

Forton's Brutal Liminality:
a case study of architecturally induced
psychological stressors as a result of
prolonged exposure to liminal spaces in the
brutalist mode, as exhibited by Forton
Service Station.

by

Terrance Stevens

1. Introduction

This paper will present a comprehensive analysis of Forton Services as a key site of study for the intersection between brutalism and liminal space design, with a secondary focus on the psychological stresses such sites can cause.

First, I will combine theoretical frameworks for brutalism and liminality. I will then examine service stations as psychologically stressful liminal spaces, before moving onto an architectural analysis of Forton Services and its history as a brutalist site. This will culminate in a case study into the effects of extended exposure to liminal spaces with brutalist architecture, via my employment at Forton Services.

To start with, let us establish a theoretical underpinning for this paper by linking the architectural style of brutalism to the anthropological theory of liminality. I will do this by providing compatible interpretations of both and suggesting the new concept of “brutal liminality.”

Brutalism – originating from the French ‘béton brut,’ raw concrete – is an architectural movement that focuses on utilitarian purpose. This often results in exposed raw materials, stark forms, repetitive geometric shapes, and monolithic structures. This can often lead endusers to feel overwhelmed or oppressed (Zumthor, P. 2006).

‘Liminal’ spaces, derived from the Latin ‘limen,’ meaning ‘threshold,’ are transitional spaces normally inhabited for short periods. They have been shown to have marked effects upon the psychology of those exposed to them, and long-term exposure has been found to elicit anxiety responses (Augé, M. 1995), (Bachelard, G. 1994) and feelings of the uncanny (Trigg, D. 2012).

My hypothesis is that that Forton Services, as a site of intersection between these two psychologically significant elements, can be considered a site of what I have termed brutal liminalism, and this is why it has a profound effect upon those exposed to it in the long term, as testified by my own experiences. Specifically, it creates an effect of absence despite presence, an “architectural hunger” of a sort.

Service stations such as Forton were originally conceived of as a location in and of themselves, rather than merely a pause in a journey. However, with the widespread adoption of personal automobiles and the subsequent overdevelopment of UK road infrastructure, these spaces transitioned into liminal spaces.

This increase in travelers, far beyond older design parameters, has led to an ephemeral flux of people transitioning through service stations at all hours, leaving only trash in their wake.

Not only this, there are perceived time distortions associated with such spaces, exacerbated by the deliberate absence of clocks (to encourage longer stays) and 24-hour opening times with rolling opening, closing, cleaning and restocking routines.

I propose that because these spaces are devoid of persistent humanity and consistent time perception, they have thus become dislocated from humanity’s shared mindscape, and there are unique health risks to people who are over-exposed to this phenomenon. In essence, I believe the “architectural hunger” of a space that resents its own transitional nature can be dangerous, and I have a unique personal insight into this phenomenon.

I originally took my role as a night janitor at Forton following a protracted divorce which cost me the majority of my friendships. The ensuing stress episode led me to quit my job as a deputy fiduciary services administrator. I thus applied and successfully interviewed for a low-stress janitor role, despite my overqualifications. At the same time, I successfully applied for the Architecture Program at Lancashire University as a mature, 51-year-old student.

I soon came to realize that Forton Services is an ideal example of brutal liminalism, given its status as both a popular motorway service station and a landmark of brutalist architecture. And I believe this is primarily thanks to the 20-meter Pennine Tower, which was listed in 2012, despite being closed to the public.

The site is seventeen point seven acres, featuring an eastern picnic site and facilities on both sides of the M6 motorway, with seating for 700 people, 101 toilets and 403 parking spaces.

The top of the tower once held a fine-dining restaurant with a roof-level sun terrace, both of which featured unmatched panoramic views of the surrounding rural countryside on all sides.

Unfortunately, the effects of brutal liminality soon took effect, with a 1978 government review describing the site as “a soulless fairground,” and the restaurant became a trucking lounge before being closed to the public in 1989. No-one has eaten there in decades.

There were later failed attempts to repurpose the space, but in 2017, the two pentagonal lifts in the center of the tower shaft were replaced, leaving the higher floors derelict and inaccessible.

The tower still stands overlooking the surrounding countryside, the only access via the brutally liminal Forton Services below. But the entrance is sealed, and this is perhaps for the best.

Despite being unable to enter the tower itself, I myself still came to find that over the months of my work there I was undergoing a psychological shift.

It was initially subtle enough that I failed to notice it, and when I did, I assumed there was a rational explanation. Put simply, there were less and less people every night. At first I assumed it was some seasonal change I hadn't accounted for, but every day it grew more pronounced until finally, one night, I realized that I had not seen a single person.

This was obviously impossible, but it was verified by my log (see fig 1). I racked my brains, trying to remember if I had caught even a glimpse, but no, no one. Intrigued, I stepped outside to check the car park. There wasn't a single car. But there was... something else.

As my eyes adjusted to the amber-lit expanse, I started to notice streaks of light lingering in the air. There was a nebulous haze across the entire car park, a mélange of muted colors punctuated with more vivid reds, whites and yellows, but even more curiously, I realized it primarily hovered above the asphalt. The greenery and walkways were mostly clear. The effect was curiously familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. I have since been unable to determine if this effect was psychological, physiological, or atmospheric in nature, but I maintain that the phenomena was accompanied by a disquieting sense of absence. Of hunger.

I squinted again, trying to make out details in those long, waving, iridescent strips. I could trace denser routes through the chaos leading through the main doors to the facilities. And as I watched, a memory of my ex-wife's photography leapt unbidden to my mind, my favorite shot that she'd given me on our seventh anniversary: "A study of traffic."

That's when I realized why this all felt so familiar. Timelapse. If I could have walked into that photo, this must be what it would have felt like. It would have been beautiful, if it weren't so unsettling.

In retrospect I was clearly having some kind of severe hallucinatory episode brought on by long-term exposure to the space. I knew I should probably just sit quietly and wait it out, but the glowing mist had already crept into the building itself, and my only instinct was to *hide*, to find somewhere, anywhere, that I might be free of that overwhelming miasma sloshing back and forth within the foyer, threatening to wash me away with it.

I retreated, away from the main entrance, away from the densest areas of the kaleidoscope, in the hopes of finding somewhere less overwhelmingly saturated.

And that was when I saw the woman.

She was tall, young, and thin, almost to the point of malnourishment, dressed similarly to a stewardess with a tightly fitting blue waistcoat, buttoned over a sensible-looking grey skirt. She was beaming, holding open the door to the lift and inviting me inside. There was a small brass badge on her waistcoat, but instead of a name it simply read, "You are here."

I hesitated a moment, but before I could consider her strangeness, a particularly high tide of color swept down the corridor toward me. I panicked, and before I realized what I was doing I had darted inside the lift and slammed the close-door button.

"Thank you," I croaked, my voice catching from disuse. She didn't seem to notice and instead continued to smile warmly at me as she reached across and pushed the button for the penultimate floor marked "Restaurant." A button I knew was disabled. The lift started to climb.

I stood, leaning against the doors, and tried to catch my breath as she began to speak:

"Good evening!" She exclaimed. "It's my pleasure to welcome you! You are here! Stay awhile!"

I gabbled some indeterminate question, and her rictus grin stayed as wide as ever, but she said nothing. Then the doors to the lift opened with a ping and I tumbled backwards onto the floor.

"Stay awhile!" she called again, before the lift doors closed, depositing me in the tower.

I'd been shown the locked tower stairway on my first day by my predecessor Molly, and I knew there was nothing up there anymore apart from damp and broken furniture. At least, there shouldn't have been.

Before me, though, was a restaurant, spotless and bright with retro 60s décor and the sweet smell of frying pork drifting towards me from the central kitchen. Chairs and tables lined the outside wall, each of which

sported a large window which would have granted an impressive view of the landscape below, if they weren't all blacked out. This didn't seem to concern the diners, however, who were perfectly content eating whilst chatting amiably with one another.

There was a moment of relief then, for as strange as the situation was, at least there were people. I was no longer trapped in that bizarre, solitary, aurora limbo downstairs.

The feeling faded, though, when I heard what they were saying. Or rather, what they weren't saying.

Looking around, the restaurant was near capacity with only one free table, but when I tried to listen to any one conversation it was just... noise. A muffled murmur that sounded like speech but held no information. Their mouths were moving but all I could make out was a meaningless garble, just the impression of speech, nothing more.

Similarly, as I looked closer at the diners themselves, I noticed oddly repeating elements to them. Three women were wearing the same blood-red heels. Two men, the same blue coats. And worse, there were even recurring features iterating on different faces: the same green eyes on two women, identical moustaches on three men. These were as much an impression of people as the sound was an impression of speech. And they were all so horribly thin.

A chef turned to me, the same smile on his face below a fourth version of a bushy moustache, and an identical "You are here" name tag on his chest. He gestured from his place behind the counter to the only open table:

"Good evening!" He cried. "You are here! We hope you stay awhile!"

I automatically stepped towards the table before I caught myself. At the same time everybody in the room seemed to lean ever so slightly forward in anticipation.

And that was when I noticed the breeze blowing in through the blacked-out windows, only they weren't blacked out. They weren't even windows. They were gaping square holes and beyond them was nothing at all. Any one of the diners could reach out if they had a mind to and plunge their hand outwards into the dark, foreboding and utterly featureless void. There was nothing. Nothing above, nothing below, nothing at all. Nothing, save the tower and the restaurant.

My whole body recoiled from that awful absence, and I retreated backwards towards the lift. That was when the gentle murmur of non-speech abruptly ceased, to be replaced with a complete and utter silence.

Everyone was still smiling, but their repeating faces had frozen, staring straight at me.

The chef spoke again, and though his tone hadn't changed, it was clear this was no longer a request:

"Stay awhile."

The diners echoed his words, a gradual chorus disseminating about the room, overlapping and entwining, wrapping me up and dragging me back towards the table.

“Stay awhile.”

Their grip on me tightened, a dozen hands pushing and pulling me as one. Then a man with that same moustache leant down towards my leg, opened his mouth, and *bit* into me.

Pain shot through my body, but my thrashing was in vain as one of the women buried her teeth in my shoulder, and I could feel hot blood flowing down my back, whilst at the same time the chef took off one of my fingers, the bone barely slowing his chiseled jaw.

I screamed, but the sound withered, draining out the windows into nothing.

With a sudden surge of adrenaline, I shoved and kicked and *fought* my way free of the emaciated crowd, their thin and brittle bodies offering little resistance despite their number. But I had nowhere to go. The lift had disappeared as if it had never been and beyond the windows there was, of course, nothing. “You are here,” I thought bitterly.

And so when faced with the prospect of being eaten alive, or leaping out one of those windows into pure oblivion... it was no choice at all. I jumped.

The paramedics listed my missing finger and other injuries as having been received when I fell from the tower, and barring further evidence to the contrary (which I shall not be returning to Forton to collect), I am forced to accept their diagnosis of falling damage and associated trauma as a result of a stress-induced psychotic episode.

In conclusion, there is no question that my time working at Forton Services has affected me profoundly. This experience is proof of the intense mental pressure that such brutal liminalism can have upon a person who is overexposed to such “hungry architecture.”

I can only apologise for my unintentional extended absence. I hope this may provide some context, though I am painfully aware that no missing person report was filed with the police, since apparently none of my colleagues, tutors or fellow students noticed my absence.

Nonetheless, I hope that this can still be considered an extenuating circumstance and that my findings do merit further study. Though I would request that any further work be passed to another student.