

FINAL DRAFT

Jones, P. (2005 in press) 'The city as artwork: the dismemberment of modern Birmingham' in Martyn, P. (ed.) *The City in Art: Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of Art Historians from Britain and Poland. Warsaw-Cracow September 2004* ISPAN, Warsaw

Introduction

Driving through the underground dual carriageways that wind beneath the city centre, one would be hard pushed to say that the modernist project was under attack in Birmingham (Figure 1). This section of the inner ring road represented the zenith of Birmingham's post-war planning, crystallising its self-image as a 'car city' by the late 1960s. Elsewhere in the city, however, the legacy of this period in the built form is being rapidly removed, with very little protest and frequently a good deal of celebration.

Cities are rarely the creation of a single period in history, representing a single vision and a single style. More usually they are a mix of different elements, representing the different historical traditions in which parts of the city have been built. Geographers and historians use a number of metaphors to describe this phenomenon, describing the city as a mosaic, a patchwork or a palimpsest.¹ All give a sense of a city that is built up of a number of parts – some reused, some new – which fit together to make the city as it exists at that moment.

Britain's modernist reconstruction during the 1950s and 1960s resulted in large parts of the city being demolished. One result of this was the notion of the Conservation Area, where a group of buildings of a particular character were given a degree of protection, even where the individual buildings were not sufficiently interesting to warrant individual 'listing' as historic monuments.² At the moment, no one is seriously calling for modernist townscape to receive such protection, and the listing of individual buildings from this period – such as the Park Hill housing complex in Sheffield – can often cause controversy.³

It is perhaps something of an historical irony that modernist infrastructure, built in a style associated with the destruction of outdated urban forms, is now itself quietly under attack. It is true that modernist icons such as Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation in Marseilles or Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building are not going to be demolished without a fight. More generally, however, it seems this is a period many cities, particularly in Britain, would rather forget. Modernism is seen as having

¹ S. Agacinski 'Sewing machine: building monumentality' in Benjamin, A and Osborne, P (eds.) *Thinking Art: beyond traditional aesthetics* London, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991; G.H. Martin 'The town as palimpsest' in H.J. Dyos (ed.) *The Study of Urban History* London, Edward Arnold, 1968 pp155-69

² P.J. Larkham *Conservation and the City* London, Routledge, 1996

³ M. Kennedy 'Listed tower blocks 'built on ideals'' *The Guardian*, 3 September 1996, p9

destroyed large and often interesting parts of the city and replaced them with blank concrete barrack-like buildings and urban motorways.⁴

Architect and historian Sylvian Malfroy has, however, suggested it is a mistake to thoughtlessly demolish 'ordinary' modernist buildings, simply because they are from a period whose architecture is now regarded as having failed. Indeed, he argues that thought should be given to preservation precisely because these buildings are representative of a unique period in history.⁵ In Birmingham, however, a conscious decision was made by the City Council in 1988 to completely remove elements of its post-war modernist infrastructure in the city centre.⁶ The inner ring road – the jewel in the crown of the post-war reconstruction – was the particular target. It was believed, probably with a certain amount of justification, that both the image it generated and the physical constraints on the growth of the city centre, were hampering economic expansion. The last fifteen years have thus seen a determined assault on the legacy of the reconstruction planners in Birmingham.

Birmingham's modernist reconstruction

The individual most closely associated with the reconstruction of Birmingham following World War II was Sir Herbert Manzoni, the City Engineer and Surveyor. Manzoni, who joined the City in 1927 and became Chief Engineer in 1935 guided Birmingham through its radical post-war reconfiguration.⁷ His major contribution to the city came with the realisation of two closely linked schemes, the completion of which was largely due to his personal determination and the high regard in which he was held by local politicians.⁸ The first was a network of ring roads around the city core, early plans for which had been drawn up in 1917-18.⁹ The second scheme was for five giant slum clearance areas, identified by 1941, which were to be comprehensively demolished and rebuilt in a modernist style.¹⁰ By the early 1970s the ring roads were almost completed and the five slum clearance areas, totalling 563 hectares,¹¹ had been completely rebuilt, with almost none of the original buildings surviving (Figure 2).

Lee Bank, one of the five clearance areas, adjoins the southern edge of the central business district and is currently undergoing a major redevelopment programme

⁴ A view that had already gained a good deal of momentum by the mid-1970s. See, for instance, C. Amery & D. Cruickshank *The Rape of Britain* London, Paul Elek, 1975

⁵ S. Malfroy 'Who's afraid of the sixties? The gentle liquidation of the post-war urban heritage in the name of the historical continuity of the city' paper presented to the conference of the International Seminar on Urban Form, Cincinnati, 2001

⁶ Birmingham City Council *The Highbury initiative: proceedings of the Birmingham City Centre Challenge Symposium 25th-27th March 1988* Birmingham, Birmingham City Council City Action Team, 1988

⁷ N. Tiptaft *My Contemporaries* Birmingham, Norman Tiptaft Ltd., 1952 p129

⁸ For a sense of the respect Manzoni inspired see, for example, contemporary comments made by councillor Doris Fisher in A. R. Sutcliffe *Transcripts of Interviews with Prominent Birmingham People, 1967-9: part of the research for his book History of Birmingham Volume III* research paper held in Birmingham Central Reference Library, 1969

⁹ A.R. Sutcliffe and R. Smith *History of Birmingham Volume III: Birmingham, 1939-1970* London, Oxford University Press, 1974 p400

¹⁰ *ibid.* p224

¹¹ H. Manzoni 'Town and Country Planning Act, 1944: acquisition of properties, redevelopment areas', Birmingham Public Works Committee Minutes, 25 October 1945

which is removing a good deal of the modernist-influenced built form.¹² One of the earliest post-war visions for the estate, produced in the late 1940s (Figure 3), shows a mixed landscape of high-rise and lower buildings all set in rolling parkland – the model was a Swedish style ‘mixed’ development, one perhaps more famously played out at the London County Council’s Alton East estate in Roehampton.¹³ It should be pointed out not only that these wide open spaces were a stark contrast to the high ground cover of the original site, but also that when these plans were drawn up, the city had no flats of more than four storeys in height.¹⁴ Modern-influenced design was really something quite new to the city at this point. The designs that resulted were a little more ad hoc than this 1940s vision. A variety of differing styles reflected the twenty years or so it took to completely clear the site of its original buildings and replace them, but the principle of a ‘mixed’ development remained intact, as did the general architectural theme of a diluted modernism.

About a quarter of the estate was designed in 1960 as a single unit by the then City Architect A.G. Sheppard Fidler.¹⁵ This area, in the vicinity of Cregoe Street (Figure 4), included tower blocks of 22-storeys, as well as smaller scale flats and houses. Cregoe Street was one of a number of modernist housing estates singled out for criticism by the *Architectural Review* in 1967. In a famous special edition of this journal, which had been an early campaigner in favour of modern architecture, Nicholas Taylor condemned not only the unimaginative design, but also the social environment that was being produced:

In schemes like Lee Bank, there is no threshold to connect the private world with the public, except the anonymous lift shaft; for any individuality – the specially painted door, the loud check doormat, the lace curtains, even paradoxically the washing lines – is suppressed in the interests of visually portraying communal cleanliness.¹⁶

Although Taylor’s critique seems prescient, it was not entirely fair; locally directed policies on allocations and management, combined with an extremely restrictive housing budget laid down by central government were as much to blame for the socio-economic decline of the estate from the mid-1970s as was the basic architectural form.¹⁷ This said, the physical environment certainly did not help matters in terms of trying to retain long-term residents and create a stable community.

¹² An area with a long and diverse history, Lee Bank has undergone a number of different redevelopment schemes. For details see, P. Jones ‘Historical continuity and post-1945 urban redevelopment: the example of Lee Bank, Birmingham, UK’ *Planning Perspectives* 19;4, 2004 pp365-389

¹³ For details of the Alton East estate and the ‘mixed’ development concept see, H.J. Whitfield Lewis ‘The principles of mixed development’ *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* 62;5 1955 pp196-7

¹⁴ A.R. Sutcliffe ‘A century of flats in Birmingham 1875-1973’ in Sutcliffe, A. (ed.) *Multi-Storey Living: the British working-class experience* London, Croom Helm, 1974

¹⁵ A.G. Sheppard Fidler ‘Lee Bank redevelopment area’ Birmingham House Building Committee minutes, 17 March 1960

¹⁶ N. Taylor ‘The failure of ‘housing’’ *Architectural Review* 142 (special issue ‘Housing and the environment’), 1967 p345

¹⁷ For details of funding crisis in local authority housing that had developed by the mid-1980s, see Audit Commission *Managing the Crisis in Council Housing* London, HMSO, 1986

By the early 1990s, Lee Bank was being regarded as a new ‘slum’¹⁸ and a series of initiatives were attempted to redevelop the area. After a great deal of campaigning by a highly organised group of residents, the council housing in the area was transferred to the ownership of a newly established private sector social landlord in 1999. In the years since, the project has grown from a fairly unremarkable demolition and refurbishment scheme, into a major commercial redevelopment project.¹⁹ Only a few pieces of the post-war design are being retained, with the rest consigned to the dustbin of history.

It is difficult to lament this kind of thing – tenants who remain at the end of the redevelopment will undoubtedly end up living in a better managed and more pleasant environment. Alongside the modernist housing programme, the other great legacy of Birmingham’s post-war reconstruction, the inner ring road, has similarly been radically reconfigured. Again, it is hard to dispute that the overall effect has been to improve the appearance and usability of the city centre. The part of this road running along the west of the city centre in a series of tunnels has been left virtually unchanged, forming as it does the main link between the south of the city and the M6 motorway to the north. The rest of this road has, however, been dramatically transformed over the last 15 years, tied into a series of major changes to the eastern side of the city core.

The inner ring road was built in stages from the mid-1950s to late-1960s. The early parts of the road were elevated, weaving around and over the modernist Bull Ring shopping centre, which was rebuilt as part of the post-war reconstruction programme. Pedestrians were very much subordinate to the road network, forced into dank underpasses, while cars rushed overhead on urban motorways of up to three lanes in each direction. This segregation of users and functions was a common theme in Britain’s post-war reconstruction, with pedestrian-only precincts at the city core forming a refuge from the automobile’s conquest of the rest of the city.²⁰ All the elevated sections of Birmingham’s inner ring have now been removed and the lowered roads are disciplined by a large number of surface level pedestrian crossings – a complete reversal of the post-war model (Figure 5).

Much of this work to alter the inner ring road has been connected with the demolition of the Bull Ring shopping centre and its replacement with the wilfully post-modern ‘Bullring’ (note the dropping of the space between the words). The connectivity of the inner ring has been broken at this point – indeed, only cyclists, buses and taxis are allowed to take the service road under the new shopping centre which connects the parts of the old road. This is part of a policy of trying to encourage a more ‘sustainable’ approach to transport, with part of inner ring at the back of the Bullring having been transformed into a ‘bus mall’ to service the new shopping centre.²¹ The

¹⁸ Local resident Steve Austin won the area significant press attention when he covered a billboard on the edge of the estate with a poster reading ‘Welcome to Lee Bank, Birmingham’s Slum Quarter’. J. Weaver ‘Residents voice anger over ‘slum quarter’’ *Birmingham Post*, 10 June 1996

¹⁹ Interview Director of Property, Optima Community Association, 26 October 2004

²⁰ L. Esher *A Broken Wave: the rebuilding of England 1940-1980* London, Allen Lane, 1981; J. Hasegawa *Replanning the Blitzed City Centre: a comparative study of Bristol, Coventry and Southampton 1941 – 1950* Buckingham, Open University Press, 1992

²¹ The new bus mall had a rather troubled opening, however, with a series of injuries to pedestrians confused by the new road layout. After just three months it was partially closed and at the time of writing (November 2004) remains so. B. Hurst ‘Shambles: fury as commuters are trapped in queuing

large scale reconfiguration of this eastern side of the city centre during 2002-3 is associated with a longer term plan to redevelop the entire 'Eastside' district.

Referring back to Figure 2, it should become apparent that there are two significant gaps in the ring of clearance zones surrounding the city centre. On the western side is the Jewellery Quarter, traditionally an area of small manufacturing workshops in the jewellery trade, but today largely a 'heritage' site, with Conservation Area status in order to preserve the historical legacy inscribed in its built form.²² The district on the eastern side, Digbeth, was another manufacturing area, but less historically interesting from the heritage industry's point of view. With industry declining in the area, it was ripe for regeneration, particularly given its proximity to the city centre. Removing the barrier presented by the elevated portion of the inner ring road was seen as a crucial precursor to allow redevelopment to stretch out from the city into 'Eastside' – as this area has been rebranded.

The removal of the inner ring road has made the natural topography of the area all the more striking, with fantastic views opened up from the city centre, across the Rea Valley to the city spreading across the hillside beyond. Beyond these new views, however, Eastside is still struggling to make its mark upon the city. The redevelopment is far from completion. The cultural centre, Nicholas Grimshaw's Millennium Point, stands awkwardly isolated in the distance. The new library, designed by the internationally renowned Richard Rogers Partnership, is still to get off the drawing board, yet is crucial to linking up the different elements of the Eastside scheme. Without it, the site lacks a coherent identity.

The development of the Eastside district has, however, been facilitated by the new Bullring shopping complex, which stands on the eastern edge of the city centre. Undoubtedly the new Bullring building is a good deal more pleasant inside and out than the concrete boxes it replaced. The old Bull Ring was originally conceived, however, as a socially inclusive space, with upscale retail alongside a new outdoor market, which sat at the heart of the development. The indoor retail quickly went downmarket, as the shopping centre became increasingly unfashionable. An opportunity to redevelop the site brought with it an opportunity to bring back a wealthier consumer. The new Bullring comprises two department stores and a great number of upmarket shops. The market area *has* been retained, but with a rather subtle shift. Instead of forming the heart of the new development, it has been moved to the edge, at the foot of the steep slope down from the city centre. The focus of the new Bullring is the 19th century church of St. Martin's, a small parish church suddenly thrown into the limelight by dint of being used as an aesthetic centrepiece for the redevelopment (Figure 6). The target customer groups for the Bullring and the market are very different and their spatial separation can be read as reinforcing a class- and income-based separation.

This has interesting ramifications when one considers an interpretation of the interior spaces of the Bullring, using de Certeau's ideas of spaces being created through the way people move around them (Figure 7). De Certeau, looking down at Manhattan

buses', *Birmingham Post*, 14 August 2003. B. Hurst 'Safety blitz at city's bus mall: fears after injuries', *Birmingham Post*, 23 August 2003

²² Birmingham City Council *Jewellery Quarter Conservation Area: character appraisal and management plan* Birmingham, Birmingham City Council, 2002

from the top of the World Trade Centre, suggested that the hard material landscapes – what we normally think of as the city’s architecture – were relatively uninteresting, being merely a product of the capitalist system attempting to express its power over the landscape. The more interesting aspect of the city was produced by people walking around the spaces in between those buildings, their actions functioning as tactics of resistance against the hard spaces of capitalist hegemony.²³

Certainly the architecture of the Bullring could be read as being fairly uninteresting – flashy detailing hiding the essential banality of a large box constructed to keep the rain off retailers and shoppers as they engage in practices of exchange and consumption (Figure 8). The interior is a much more exciting and dynamic space, with large flows of people in and around the spaces contained within that architectural shell. The Bullring is designed, however, as a place where people go to spend money and the people in question do not belong to that less well off demographic that makes use of the spatially separate market spaces. The spontaneous tactics of resistance that de Certeau looks for are exactly the kind of practices that those controlling the interior seek to discourage through the panopticism of CCTV and private security guards.²⁴ There are relatively few places in the building where one can sit down without having to spend money in a café. Behaviour deemed to be outside the norms laid down by the management of the centre can result in the removal of an individual or group. To utilise de Certeau’s terminology, tactics of resistance against the physical manifestations of capitalism are likely to result in capitalism wielding its powers of spatial discipline.

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Regeneration work over the past 15 years in Birmingham has been predicated on removing large elements of the modernist townscape which had been enthusiastically erected during the post-war reconstruction. The widespread popular feeling that the modernist architectural dream has gone sour has meant that this process has been generally welcomed. On former council estates such as Lee Bank, which suffered from both physical and social neglect, widespread demolition and new construction has proved a powerful symbol of the determination to make life better for the people living there. In turn, removing the eastern portion of the inner ring road has created new redevelopment opportunities beyond the city core even if, at present, that redevelopment is somewhat piecemeal.

The new Bullring shopping centre exemplifies the debate about the value of preserving the modernist townscape. The new centre is undoubtedly a nicer place to visit, particularly if you happen to be the kind of middle-class consumer being targeted by the retailers therein. The concept of inclusiveness, which was built into the design of the modernist Bull Ring has, however, been pushed (literally) to one side by moving the open air market from the centre to the edge of the shopping centre. Modernist townscape may not have always worked particularly well in practice, but it seems a shame to demolish the ideals as well as the built fabric in redevelopment.

²³ M. de Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* Berkley, University of California Press, 1984 pp92-4

²⁴ M. Foucault *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* London: Allen Lane, 1977 ; M. Hannah, ‘Imperfect panopticism: envisioning the construction of normal lives’, in G. Benko and U. Strohmayer (eds.) *Space and Social Theory: interpreting modernity and postmodernity* Oxford, RGS-IBG special publications series no. 33, Blackwell, 1997

Modernist Birmingham is not going to completely disappear in the foreseeable future, if only because the post-war construction was undertaken on such a massive scale. Individual buildings may be listed as historic monuments, but there is no prospect of Conservation Area status being granted to preserve parts of the more general modernist townscape and there is no doubt that a great deal more of the built form from this period will disappear as the city's regeneration programme continues. Of course, the kind of urban performances that so fascinated de Certeau – people creating new spaces as they move around the city – are the most ephemeral urban landscapes of all, constantly destroyed and refashioned in a new image. Ultimately, a town is more than its material form even if, in practice, it is the buildings that are easiest for us to capture, document and discuss. The dismemberment of the modern townscape in Birmingham is therefore straightforward to record and is a fascinating story in its own right, but an understanding of the performances undertaken in and around that townscape lies tantalisingly beyond our reach.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Western section of Birmingham's inner ring road. Built in a series of tunnels this portion of the road continues to operate in its original 1960s configuration (Author, January 2005)

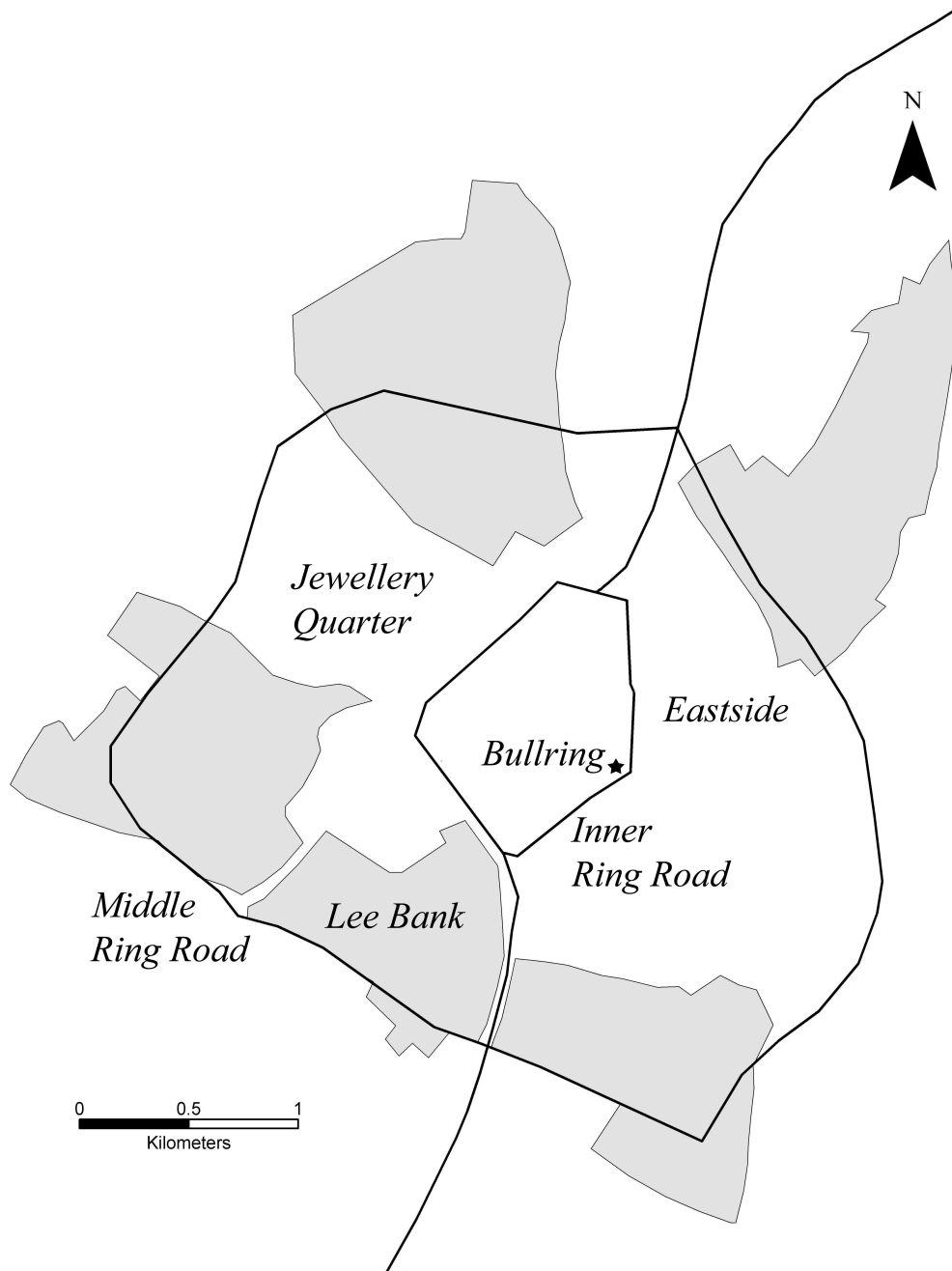


Figure 2: Simplified map of inner Birmingham indicating location of the five central slum clearance districts relative to the inner and middle ring roads. (Redrawn by author)

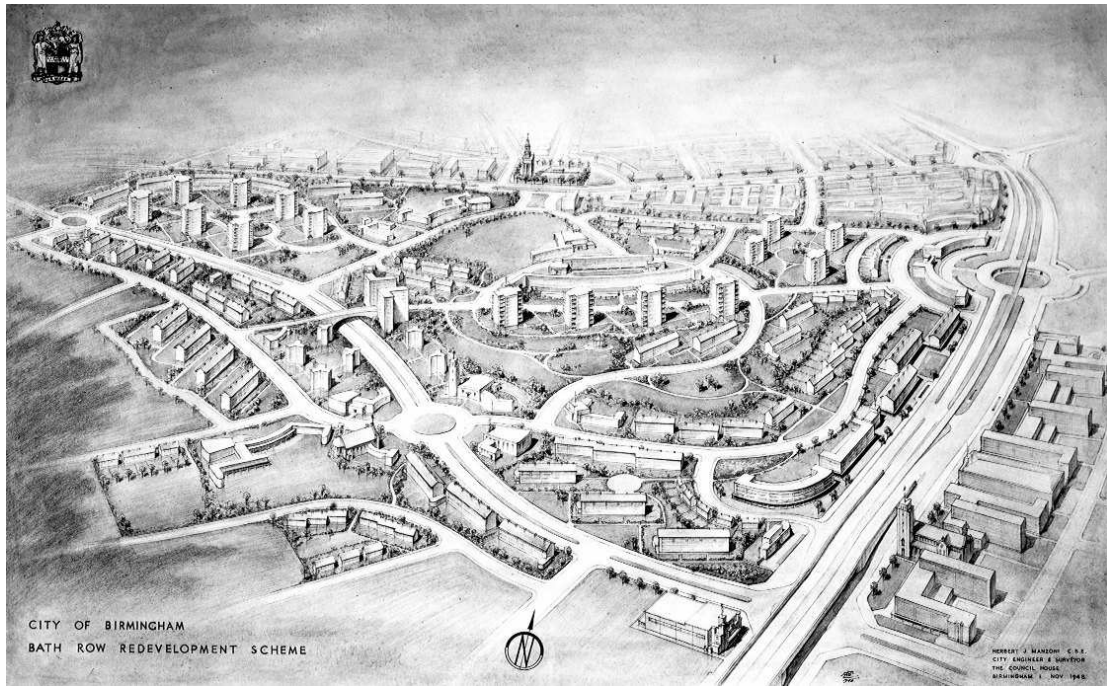


Figure 3: Painting produced by the Birmingham Public Works Department, c. 1948 showing a vision of Swedish-style 'mixed' development for the redevelopment of the Bath Row (Lee Bank) area. (Birmingham Central Reference Library, Photographic Collection, WK E1 1066)



Figure 4: 22-storey tower blocks in the Cregoe Street area of Lee Bank, just prior to demolition. (Author, September 2000)



Figure 5: This boulevard replaces a very large multi-level interchange (Masshouse Circus) which was demolished in 2002 as part of the changes to the inner ring road on the eastern side of the city. (Author, January 2005)

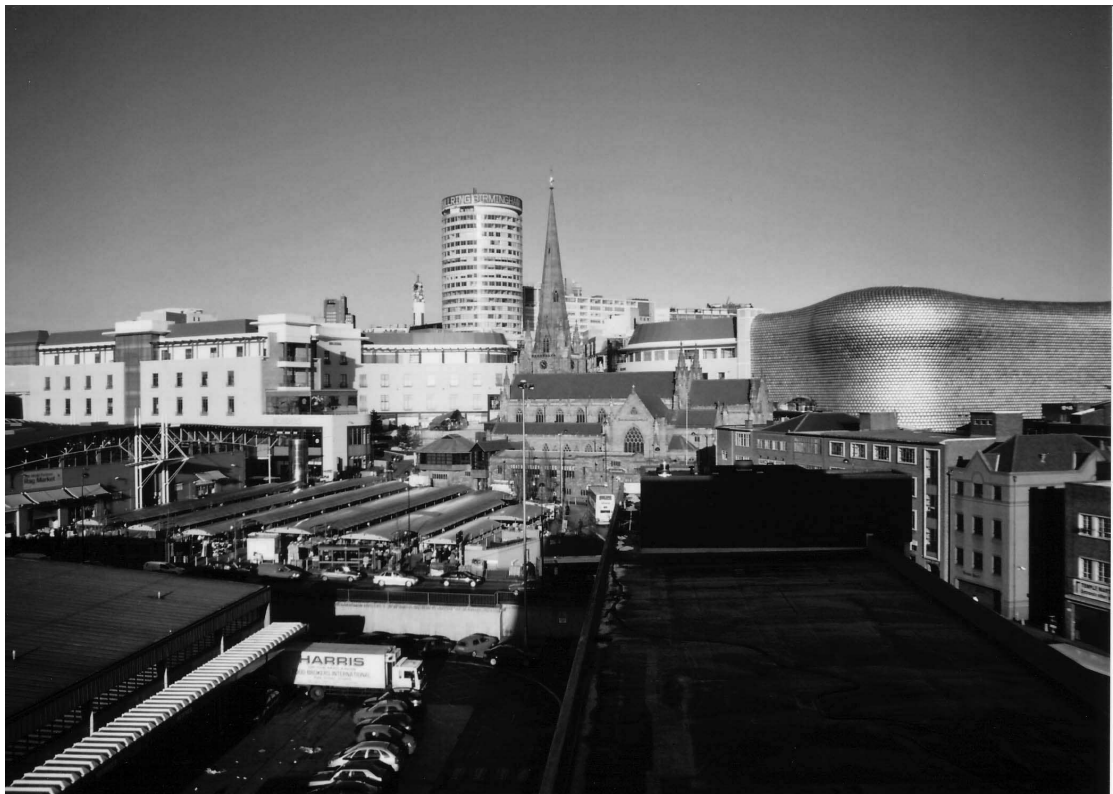


Figure 6: General view of the new Bullring shopping centre. St. Martin's church stands at its heart while the newly rebuilt market area (visible in the foreground) has been pushed to the edge of the development. (Author, January 2005)



Figure 7: Bullring, interior view – note the large glass roof and the multiple levels of circulation space. (Author, January 2005)



Figure 8: Exterior of the Bullring shopping centre, rear entrance. (Author, August 2004)