Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript
The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:
http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/103325

How to cite:
Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information.
If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:
The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:
Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

warwick.ac.uk/lib-publications

Road Rumour: Ground Plans for the Sky Blue City
Nicolas Whybrow

A document that appears to provide a form of conceptual blueprint for Coventry's notorious inner city ring-road to be converted into a New York City-style High Line development has recently come to light. Sources suggest that the 4-page text and image montage was produced independently by an unnamed artist or architect at the time of Coventry's bid to become UK City of Culture in 2021. Thought to be a fragment referencing but one of the nine sections (or 'ringways') of the 2.2-mile long route encircling – some would say strangling – the city centre, the carefully-prepared document, which is entitled 'Bare City: "We'll Live and Die in These Towns"', presents an assemblage of subtitled and attributed quotations against a photographic backdrop of part of the road itself (identified as Ringway St Patricks, which runs between Junctions 5 and 6). Considered to hold high potential as both a call to action, the fragment is given a preliminary airing here (with annotations and this introduction by the present author) while research continues to try and establish, first, whether or not there is further material to be unearthed and, second, what the official status of the document is.

While nothing is stated directly in 'Bare City', and only its images tie it specifically to Coventry, the firm view of this commentator is that it proposes a form of step change – literally as well as figuratively as it happens – in Coventry ring-road's future role.[note 1] This would see the road turned into a green eco-area – an 'urban wild' of natural growth – intended primarily for people to interact but, above all, be in the city centre. For, as Jan Gehl (2010) has shown, what makes cities work ontologically is based on opportunities for walking, talking and hanging out, the engagement of the senses, and self-generated mobility.[note 2] Other activities and features could, like the High Line, include installing site-responsive and participatory artworks, but there are any number of other potential uses – transient and permanent – that arise once cars are removed from the equation. From pop-up cinemas to open markets, these could be located specifically to take into account the undulating as well as twisting and turning architecture of the ring-road.[note 3] The inaugural events in 2017 of both Coventry's bid to bear the mantle of UK City of Culture in 2021 and the launching of the city's Council-led 10-year cultural strategy (supported by the Arts

Council of England) afford a 'perfect moment' to reassess the effect of the ring-road on the city in all its urban complexity some fifty years after its construction in the aftermath of World War 2.[{note 4}] In a sense what the 'found documents' of 'Bare City' represent are a form of 'future archaeology', conjuring an image not only of the present city but also of a city yet to come. 'Bare City' is, then, the testament of an event before its materialisation, with the implications of its realisation emerging in the performative act of its discovery and interpretation.

Cars and concrete

It is, of course, common knowledge that Coventry was subject to a devastating 'Baedecker bomb' attack on a single night in November 1940, which flattened large areas of the city centre. In retrospect Hitler infamously coined the verb coventrieren (to conventrate) as a term to be applied to such acts of blanket bombing in general, which has had the effect of raising the attack on Coventry to the level of myth; other cities in the UK were hit at least as badly. Moreover, there had already been substantial pre-war moves to reconfigure the chaotic medieval city, with many of the timber-framed gabled buildings in the centre razed for the purposes of road widening and slum clearance (Stamp 2007). In May 1940, just six months ahead of the bombing, a public exhibition entitled 'Coventry of Tomorrow: Towards a Beautiful City' laid out comprehensive plans for further changes to both the civic centre and the city's residential suburbs (Gould and Gould 2016: 9-11). Curated by the city's municipal architect Donald Gibson, the exhibition was intended to instil in the people of Coventry a desire to engage with the planning and design of their city. Proving highly popular, the plans drew significantly on Lewis Mumford's then recent The Culture of Cities (1938): 'Mumford rejected what he described as monumental, backward looking, grandiose planning in favour of the 'poly-nucleated city' based on smaller communities surrounding grouped cultural institutions like the civic centre of 'Coventry of Tomorrow', to give a "social basis to the new urban order"' (11).

In an irony not lost on Gibson, the German bombing later that year would effectively clear the way for his proposals to be expedited through a succession of revisions. These were distilled shortly after the end of the war into another public exhibition this time entitled 'The Future Coventry', which also witnessed publication of 20,000 copies of an accompanying brochure for the citizens of the city (24). The well-

received plans emphasised a modernist urban ethos of clarity and pragmatism: clean lines, functional zones and moderate heights to buildings. Above all, though, the centre was to be significantly pedestrianised, incorporating abundant green areas and even a pond. So, an open, rationalised civic centre for working people, many of who were employed in the burgeoning post-war car industry. Even the inevitable ring-road that was foreseen at the time aimed to integrate pedestrians and bicycles and was conceived as an attempt to absorb and redirect traffic, restricting its incursion into the centre as far as was feasible.

In an age of cars and, moreover, in a city that not only produced them in abundance but also had a far higher than average rate of ownership nationally once post-war shortages had subsided, the dream of pedestrianisation proved elusive.[|{note 5}] After Gibson's departure from office in 1955, the original plans shifted rapidly under his successor Arthur Ling and the city engineer Granville Berry, with the ring-road becoming 'in effect Britain's first urban motorway' (58). Motorways, urban or otherwise, are not pedestrian or cyclist friendly at the best of times – no one would risk their life by venturing anywhere near the current road – and so an elaborate system of subways and bridges had to be devised to facilitate passage between centre and suburb. Their various convolutions, requiring 'torturous and uncomfortable detours' (59), only underscore the degree to which these were built far less to enable pedestrian flow than to compensate for the crass prioritisation of the ring-road. Gould and Gould again: '[T]he road was mostly elevated but, with the slip roads, it formed an almost impenetrable barrier around the city, limiting both vehicular and pedestrian connections' (59). Without question the ring-road became the single most incisive post-war intervention into the built environment of Coventry after the war. Although some locals are known to express affection for it in a we've-got-used-to-it kind of way, and it also fits with the current trend of revisiting and championing brutalist aesthetics in architecture, both the physical interruption of the central cityscape and the implicit effect on the immediate urban infrastructure is, well, brutal. Its sudden turn-offs, tight bends and fatally compressed traffic merging zones, represent – ironically for 'motor city' – an invitation to crash, but practically speaking one also has to ask: is it necessary to have such an elaborate structure around a city centre that is a mere mile in diameter and takes ten minutes to traverse on foot?

So the whole centre has been built around <u>dealing</u> with cars, parking included, of course. The fact that IKEA was invited in 2007 to set up shop in the <u>centre</u> rather than the outskirts of the city (uniquely in the UK) – tucked just inside Junction 7 of the ring-road, with three of its seven levels dedicated to car parking – is indicative of continuing urban planning priorities. It also draws attention to a further aspect raised by the 'Bare City' document – hinted at, in fact, in its very title – which is the slow emptying, indeed death of provincial city centres in the UK. In other words, inviting IKEA to locate its store in the centre was evidently an attempt to draw people into the city and generate renewed life in the face of retail's rapid transference to online consumption and a general, widespread culture of stay-indoors screen and phone introspection. For a city the size of Coventry the question of what a centre is <u>for</u> in the 21st century is key. As 'Bare City' implies, not only is the era of cities organised around the private car over (Harris 2017) but what will replace it is dependent on being able, first, to attract people into the centre and, second, on creating conditions that will encourage them to be motivated to interact and <u>stay</u> (Gehl 2010). In Gould's and Gould's concluding view:

> [T]he ring-road has drawn a tight collar around the city centre, using and blighting acres of valuable land and severely restricting access … [T]he necessity for an urban motorway, especially one which is so tortuous to navigate, is now debatable. Were it to be replaced by an at-grade boulevard with the level pedestrian crossings and cycle lanes Gibson intended, Coventry would be a much enhanced city. (143)

In<u>reach</u>

Unlike the lower Manhattan High Line initiative cited in 'Bare City', which represents the exploitation – positive and otherwise – of an <u>obsolete</u> site, and is also bound up with controversial questions relating to the aestheticisation of post-industrial landscapes (Edensor 2005) as well as the fetishisation of ruins (Lindner 2016), the Coventry ring-road proposal made here represents a radical repurposing of a structure that is still very much <u>in use</u>. That naturally poses a considerable practical challenge for urban (traffic) planners. But it is also feasible to suggest that refunctioning would productively pre-empt inevitable obsolescence and ruin. In other words, it would imply remaining necessarily responsive to the shifting temper of the

times, with the improved lives and futures of the city's citizens as the objective. Some potential benefits: first, it would directly address the pressing threat of pollution from vehicle exhaust fumes, mitigating it by introducing 'lungs' to a city centre bereft of green 'breathing space'. Second, it would offer opportunities for citizen health and well-being activity by opening up space to move freely, interact and play: to walk, run, cycle, skateboard and so on. Third, it would eradicate the sheer physical and sensorial threats of traffic that perennially exist for the hapless pedestrian based on incompatible levels of velocity and sound. And, finally, it would provide a way of enticing into central areas Coventry's diverse suburban constituencies – ethnic, racial, cultural, faith-based and so on – who, in an echo of the divisive centre-périphérique-banlieue scenario found in Paris, tend to exist in discrete immobile community enclaves. Providing all citizens of the city with a motive – beyond IKEA – to foster a relationship with the centre, to witness and participate in the novelty of a repurposed ring-road that does not merely function as an intimidating exclusionary barrier, has the potential to engender an unforced socio-cultural mix and flow. This would be a process entailing the creation of a diverse and inclusive centralised space of community – in rather than outreach – born out of the common purpose of striving to live contentedly in the same place, which, ultimately, is surely the definition of a city in the first place.

Conclusion

The Coventry ring-road was built in phases over a 17-year period, so the implied repurposing of it would be wise to follow suit: step change, in steps. The 'Bare City' fragment – if that is what it is – which covers but one of the nine ringways, itself formally suggests a vision of change in planned stages. And, as Lindner's disquisition on the High Line also emphasises, an ethos of slowness both in the initiative's unfolding and in the rhythm it imposes on the pace of urban life through its focus on walking and lingering ('pause, delay, detour'), has been key (2016: 58). There is even a case to be made for repurposing the term 'coventrate', hijacking its singular, deathly association with the at-a-stroke blanket destruction of cities in the 20th century and allying it instead with a new dawn of radical, drawn out and sensitive urban reconstruction in the 21st.

Bare City: 'We'll Live and Die in These Towns'[{note 6}]

'When I visited the CCTV control room in Coventry, which is part of CV One, the city's BID [Business Improvement District], I was told that the camera network would be expanding to 700 cameras, even though Coventry is a small city, with a comparatively low crime rate. While I was there a security guard radioed in a concern to the CCTV operator, his voice crackling over the radio, to say that a photographer had been spotted carrying a tripod. I watched as a number of cameras were trained on the photographer, monitoring his progress as he walked down the street…' (Minton 2012: 46).[{note 7}]

Drivers of change

'To put it another way: after a century in which the car has sat at the heart of industrial civilisation, the age of the automobile – of mass vehicle ownership, and the idea (in the western world at least) that life is not complete without your own set of wheels – looks to be drawing to a close... [I]n our cities, the use of cars is being overtaken by altogether greener, more liberating possibilities… [O]nly 10 days ago Oxford announced that it is set to be the first British city to ban all petrol cars and vans – from a handful of central streets by 2020, extending to the entire urban centre 10 years later' (Harris 2017: 25).

Form follows fiction

'For example, Park Fiction, a loose network of artists and local interest groups, is based in the St Pauli neighbourhood, an area that has a history of dissent, and where the squatter movement of the 1980s was prominent. Following the prolonged neglect of the area by the authorities, the group campaigned for a public park rather than private development. It organised a parallel planning and design process based on extensive outreach and engagement, and drew up plans. Their most successful

strategy was not just to campaign for a public space but <u>to act as if one already existed</u> [my emphasis]. To this end, they hosted an extensive programme of temporary public events on the site (Infotainment), including talks exhibitions, open-air screenings and concerts. This continual use of the "park" helped to make it a social and physical reality. The park was finally implemented in 2005…' (Bishop and Williams 2012: 168).[{note 8}]

Road rupture

'When the extensive Embarcadero Freeway in San Francisco was closed after the 1989 earthquake, people quickly adapted their traffic behaviour and residual traffic found other routes. Today the Embarcadero is a friendly boulevard with trees, trolley cars and good conditions for city life and bicycles' (Gehl 2010: 8).

Taking the high road

'First opened in 2009, the High Line is an elevated park that repurposes a 1.4 mile stretch of abandoned railroad track dating from the 1930s…[It] belongs to a broader global trend in landscape urbanism, in which abandoned, post-industrial sites are creatively remade into eco-friendly, pedestrian spaces designed for conspicuous public leisure…What makes the High Line remarkable is its staggering popularity, [but] the story of [its] success is much more complex, of course, and connects not only to the design of the park, but also to the high level of support and involvement it has received from the local community. In particular, the non-profit organization Friends of the High Line, which led the campaign to build the park, has now assumed both operational responsibility and cultural stewardship over the space in partnership with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation' (Lindner 2016: 53-4).[{note 9}]

Ring cycle

After many years of pruning back pedestrian areas, Copenhagen was one of the first cities in Europe to grasp the nettle in the early 1960s and begin reducing car traffic and parking in the city centre in order to create once again better space for city life. …After only a short period it was clear that the project was enjoying far greater success faster than anyone had anticipated. …The conclusion from Copenhagen is unequivocal: if people rather than cars are invited into the city, pedestrian traffic and

city life increase correspondingly. …Year by year the inhabitants have been invited to bike more. The entire city is served now by an effective and convenient system of bike paths [and] more than 50% of Copenhageners bicycle every day' (Gehl 2010: 10-13).

Step change

'Many huge social changes creep up on us, and the fact that politicians tend to avert their eyes from incipient revolutions often serves to keep them out of public discourse. But this one is surely huge…With the requisite political will, dwindling numbers of cars will bring opportunities to radically redesign urban areas. The environmental benefits will be self-evident. And as cities become more and more car free, towns will cry out for their own changes. Neglected railway branch lines may well come back to life; the hacking-down of bus services that came with austerity will have to be reversed. With any luck, the mundane term 'public transport' will take on a new vitality' (Harris 2017: 25).

Instruction: Endnotes, references and acknowledgement separately on final page

Notes

1. 'Bare City' no doubt carries deliberate echoes of the Situationists' famous Naked City screenprint of 1957 which depicts Paris as a fluid and continuous psycho-geographical 'map of experience'. As Hussey explains: 'The Naked City is the negative corollary of de Gaulle's programme – the so-called "reconquest of Paris" – which aimed to evacuate the working classes from Saint-Lazare, Gare du Nord and Place de la République and move them to the neo-Corbusian barracks of Sarcelles. It is a map of a city which is being emptied of human activity and which is in the process of becoming a dead site, a city without telos' (2002: 220).

2. This is why the ancient urban infrastructure of Venice is still held up as a model for 'working with the human dimension' (Gehl 2010: 12).

3. Very occasionally sections of the ring-road have been temporarily closed down in order to permit events to take place. One that the present author witnessed on a

random Sunday in 2017 perversely turned the road into a race track for private rally cars.

4. Work on the ring-road began in 1957 and proceeded in stages until its completion in 1974.

5. Richardson points to a general underestimation by urban planners of the extent to which cars would figure in British cities after the war. With regard to Coventry in particular, he adds: 'In 1965, for example, Coventry had 146 cars per 1000 of the population while the national average was only 107' (1972: 303)

6. The Naked City aside (see n.1), the main title of the montage appears to reference Giorgio Agamben's complex notion of 'bare life' which is premised to some degree on identifying a growing global 'precariat' – essentially human beings who find themselves existing in implicitly sanctioned circumstances of acute risk and vulnerability that include poverty, homelessness, modern slavery, enforced migration and so on. The subtitle, meanwhile, represents the title of a 2007 album by the then emerging Coventry band The Enemy.

7. This quote is assumed to be a form of signature introduction to 'Bare City' by the artist/architect in which he or she effectively casts him'herself as the 'photographer', thereby making a small gesture towards identifying him/herself as the originator of the montage. The centralised surveillance of public space that haunts, and implicitly criminalises his/her activity serves perhaps as an explanation as to why anonymity has been preserved in the document.

8. The example refers to Hamburg's regeneration of its harbour area, the major HafenCity development, whose plans were initially presented in 1997 as a top down policy approach designed to attract a 'creative class', as in Richard Florida's The Rise of the Creative Class (2002). As Bishop and Williams point out, Florida 'seems to be more concerned with the consumption of culture than with its production' (2012: 167).

9. While stressing the positive in this extract, Lindner is not so wide-eyed as to be oblivious to the fact that the complexity of which he speaks also contains highly problematic aspects, which throws into relief the imperative of taking local circumstances into account. As Harvey warns in <u>Rebel Cities</u>: 'The newly created High Line in New York City has had a tremendous impact on nearby residential property values, thus denying access to affordable housing in the area for most of the citizens of New York City by virtue of rapidly rising rents. The creation of this kind of public space radically diminishes rather than enhances the potentiality of commoning for all but the very rich' (2011: 75).

References

Bishop, Peter and Lesley Williams (2012) <u>The Temporary City</u>, London and New York: Routledge.

Edensor, Tim (2005) <u>Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality,</u> Oxford: Berg.

Florida, Richard (2002) <u>The Rise of the Creative Class</u>, New York: Basic Books.

Gehl, Jan (2010) <u>Cities for People,</u> Washington: Island Press.

Gould, Caroline and Jeremy Gould (2016) <u>Coventry: the Making of a Modern City 1939-73</u>, Swindon: Historic England.

Harris, John (2017) 'Owning a car will soon be a thing of the past', <u>Guardian</u>, 23 October, p.25.

Harvey, David (2011) <u>Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution,</u> London and New York: Verso.

Hussey, Andrew (2002) '"The Map is Not the Territory": The Unfinished Journey of the Situationist International', <u>Urban Visions: Experiencing and Envisioning the City</u>, ed. S. Speir, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Publishing, pp.215-28.

Lindner, Christoph (2016) 'Interrupting New York: Slowness and the High Line', <u>Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space</u>, ed. S. Jordan and C. Lindner,London: Bloomsbury, pp.49-64.

Minton, Anna (2012) <u>Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First-Century City</u>, London: Penguin Books.

Mumford, Lewis (1938) <u>The Culture of Cities</u>, London: Secker and Warburg.

Richardson, Kenneth (1972) <u>Twentieth-Century Coventry</u>, Coventry: City of Coventry.

Stamp, Gavin (2007) Britain's Lost Cities: a Chronicle of Architectural Destruction, London: Aurum Press.

Acknowledgement