on any changes to the exterior of the brothels. Particularly in Cookson Street, residents often engaged in creative and often playful practices to watch and listen, as shown above. They often tried to observe at a distance and mask their actions, to pretend they are not staring or listening too intently, because they did not want to be perceived as being either intrusive neighbours or customers. It is arguable that this heightened playfulness in Cookson Street is, on the one hand, indicative of the notion that the brothels are an extraordinary feature of the streetscape; but, on the



other, demonstrates that the surrounding spatial context is deemed appropriate enough to engage in such practices during encounters with the brothels.

There are faint similarities between the interviewees and Walter Benjamin's (1999) *flâneur* here; a man who strolls voyeuristically through the city, simultaneously detached from and enthralled by the vibrancy of his surroundings. He, like the residents of Blackpool, was an amateur detective of sorts. Yet unlike the *flâneur*, the intrigued residents were neither solely men nor were they predominately on the move when observing. Indeed, Jim in the quote above talked about observing while standing outside on a cigarette break, and Mandy (53) described how she would watch the brothels through the window while at work (but would avoid "gawping" if customers came into her building). For Jim and Mandy, observing the sexual Other became routinized everyday performance, with brothels occupying a liminal presence as both routinely extraordinary and routinely ordinary features in the streetscape.

## **Conclusion**

This paper opened by calling for closer dialogue between urban studies and criminology: two fields of study that have, for too long, tended to work in isolation. Here we have sought to demonstrate how certain conceptual and theoretical ideas from urban studies (on sensory urbanism) and criminology (on visual criminology) can productively inform and aid each other. Indeed, the paper has suggested a holistic framework, taking ideas from sensory urbanism and visual criminology, which can enhance our understanding of the multi-sensory encounters and perceptions of brothels by surrounding residents. Such a framework emphasizes the lived experience and spatial practices of those inhabiting urban areas, multi-sensoriality, the production of meaning from sensory encounters, and the power relations that underpin these encounters.

Three key observations from the case study of residential perceptions of brothels in Blackpool are useful to note here. First, while the visual appears to have the most influence over the governance of sex work in Blackpool as well as the perceptions of residents, touch and smell (and their interaction with the visual) also play small but important roles. Second, residential perceptions of sex work and brothels are linked to, and encompass, a plurality of emotional responses, many of which were not intended by those decorating the brothel exteriors. Third, residents were active and creative in the production of meaning from the brothels. Although their understandings of brothels and sex work were shaped by the ambiguity of the brothels and the media, they also emerged out of the residents' curious searches for, and interpretation of, clues often drawn from the external façade of the brothels. Clues, they hoped, would give them an insight into what was happening inside. We can see, therefore, that there was a significant degree of agency in their observations and interpretations. Together the findings from this research project would suggest that Agustin (2005) is correct in calling for a more comprehensive cultural analysis of urban sex work, moving away from purely moral or legal concerns and exploring its intersections with aesthetics, art and everyday life. Making sense of the visual and sensual dimensions of sex work should be central to this research agenda, while also potentially offering new and productive ways for local authorities to navigate harmonious co-habitation between sex workers and residential communities.

Of course, in making the case for a closer dialogue between urban studies and criminology, we have focused on relatively small parts from both fields: sensory urbanism on the one hand and visual criminology on the other. There are countless other empirical insights, conceptual ideas and methodological innovations that can be shared and co-produced between urban studies and criminology. Future dialogue and research, therefore, is of paramount importance. Working together can result in increasingly nuanced understandings of sex work in urban areas as well as many other aspects of urban criminological life.

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**Figure 1:** Twilight Babes, Cookson Street

**Figure 2:** Exterior and interior door of a brothel in Cookson Street

**Figure 3:** Brothel entrance via alleyway behind Central Drive

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