

## 'The Mistakes of the Past'? Visual Narratives of Urban Decline and Regeneration

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Birmingham today is undergoing a transformation which will startle, and doubtless delight, any visitor who has not been to the city for some years. It is claimed that this process has involved probably the greatest rebuilding and development programme taking place at the present time among the towns and cities of Europe. The old Birmingham is yielding place to the new - and very rapidly. Acres of buildings are being demolished, familiar streets are closed, and the city is undergoing a stupendous rebirth.

The above quotation neatly summarises early twenty-first-century Birmingham, England's second city.

We, the authors of this article, are about the same age as many of the structures currently being demolished in the place we've known all our lives. Born in Birmingham, and having negotiated its flyovers and underpasses for over three decades, we could not help feeling a sense of mortality as we witnessed their destruction from the 1990s onwards.

Yet more than buildings and infrastructure have perished. A series of twentieth-century visions of what a good city should look like and how it should function are being buried. Notable is the ease with which familiar images are deployed in visual narratives to both promote and make sense of change. Unappealing urban vistas of concrete car parks, ring roads and underpasses conjure up reflex feelings of shame and embarrassment among the local population. This article was conceived on the day part of Birmingham's infamous Inner Ring Road was demolished. A local environmental group sold off chunks of 'Masshouse Rock' like pieces of the Berlin Wall to symbolize the liberation of the pedestrian from the tyranny of the motor vehicle. Such rituals of expiation are intended to ensure the city learns from 'the mistakes of the past' and moves on. (1)

Here we pause and consider whether this is too simplistic. This is not the first time Birmingham has been rebuilt, for the quotation at the beginning comes from a magazine article in 1961. (2) The striking parallels between the optimistic rhetoric of the 1960s and the present day 'place marketing' which decries the built environment of that era demand further investigation.

### Visions of the City

A number of recent exhibitions have been a further stimulus to our exploration of the envisioning of Birmingham. These have seen photographers and visual artists, many of whom grew up in Birmingham at the same time as ourselves, reflect on the changing city skyline. In some of these studies Birmingham's post-war architecture is woven into personal memories and belatedly accorded

recognition through the aestheticization of a landscape normally viewed with contempt. The search for meaning in the recent architectural past evoked by this work merits comparison with the exuberant boosterism of the new visions of Birmingham in official publicity. As new developments rapidly excise the modern built environment from the collective memory, we compare current images of change with those accompanying the original post-war redevelopments at the time of their conception.

Our empirical basis is the exploration of a range of past and present visual material – plans, models, newspaper commentary, paintings, photographs, websites - through which visions of Birmingham have been projected. These exemplify how ‘buildings are imagined through words and images before they are constructed in bricks and mortar’. (3) Such discursive processes continue after the new structures are in place, an ongoing appraisal of how the visions they express are sedimented in the urban landscape.

Our particular concern is with how images of the city are deployed in wider narratives animating urban redevelopment. Narratives of decline and an associated politics of erasure dramatize the alleged failures of the recent past. Narratives of regeneration and an associated politics of vision see hope in a spatial transfiguration. Images of the city centre, and the particular buildings they are focused through, become condensed narratives in their own right, defining the degree of modernization both achieved and yet to come. These representations of the city's trajectory through time constitute what we term the urban imaginary. Yet there is no single urban imaginary, nor is it invariant. Successive generations of urban imaginary find architectural realization in cityscapes. [insert Fig.1]

### **The Image of the City: Imaginaries and Narratives**

The built form of a city is one tangible expression of the social imaginary - the ensemble of ideas, images, knowledges and symbols that enable, energize and make sense of social practices. (4) The social imaginary shapes the embodied understandings embedded in the spatial practices of everyday life. The specifically urban imaginary is defined by Edward Soja as ‘our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretative grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate and decide to act in the places, spaces and communities in which we live.’ (5) A crucial element of the urban imaginary is what Kevin Lynch termed the image of the city. (6) Central to this notion is the idea of legibility: the clarity of the cityscape for residents and visitors who have to negotiate it every day. A transparent image of the city supports personal growth and generates raw material for collective memories about the place in question. City images for Lynch are ‘crossings of social meaning and

recollected form that grow and elaborate in time. They link citizen and place, enhance the significance of everyday life, and reinforce the identity of group and self'. (7)

How a city is comprehended by its inhabitants is an important factor in making sense of change, and in either promoting or resisting it. Lynch is at pains to emphasize how the image of the city can arise from changes in perception, as well as from physical alterations. The skyline of a city traces the visual signature of its identity. It offers an immediate reading of its ambition, modernity and novelty through which economic, social and aesthetic meanings are signified. (8) Accordingly, urban imaginaries are constituted by *visual* narratives - summary readings of history and futurity encoded in the skyline, both as it is and how it might be.

Competing urban imaginaries, and their embodiment in built form, both shape and mediate between individual and collective biographies. Personal hopes can be invested in, and often later thwarted by, the ambitions of architects and urban planners. (9) The constitutive role of these narratives of individual and collective progress in the formation of urban imaginaries requires more extensive treatment, grounded in local particularities.

In the framing of contemporary redevelopment in British cities a narrative of post-war decline is being displaced by a narrative of urban renaissance. The narrative of decline formed part of a broader anti-state political philosophy in the 1970s, linking the failures of large-scale urban planning to 'the flawed visions of pioneering modern architects'. (10) The regeneration narrative locates the dynamic of change in market-driven redevelopment. The visual amenity of the cityscape is a crucial index of this transformation, as the Urban Task Force observed, 'successful urban regeneration is design-led'. (11) The role of images in providing the visual markers for this narrative of regeneration is highlighted in the city widely regarded as the most illegible and badly designed of all.

### **Images of Birmingham**

Birmingham offers a rich example of how the narrative of Britain's post-war decline was powerfully expressed through visual imagery. A proud history of municipal activism and 'can do' pragmatism left it less encumbered by tradition than most other British cities, and thus more open to the reconstructive impulses of successive waves of rebuilding. Yet Birmingham has paid a heavy price for embracing redevelopment so enthusiastically. England's second city is recurrently the butt of metropolitan jibes for exemplifying the worst excesses of bastardized architectural modernism and the failures of utopian planning, represented by the weather-beaten concrete currently being broken up.

Unprecedented slum clearance, housebuilding and office developments transformed the built environment of post-war Birmingham. As a result, the city gained notoriety from a cluster of landmarks such as the Bull Ring Shopping Centre, the Rotunda, the Post Office Tower and the Central Library. Once seen as totems of success, these much decried concrete icons now connote the failure of an optimistic vision of progress through planning. Above all, they are held to give Birmingham a poor visual aspect. The current *Lonely Planet* Travel Guide summarises the prevailing image of the city: 'Surrounded by sprawling motorways, bisected by canals and punctuated by modern shopping centres, Birmingham can seem like a concrete maze.' (12) City images like these have become crucial elements in the formulation of the decline and regeneration narratives animating urban redevelopment since the mid 1980s. The decline narrative offers a stark depiction of a specifically provincial drabness, reading the fading concrete surfaces of cities as proof of where a whole generation went wrong. The regeneration narrative looks for redemption in the continental ambience of streets and squares, a finer urban grain. In Birmingham a city centre design strategy from the early 1990s distilled this conventional wisdom, calling for a new visual treatment of urban space. This set the parameters for the current wave of redevelopment. (13)

In the next section we explore the original conception and reception of some of the post-war visions of urban redevelopment in Birmingham. Reconstructing this utopian moment leads us to query how far the current orthodoxy of urban regeneration has learnt from a past it disavows too readily.

### **Utopian Visions of Birmingham**

If 'the desire to rebuild any great city in a modern way is to engage in a formidable battle', (14) then Birmingham was at war with its own space in the three decades after 1945. With over 400 tower blocks distributed through the city, concrete underpasses and flyovers lacing around the centre, apparently charmless skyscrapers dominating the skyline, 1960s Birmingham at first sight incarnated the Corbusian City of Tomorrow.

The aerial perspective afforded by the scrutiny of war-time bomb damage lent post-war planning an unprecedented grand sweep, coupled with the urgent need to build new housing, clear away slum dwellings and efface the residues of the past. (15) Progress took a tangible visual form: ordered and rationalized land patterns, with functions and activities decisively separated. A futuristic emphasis on the large-scale and the novel privileged an architecture for mobility and momentum. An heroic optimism was underpinned by 'the belief in salvation through design, the belief in a perfectible world,

the search for truth and purity, faith in linear progress, faith in science and reason, faith in technocratic solutions, a certainty and hubris among architects and planners.' (16)

Reading through the early plans for what became post-war Birmingham the sense of hope and ambition is tangible. There is a confidence in the capacity of organized interventions to reshape space and secure a better future. This would bring tangible social benefits and decisively erase the Victorian slums from both reality and memory. The newness of the plans, the models and the flow-diagrams is seductive. A special local newspaper supplement of 1959 heralded 'The New Birmingham' and had to be reprinted, so great was the demand. A picture of civic dignitaries around an architect's model is captioned 'modernity in miniature'. The text reports that the City Engineer and Surveyor, Sir Herbert Manzoni, 'concerned about the sea of slumdom which encompassed the city centre, had the vision of sweeping it all away in one operation'. (17) Manzoni instigated a 'scorched earth policy. Whole districts were razed to the ground to rise phoenix-like with the towering blocks and wide avenues of the contemporary scene'. (18)

Crucial to the formation of post-war Birmingham was the interplay between engineering and economics. A bold plan to route traffic away from the city centre along a new Inner Ring Road opened up sites for redevelopment beside the freeway. The loosening of building and planning restrictions and the release of pent-up post-war demand generated a property boom in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of the nineteenth-century city centre was replaced, taking on a distinctive concrete cast.

Birmingham's image as a post-war city was defined by four landmark buildings. They each displayed the assertive spirit of a city making a bold and confident declaration of its modernity through its buildings. Yet the purity of any vision of progress through planning was in each case undercut by a failure to sustain the original intervention, maintain the new structures and support the very innovations they were built to create.

The Bull Ring Shopping Centre opened in May 1964. Its glossy promotional literature proclaimed 'the world's most advanced shopping centre' and promised 'Continental restaurants ... Every other word had "style" suffixed to it; continental-style, pagoda style'. (19) Yet a new concept in car parking - leave your car and keys, with attendants pushing vehicles into semi-automated lifts - proved unworkable within a few years. (20) The shopping arcades themselves were plagued from the outset by their internal complexity - being spread over five levels, and by the Centre's external

anonymity. Shops struggled for years after its opening and the Centre never recovered. (21) It closed in June 2000 but had been dying for at least two decades.

Towering above the Bull Ring Centre, and opened in 1965 stands the uniquely shaped Rotunda, designed by Birmingham architect James Roberts (see fig.2). Its distinctive cylindrical profile and vantage point gave the eastern skyline of Birmingham ‘a splendid design for its position ... a much needed focal point and contrast to all the surrounding rectangular blocks’. (22) However, the building has proved notoriously difficult to let, heat and ventilate. It came to symbolize Birmingham's ultimately half-hearted architectural ambition when the Coca-Cola sign and digital clock built to illuminate its summit went out shortly after their installation in the 1980s, never to be relit.

Although twice as high as the Rotunda and easily the city's tallest building, Birmingham's Post Office Tower, unlike its London counterpart, made no pretensions to being a tourist attraction: ‘when the Birmingham tower was designed the idea of public access to the top was considered but dismissed out of hand. No one, they said, would want to go and look at the panorama of Birmingham’. (23) Instead, its functional significance as a facilitator of the new communications technology subordinated style to efficiency.

The same has been said of Birmingham's Central Library, opened in June 1973. It was the largest non-national library in Europe, and still attracts several thousand visitors each day. It stands at the apex of Birmingham's civic triangle around Chamberlain Square, flanked by the symbols of Victorian municipal grandeur, the Town Hall and the Council House. The building was widely regarded as a step change in library provision, attracting national and international attention. (24) Yet here again politics and economics compromised the initial intentions. The architect of the Library, John Madin, points out that his vision of a building finished in travertine marble, set amidst landscaped gardens, fountains and waterfalls in a comprehensively designed Civic Centre complex, never materialized: ‘they never carried the thing through and they never maintained the building’. (25) Instead, the City Council, mainly on grounds of cost, chose to clad the Library in precast concrete panels, not marble. Furthermore, the open public space around the Library was left undeveloped as the recession of the mid-1970s curtailed public investment. Over time the land has been gradually leased to hotels, souvenir shops and McDonalds, according to Madin ‘because the local authority wanted to make a profit out of the sale of the land at the expense of the citizens of Birmingham’.

As well as acknowledging the incomplete realization of their plans, any retrospective assessment of these post-war buildings must allow for their positive reception at the time. They were well-regarded for the very reason which now dogs the visual representation of Birmingham: their ultra-modernity. Birmingham of all Britain's provincial cities broke most decisively from the Victorian architectural legacy. The drive to redevelop and regenerate was only successful to the extent that it was dramatically visible in the skyline:

Birmingham's gleaming new buildings and roads made a striking contrast with many less prosperous cities ... Its expressways, sprawling suburbs, tall buildings, and its air of bustle and enterprise all combined to make it Birmingham's most transatlantic city ... Whatever its faults, Birmingham was almost certainly a glimpse of the future, the shape of things to come ... In 1939 it was still possible for an outsider to be indifferent to Birmingham; in 1970 it could not fail to provoke a thrill, or perhaps a shudder, among all who beheld it. (26)

Writing in 1971 the architectural historian Bryan Little reported, 'Birmingham claims that it has become a city of this century and that it now contains more buildings of our own time than any other city in Britain, or perhaps in Europe'. (27) The claim to modernity requires a condensed fusion of imported progressive influences. The road-dominated cityscape was inspired by American car cities such as Detroit, but the measure of successful urban reinvention was (and often still is) being able to claim the building, development or expressway as the biggest, fastest or widest in Europe.

Unfortunately such modishness dated rapidly and proved unsustainable.

### **'The mistakes of the past'**

Undercurrents of discontent emerged soon after the completion of many post-war projects in Britain's provincial urban centres. In a review of a BBC TV series broadcast in 1964, 'The Rape of Utopia', a major town planning journal describes how the presenter, John Donat called on the able and devoted redevelopers of Sheffield, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Birmingham to show how ... Hell can be sophisticated into a clean, tight Purgatory of steel and glass for reconditioning the involuntary sinners of the slums. We could imagine the dumb dismay of these hapless creatures as they viewed their promised land of rectilinear pavilions and slab tenements, railed walkways suspended over the concrete landscapes, and yawning gulfs down which cars and buses dive into deeper catacombs below. (28)

Birmingham, as the nation's motor city, became renowned for pushing its pedestrians into underpasses. The design of the city centre reflected organizational rather than human priorities. Birmingham City Council did not appoint a City Architect until 1952 and even after that the planning department deferred to Herbert Manzoni, the City Engineer. Birmingham's post-war development was project-driven, the triumph of infrastructure over architecture. The engineer's eye of Manzoni saw his job as

complete once roads had been driven over freshly cleared ground. The new opportunities for development created by each road project were dealt with piecemeal, resulting in a lack of aesthetic consistency. Paradoxically, the City Centre suffered from a lack rather than surfeit of planning for the buildings themselves. Getting things built rather than ensuring their aesthetic value became the priority. This lent the cityscape an accent on movement - the dynamic sweep of roadways and roundabouts - rather than the static beauty of architecture.

Manzoni's attitudes can be gauged from his eulogy to the Inner Ring Road he devised. He bemoans the decision not to proceed with legislation to make it illegal for pedestrians to cross the urban freeway at surface level near subways: 'It became necessary therefore to consider the substitution of attraction for compulsion in order to achieve a carriageway free of pedestrians'. (29) Not all were enamoured of these plans at the time; the director of Birmingham's School of Planning remarked of the Ring Road: 'this looks like being the greatest traffic and town design tragedy yet to afflict an English city'. (30) Today, the subways, along with the kiosks, shops and toilets Manzoni hoped would entice pedestrians underground, have now been closed, broken up, filled in and paved over with surface level walkways.

As visually abrasive and uncompromising as the Ring Road, the Central Library famously inspired a royal diatribe: 'Birmingham Central Library. But how can you tell? It looks to me like a place where books are incinerated, not kept! ... an ill-mannered essay in concrete brutalism intended to shock (which it certainly does). An insult to the grand civic buildings amongst which it squats'. (31)

Prince Charles also took exception to the Bull Ring shopping centre:

The Bull Ring today has no charm, no human scale, no character except arrogance. It's a planned accident. Most of it is coming down - thank goodness! So here is a second chance to put things right. But are we going to take it? ... Surely, after the experience of the last twenty years, we can get away from these terrible comprehensive development schemes? (32)

Prince Charles's interventions reflected the 1980s reaction against the grand designs of post-war architectural brutalism. The call for a return to classical building styles also drew on a wider critique of the alleged cultural excesses of the 1960s. A 1988 article about Birmingham in the *Financial Times* summarized the prevailing mood:

the main reason for the city's lack of charm is that it was comprehensively redeveloped during the prosperous 1960s, a time when architecture appears to have struck a low and town planning theory advocated the separation of people from cars. Over-enthusiastic developers tore out much of the city's Victorian heart and replaced it with lumps of featureless concrete. Then around the whole, they threw a

motorway style inner ring road less than a mile in diameter that forced pedestrians into dingy and dangerous subways. (33)

By contrast, the urban imaginary of the next generation of redevelopment returned to the ornate, the small-scale and a finer urban grain of streets and squares. In Birmingham this had two institutional expressions. Within the City Council itself a long-term planning initiative began in March 1988 at a high-level symposium, The Highbury Initiative. (34) In a decisive rejection of the post-war modernist townscape, the report undertook to rebuild the city centre on Lynchian lines, making it legible and navigable, prioritizing the pedestrian over the car. Opinion outside the Council was galvanized by a ginger group of architects and local activists, Birmingham for People. They issued their own blueprint for the redevelopment of the Bull Ring Shopping Centre in the late 1980s to counter the development then proposed by the London and Edinburgh Trust. (35)

Both these official and unofficial plans for a new Birmingham reflected a general intellectual shift away from heroic modernism to a more pragmatic and piecemeal approach: urban planning now tends to centre on projects rather than comprehensive and strategic plans; on getting other agencies to deliver required urban services or infrastructures; and on pragmatic attempts to address perceived local problems rather than utopian or visionary frameworks for re-engineering metropolitan regions according to idealised blueprints or desired urban forms. (36)

This had determinate effects on visual form in the city centre: red brick buildings, low-rise glassy apartments; insidious rather than obvious assertions of spatial possession. The inoffensive ‘contemporary traditional’ architecture draws attention away from the entry systems, uniformed guards and surveillance cameras securing the space it surrounds. The canalside development around Brindley Place and the International Convention Centre in the early 1990s marks the apotheosis of this new urban imaginary. Bars, clubs and restaurants encircle new business headquarters, conference delegate hotels and flagship cultural venues. (37)

The governing narrative of city centre regeneration in Birmingham now privileges the energizing forces of the private sector in the private-public partnerships currently reshaping the urban fabric. It routinely dismisses the 1960s as disastrous. For example the latest City Council promotional literature hails the fact that around the new Bull Ring, ‘Only the Rotunda remains from the 1960s’. (38) However, just when the intensity of early twenty-first-century rebuilding was at its height, a series of exhibitions by young artists who had grown up in Birmingham offered more thoughtful reflections on the visual legacy of recent decades.

### Youthful nostalgia?

Landmarks of the 1960s, like the Rotunda, embody modern Birmingham. As the skyline of the city is being redrawn and new icons challenge the pre-eminence of these symbolic markers, their meaning has been revealed anew by the work of a new generation of artists. At a crucial moment in Birmingham's history their work speaks to the ambivalence felt by many local residents as the place they once knew becomes unrecognizable.

Tom Merilion's exhibition of photographs, *Concrete Dreams*, was first shown in Birmingham in summer 2000 and subsequently toured London and Belfast (Fig.3). (39) As the image of New Street station demonstrates, Merilion deliberately rescales the buildings to look like models, to capture some of the original futuristic intent inspiring their creation. (40) Questioned about the motivations for his work, Merilion replied:

The first 22 years of my life were spent in Birmingham. As a teenager, trips into the city centre were journeys to an exciting metropolis - probably more about a sense of freedom than to appreciate its fine architecture! I do remember however talking with enthusiasm about the Bull Ring, Spaghetti Junction and the Post Office Tower with friends who lived elsewhere in quite a boastful way.

Q: Why use the particular technique you employed in *Concrete Dreams*?

TM: I wanted the buildings to look like models, and to photograph them from above on sunny days so there was a sense of a singular light source. (41)

Merilion achieved this by photographing from a small aircraft flying low over the city centre. He used an architectural lens the wrong way round, with a selective focus and a polarising filter to emphasize the colours of sky and foliage. This accentuated the grey tones of the buildings, adding to the 'idealised almost toylike/model railway feel' he wanted to achieve. Asked about the perceptual changes potentially induced, Merilion stated:

I think the technique, because of its de-focusing nature, somehow restores the buildings to a former glory, probably because you see less of the buildings in detail. Also shooting concrete in full sunlight somehow burns out the weathered greyness. I have always liked the architecture of Brasilia and feel that there may have been a Niemeyer influence in certain buildings in the city centre. Maybe concrete doesn't work so well aesthetically in grey and gloomy countries?

Part revelation, part celebration, part lamentation, Merilion's compositions certainly reorient perceptions of Birmingham. The reader can recapture some of that visionary sense of 'modernity in miniature' expressed in the 'New Birmingham' newspaper supplement of 1959. A further set of Merilion's panoramas formed part of 'The People and the City', an exhibition unveiled in London in Spring 2003 as part of Birmingham's unsuccessful bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2008. (42)

This incorporation of photographic reinterpretations of a previously derided landscape into the institutional marketing of the city's image is a novel feature of contemporary regeneration. The potentially adverse consequences are captured in the photographic work being funded by the developers of the New Bull Ring shopping centre, the Birmingham Alliance.

On its Bullring website, the Alliance announces that it 'makes a continued investment in documenting the changing faces of the BULLRING, both old and new'. (43) In a fascinating virtual realization of the 'per cent for art' policy of yesteryear, 'Your Gallery' offers a facility for a digital public art directly from the public. Here, local people are encouraged to reveal their 'deepest thoughts and emotions' through art and creative writing – on 'My City', 'My Life', 'My Memories' and so on. This democratic space is accompanied by commissioned photo-essays from two local photographers. The work of Luke Unsworth is presented as having captured 'both the good and bad as the life of the Bull Ring centre came to an end'. (44) Similarly, John Davis's imagery aims to encapsulate the 'people and memories' of this passing place.

The results of both commissions have a remarkably familiar, even generic, feel – an already said quality, bearing a weighty and demanding burden of representation. All 34 images (6 by Davis, 28 by Unsworth) are in black and white. The choice is important here; the immediate associations are with a portentous documentary tradition wherein the suppression of colour acts as 'a guarantor of the integrity of an image'. (45) While there is no manifest political programme in these documents, the generic attention to working-class life located in a seedy mise-en-scène is here also. Unsworth's images are especially ambiguous and intriguing. They present a space that was once the acme of modernity – announcing itself as 'the world's most advanced shopping centre' – as, in part, that of an organic working-class community, albeit one cast adrift beneath Birmingham's Inner Ring Road. Variously, we are presented with the bric-a-brac stalls of the ragmarket, a broken toilet, old folks sharing a pint in an unspecified pub, a flat-capped accordionist, more old people (there are one or two children featured) wandering through the hostile and alienating subways. Davis's portfolio in particular portrays the city as a devastated war zone, ripe for new buildings.

The overall effect of these images is to reinforce the negative image of the city. The choice of black and white serves to accentuate greyness and its associations. Where visible, a low, dull sky acts as a halo to the iconography of the Bull Ring. This sky rhymes a graduated greyness in the brutal aspect of concrete buildings and the repeated use of the visibly aged inhabitants featured in the photography.

How could anyone gazing at this on-line gallery not appreciate the necessity of change and welcome the sweeping away of this place? The website's thumbnail arrangement structures a narrative with the photographs as storyboard, setting up the 'before' to which the redeveloped Bull Ring will be the 'after'.

By way of contrast, the officially endorsed imagery of the coming, reinvigorated Bullring is presented in a gloriously vibrant colour. One series of images – readily available on the websites, around the city and on printed promotional literature – features a stylishly dressed and choreographed model. A key banner presents an extreme close-up of the model's mini-skirted thighs as she purposefully strides past the photographer's lens (fig.4). She is, no doubt, on her way to shop. The emphasis here is upon youth and beauty and - as befits the stereotypical associations of retail and consumption – on femininity.

The area around the Bull Ring and Rotunda also figures heavily in the paintings of the young Birmingham artist, Reuben Colley. His work has been exhibited, promoted and sold by the private Halcyon Gallery in 2001 and 2002. (46) Colley's paintings prompt contradictory responses. The ordinariness of the scenes and spaces is striking. The sympathetic colour portraits of grey-remembered cityscapes reflect an emotional engagement with some of the buildings:

Q: Which Birmingham buildings have meant the most to you?

R C: The Rotunda and the BT Tower have been icons of Birmingham for all of my life, and I can see both of them from my studio window, standing proud on the Birmingham skyline. I don't think that they can fail to have the same impact on my paintings as they have had on me. The Rotunda especially has been a huge predominant figure in my paintings. The light on the circular form is a joy to paint, and as it stood, overlooking the huge crater and the development of The Bull Ring seemed very apt. A Grand Birmingham figure keeping a watchful eye. (47)

Taking the images of Merilion, Unsworth, Davis and Colley together, their appeal to local readers is evident. Icons of post-war redevelopment which towered over the childhoods of our generation are humanized, rescaled and reappraised. Seen through local eyes on their own terms there is something of a reparation with the past. A potentially alternative and muted narrative of urban regeneration could be read through some of these portraits: neither the city as pure potential nor the city as problem, rather the city as actuality. The tone is different from both the promotional literature of the time of these buildings' creation, which celebrated them uncritically, and the new narrative of redevelopment which marginalizes and repudiates them.

Ultimately, however, there are three problematic aspects to these representations. Firstly, they can be caught up with wider contemporary currents of nostalgia for the 1970s which once again leave the city open to ironic ridicule. In recent years Birmingham's running jokes have become somewhat patronizingly lauded. Ozzy Osbourne lands a series on MTV; the 30th anniversary of the opening of 'Spaghetti Junction' - the motorway interchange north of Birmingham, and most people's first sight of the city - is marked by a Highways Agency exhibition and a BBC Radio documentary; the Rotunda is granted listed building status by English Heritage in August 2000. (48)

Secondly, the politics of representation underlying images of the city can be overlooked. Such affectionate attempts to aestheticize landmarks and spaces that have become important signifiers for many residents are conditioned by the prevailing context of symbolic investment in the reinvention of Birmingham. As Malcolm Miles has argued, the city's programme of public art is embedded in its attempts to regenerate and reposition itself as an international destination. (49) The work of young artists and photographers can easily be recruited to this cause. Against this background, the popularity of Reuben Colley's *Impressions of Birmingham* canvases and prints - retailing for several thousand pounds each in many cases - becomes explicable. These frame banal scenes of city centre subways and bypasses alongside images of 'the new Birmingham'. For example The Mailbox complex of upscale shops and apartments, the prestigious Bank restaurant, Raymond Blanc's *Le Petit Blanc* brasserie (fig.5), as well as the views of newly refurbished canalside properties – all the locale of prestigious new loft apartments. Unsworth and Davis highlight the working-class spaces of the Old Bull Ring, mixing pathos, sympathy and the gently patronizing tone seemingly endemic to contemporary photo-essays pointing their lenses down the social hierarchy. By contrast, where people do figure in Colley's urban canvases the reference is the cool detachment of Edward Hopper, affluent strangers in restaurants. Colley's work is pleasant yet superficial, adornments for the walls of new office complexes, leisure spots and the very loft apartments he portrays – cultural validation and rationalizations of a newly desirable geography.

Thirdly, with the exception of Merilion's work, these images miss the emotional ambivalence felt in coming to terms with the legacy of urban planning. A jarring phenomenology of man-made decay is spurred by a walk amidst the temporary ruins of Birmingham city centre's past. All around lies debris from buildings which stood for barely half a human lifetime. There is an eerie sense of entering a cemetery of ideas, a raw encounter with failure. In the words of Georg Simmel, a segment of existence

has collapsed and ‘the fact that life with its wealth and its changes once dwelled here constitutes an immediately perceived presence. The ruin creates the present form of a past life, not according to the contents or remnants of that life, but according to its past as such’. (50) Yet few of these studies capture the depth of contradictory emotions as the recently new is rendered obsolete and what was once the future becomes the past. Only Merilion’s photographs, through their distorting lens, have the ability to instil a suitably quizzical response to buildings whose founding optimism seems so distant and irrecoverable today, less than a generation after their construction.

### **The New Image of the City?**

The material and the symbolic have always been thoroughly intertwined in cities, yet contemporary urban redevelopment is animated by a particularly intense ‘politics of vision’. (51) In this, ‘The townscape is an ideological as well as built environment, carrying iconographic and mythological significance. It is a disputed terrain, fought over from political, economic, and social causes and for metaphysical reasons’. (52) Birmingham’s investment in changing the city centre is not simply in physical renewal, but in ‘building a new image, or symbolic economy’ (53) - what we would term a new urban imaginary. Material progress is increasingly reckoned through the break-up of the Ring Road’s ‘concrete collar’ now regarded as stifling the redevelopment of Birmingham. Today’s ‘New Birmingham’ is a cosmopolitan European city with a tree-lined café culture and canalside ambience. Reflecting this ethos of regeneration, the first wave of 1990s flagship redevelopments on the west of the city centre are to be complemented in the next decade by the creation of Eastside, a creative and learning quarter. This will house the hoped-for replacement New Library of Birmingham, to be designed by Richard Rogers, with the current Central Library due for demolition.

In the visual narratives underlying regeneration projects like Eastside, the politics of vision is foreshadowed by a politics of erasure. (54) The new cannot be built until the old is symbolically denigrated and dismissed before its destruction. Yet by disavowing post-war architecture so decisively, the attendant social democratic impulses of post-war planning can also be hastily dismissed as old-fashioned. Mass housing, standardization and the spatial separation of activities have all been rejected. Instead the urban skyline increasingly plays its part in the seduction of fragmented, individualized consumers and tourists.

Birmingham’s narrative of regeneration was promoted zealously in its failed attempt to win the title European Capital of Culture for 2008. The quality of the city’s built environment was blamed for

the defeat. The bid committee chair, Sir Jeremy Isaacs, ventured that 'If Birmingham has lacked anything, it is the concept of exciting architecture as a must'. (55)

There is deep irony in Issacs's comments in the light of the central feature of the largest redevelopment project in Europe which has lately been completed in the heart of Birmingham. Here the politics of vision are most evident. Beneath the Rotunda, and announcing the rebuilt Bull Ring shopping centre which opened in autumn 2003, is the new landmark building for Birmingham's skyline. Fittingly it is a department store, Selfridges (fig.6). Created by designer architects Future Systems, the £40million structure houses designer labels and the new aspirations of post-industrial, post-modern urbanism. A sweeping curved building of massive scale, it is clad in 15,000 'chain-mail' aluminium discs which reflect light and arrest the gaze, like the Paco Rabanne dress which inspired them. (56) In the words of Amanda Levete, one of the architects, 'We felt that this new building must make an important statement about the quality of architecture in Birmingham and set the standard with an iconic piece of design'. (57)

But what kind of a statement is a building with a wilfully impermeable facade? A shop without windows, a store which takes its design alone as an identifier: there is to be no name on the outside. Once again in a bid to merit an -est suffix - in this case 'Birmingham looks set to boast Britain's blobbiest building' (58) - and offer a radical embodiment of the future, the skyline will date instantly. It is designed to a non-vernacular specification. As another architectural journal reported, 'the decision to opt for such a witty design is in keeping with the visionary business strategy of the store's American founder, Harry Gordon Selfridge, who sought to combine shopping with entertainment'. (59) The extent of the building's self-professed avant-garde intentions can be grasped from the comments of the Commission for Built Architecture and the Environment. In its design review of May 2000 the Commission, though broadly supportive of the project, called on the architects to have at least *some* shop windows at pedestrian level, a feature largely absent from the original design sketches. (60)

Whatever its merits, the Selfridges building is clearly the official image of the new Birmingham. In July 2003, within a month of the city's failure to land the Capital of Culture title, a new brand identity for the city was launched on city buildings, local newspapers and the City Council website. The new logo - the letter b - is intended to 'provide a framework for the presentation of Birmingham's visual identity over the next decade ... Through logo, font, language, slogan and colour

palettes, the brand is capable of almost unlimited application'. (61) A pixellation of Selfridge's disc facade formed the backdrop to this new brand on the website.

The extent to which private developments like this should carry civic pride and become the public image of a city is questionable. In addition, for all the novelty of the Selfridges store's chain mail facade, the publicity surrounding the building is uncannily reminiscent of that heralding the Bull Ring Shopping Centre when it opened forty years ago. Far from learning from 'the mistakes of the past', the current redevelopment replicates many of the past's defining principles. These include: the extreme exemplification of current planning orthodoxy; the desire to be the biggest and best in Europe; a series of piecemeal developments anchored by a large iconic building juxtaposed with non-descript shopping centre building masses; a pragmatic public-private partnership of local government and property developers; the creation of an easy-to-age, hard-to-maintain structure.

It is particularly instructive to recall Nikolaus Pevsner's reservations about the first Bull Ring Shopping Centre: 'The planning and technical considerations continue to be efficient, but the architecture is unquestionably disappointing. The elevations, both external and internal, are all of conventional commercial character with the typical gimmicky detail of the 1960s'. (62) The same will be true of much of the new shopping centre: plastic green cladding, semi-transparent glass atrium, a soulless modularity; all the hallmarks of late modern shopping mall design will be present in the New Bull Ring.

### **Conclusion**

Cities, like most of the lives they enclose, rarely turn out as intended. The notion of the urban imaginary thus has a particular poignancy in registering the recurrent attempts to resolve the disjunction between hope and reality. It has always been remarkable that a nation as densely urbanized as Britain should lack a wide repertoire of powerful images of good city life. (63) Birmingham - like many provincial cities - has suffered as a result. Until recently it stood for all that was wrong with the embodied experience of modern city life: dull, grey and inhumane. Birmingham's ongoing transition from post-war modernism to post-modern pragmatism reflects a wider societal journey which continues to reshape the visual culture of Britain's cities.

In the early post-war period the priority was the flow of traffic, the free movement of exported goods within and out of Britain along urban clearways. Today, commerce depends on the free-flow of pedestrians consuming imported goods within vehicle-less shopping enclaves. The eyes of the

consumer, the tourist, the potential property developer and portfolio architect must be seduced by the urban skyline. New city imaginaries heralding the transformation of space have displaced post-war Keynesian ideology with consumer lifestyles, the ethics of a Civic Centre with the aesthetics of enclosed malls. (64)

Our response reflects both an analytical disposition and a deeper biographical investment as local citizens whose identities and purview are bounded, in part, by the particular urban imaginary we inhabit and live out. It is no accident that *local* visual artists have been the first to try to come to terms with, rather than simply denigrate, Birmingham's urban settings. The rush to erase the recent past both symbolically and physically can demean the lives that were led within the landscape now being dismantled. The more strident the dominant narrative of regeneration becomes, the more devalued are the necessary narratives of negotiation adopted by local residents without the resources to aspire to the new urban imaginary's scale of ambition. The disparity finds expression in the visual register.

In summer 2003 the new Birmingham brand was launched through the first issue of *Birmingham Vision* a new quarterly celebration of the city – ‘driving forward the renaissance of Birmingham’ - co-sponsored by the City Council and the Regional Development Agency. (65) At the same time, fashion store Benetton’s regular magazine *Colors* (sic) devoted a complete issue to a photo essay on Birmingham. (66) For all the latter publication’s occasionally problematic aestheticization of mundane urban life, it at least had the imagination to present the views of a wide range of local residents. By contrast *Birmingham Vision* paraded a predictable cast of loft-dwellers and high-flyers, paying lip-service to multiculturalism whilst failing to feature anyone from the communities giving the city its diverse make-up.

The disavowal of the recent past in publications like *Birmingham Vision* lowers the critical threshold for the scrutiny of contemporary regeneration projects. It ignores the parallels between current and previous deployments of rhetoric through visual narratives. The demolition of the English cityscape most closely associated with the practical realization of modern architecture is destroying more than the buildings and raises important questions about the role of urban imaginaries in British visual culture, in particular what legacy, if any, post-war architecture will leave?

The dominant storylines of urban renewal are animated by the politics of vision and the politics of erasure. The politics of erasure is a discursive ground-clearing, the framing of a spectacle of shame - a landscape of decaying grey concrete desperate for fresh investment. The politics of vision

defines an aspirational city imaginary for the twenty-first century - a horizon of expectation towards which are projected hopes for renewal through iconic landmark buildings, decisively rejecting much of the post-war built environment.

Yet in many respects far less has changed for the better in the last forty years than those attempting to renarrate the history of urban regeneration would like us to believe. Then as now city councils supplicate in the face of private sector development projects; then as now it is in the broad framework of urban development rather than the specification of individual building styles where the point of intervention lies; then as now the narrative of urban renaissance reckons progress in the tangible reshaping of the built environment through new surfaces and vistas; the manifest speed of transformation rather than a sustainable texture of public life in the city.

The ‘mistakes of the past’ lie in the inability to implement a coherent democratic vision which undercut post-war development in Birmingham and elsewhere:

Much had been swept away and old landmarks removed in an orgy of redevelopment, all without the benefit of a master plan for the city centre ... The niceties of planning and architectural quality were put on one side, and the backlash of public disappointment would follow later. (67)

Although written of the past, this statement is likely to apply in the future as the urban skyline becomes both symbol and agent of change in a market-driven quest for new investment. For all their faults, the buildings of the 1960s and 1970s currently being destroyed and overshadowed supplied Birmingham with an identity. No matter how abjured and discredited this became, it at least had some anchoring in a broader civic purpose. By contrast, the contemporary image of the city is unashamedly a combination of retail and office-led regeneration with the primary intention of providing a congenial environment for showcasing the ‘brand soul’ of new corporate tenants. (68) As a result, the architectural interventions of the first few years of this century will become the future mistakes of the past.

### Notes

The photographs accompanying this article, unless otherwise stated, were taken by Julian Kilsby, a freelance photographer who also lectures at the University of Central England. He can be contacted via email: Julian.Kilsby@uce.ac.uk

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merchandising, products, and staff attitude. Taken together they deliver a powerful manifestation of "brand soul".<sup>7</sup> From a press release of 9 July 2002 announcing the appointment of a consultancy firm as 'design guardians' for the New Bull Ring, available via [www.bullring.co.uk](http://www.bullring.co.uk).