

Serendipity in the City

The importance of the unexpected

One aspect of our cities that makes them dynamic, hubs of creativity and locations of change is the opportunity for the unexpected. The chance encounter, the exploration of something new, the engagement with something different is what is at the heart of the urban experience. This map explores these issues within Nottingham as it reveals the places of serendipity within the city. These are locations where people meet, exchange ideas and see something new. These are the cultural, social and economic engines of the city.

The idea of serendipity is an important philosophical, anthropological, political and sociological issue as it is used by scholars to discuss how humans engage and interact by happenstance and accident (Hazan and Hertzog 2012; Olma 2016). From these meetings and exchanges, new ideas, cultures and practices emerge. The idea of serendipity is also part of the philosophy of science and is used to describe the fortunate combination of conditions where innovation emerges and

discoveries are made (Merton and Barber 2006).

The idea of serendipity and its use in the urban experience can be seen with the work of Jan Gehl who emphasised the need for public places where people could meet, interact and engage with one another (Gehl 201). It is in these sites that serendipity can happen. We can speak of an 'urban serendipity' as an experience that can transform lives but also enrich our everyday interaction with our cities (Chan 2019: 106).

Our cities need to possess a sense of adventure and excitement to make them liveable places that engage us (Acebillo 2012: 40). This conforms to what Jane Jacobs, the urban activist and theorist, asked for cities to be in her work (see Jacobs 1961). The first question that Jacobs said that city planners and architects should ask is whether the urban environment would be fun, liveable and filled with variety.

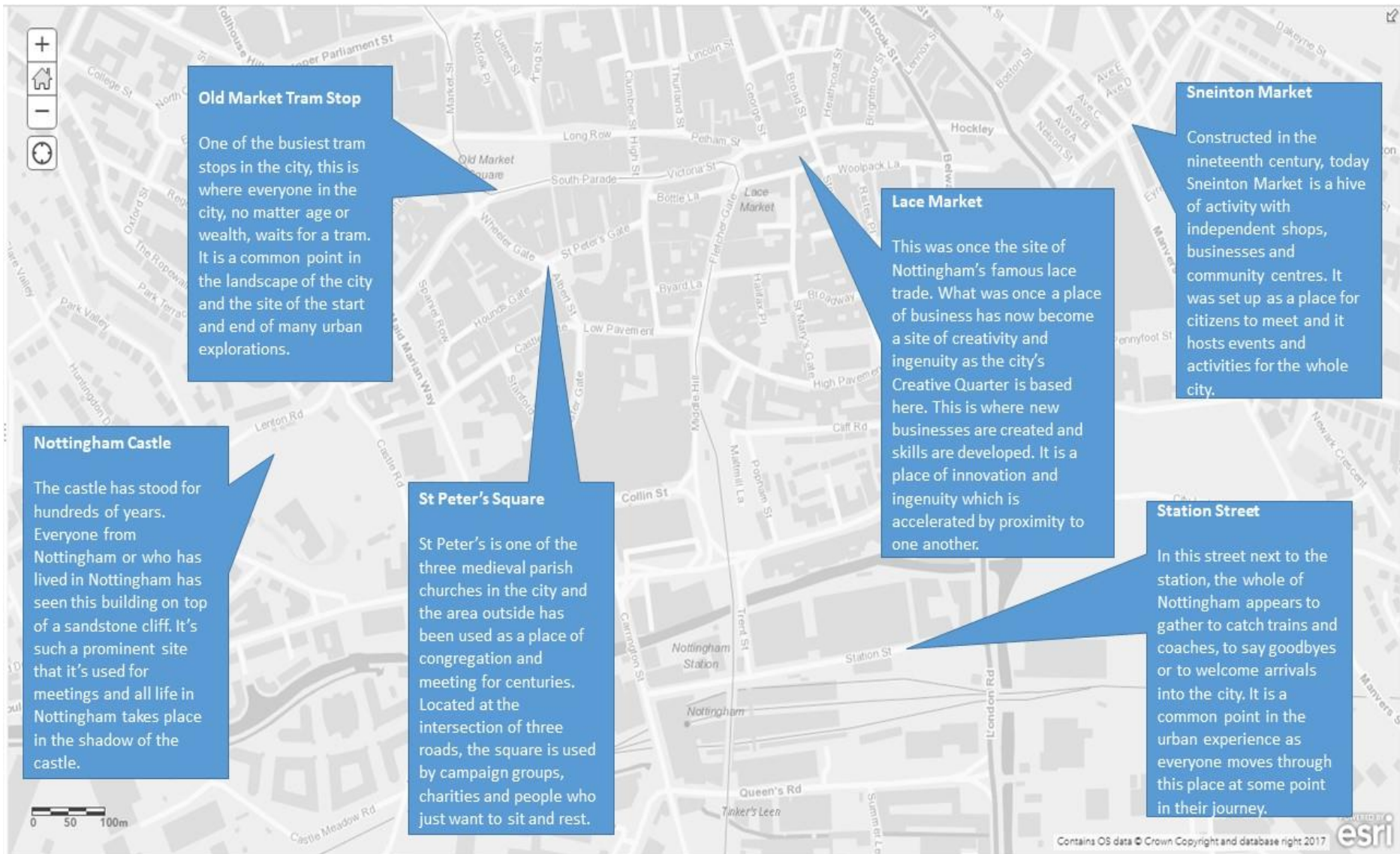
This map of serendipity provides an indication of sites in Nottingham that are places of serendipity where events and activities occur and where people can meet and engage with one another.



Old Market Tram Stop



Lace Market



Old Market Tram Stop

One of the busiest tram stops in the city, this is where everyone in the city, no matter age or wealth, waits for a tram. It is a common point in the landscape of the city and the site of the start and end of many urban explorations.

Nottingham Castle

The castle has stood for hundreds of years. Everyone from Nottingham or who has lived in Nottingham has seen this building on top of a sandstone cliff. It's such a prominent site that it's used for meetings and all life in Nottingham takes place in the shadow of the castle.

St Peter's Square

St Peter's is one of the three medieval parish churches in the city and the area outside has been used as a place of congregation and meeting for centuries. Located at the intersection of three roads, the square is used by campaign groups, charities and people who just want to sit and rest.

Lace Market

This was once the site of Nottingham's famous lace trade. What was once a place of business has now become a site of creativity and ingenuity as the city's Creative Quarter is based here. This is where new businesses are created and skills are developed. It is a place of innovation and ingenuity which is accelerated by proximity to one another.

Sneinton Market

Constructed in the nineteenth century, today Sneinton Market is a hive of activity with independent shops, businesses and community centres. It was set up as a place for citizens to meet and it hosts events and activities for the whole city.

Station Street

In this street next to the station, the whole of Nottingham appears to gather to catch trains and coaches, to say goodbyes or to welcome arrivals into the city. It is a common point in the urban experience as everyone moves through this place at some point in their journey.

Why we need serendipity in the city

We must realise the importance of serendipity in our urban environment. Our cities are diverse, densely populated areas. It is this characteristic that makes cities interesting and allows for invention and innovation. To create or to allow for spaces where people can meet, interact and engage must be our goal in creating sustainable and liveable cities for the future.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Situationists critiqued the modern city as devoid of life and places of engagement. They stated that 'we are bored in the city' (Ivain 1953). In her influential work on how cities could be planned for people, Jacobs also insisted that we should ensure our cities are engaging and fun (Jacobs 1961).

With the advent of post-industrialisation, many of our cities have lost their sense of identity and their communities. With this loss is also a sense of exploration, difference and the opportunities for adventure that make cities interesting and what drives people to make urban areas their home.

These ideas have led some planners and city governments to suggest ways in which urban areas can become 'creative cities'. These are described as sites of innovation and enterprise that increase economic output and civic engagement through investing in the creative arts (Landry 2008).

However, these creative cities can become the site of division and cause segregation within parts of the urban environment (see Florida 2005). Instead of focusing on creativity, the idea of serendipity allows for a far more democratic and open experience of the city. Serendipity should be encouraged and celebrated in the city. The places where people can meet, explore and exchange new ideas must be protected.

Serendipity is an understanding that people and places interact with one another. That a sense of place and belonging cannot be cultivated but must be generated as people move through and interact with their environment. We must make sure that to provide an enriched urban life that we allow everyone a sense of serendipity in the city.

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