

Urban Wellbeing Futures Stories



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



CENTRE FOR
URBAN WELLBEING



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Introduction

Amidst multiple questions about the future of cities lies a pressing concern with urban wellbeing and the inequalities which exist within our urban spaces. These inequalities take many forms; from basic income, health and housing, to differences in experiences of and access to green spaces and quality urban environments. Developing effective responses to these challenges requires a deep understanding of the experiences of urban populations and the assets which exist within communities. Formal and informal knowledges must be combined to enable more inclusive and equal futures to be imagined.

In Spring 2023, The Centre For Urban Wellbeing and BVSC launched the 'Urban Futures Story Competition'. The competition was part of the 'Urban Wellbeing in Policy' project, which sought to combine research, policy and community expertise to develop new thinking on addressing health and wellbeing inequalities in the West Midlands. The competition asked entrants to create a short story, in written or spoken word, which imagined a city of the future which is more equitable, sustainable and just. The brief required consideration of the challenges facing urban populations across the West Midlands, whether environmental, economic or social, and asked authors to present a means through which these could be overcome. Judges were looking for stories which demonstrated an optimistic future for the West Midlands, painting a picture of a vibrant, thriving environment which enabled the wellbeing of all its residents.

We thank all those who contributed to the competition and congratulate the winners!

The Centre for Urban Wellbeing at the University of Birmingham was established in 2020, to support interdisciplinary and community-engaged research informed by the best global evidence to address urban wellbeing inequalities. You can learn more about the Centre, it's research and opportunities to become involved here:

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/centre-urban-wellbeing/about/about.aspx>

BVSC Research is the research unit within Birmingham Voluntary Services Council (BVSC). It aims to lead and support high quality research and evaluation with, for and about the Voluntary, Community, Faith & Social Enterprise Sector. You can learn more about the Research Unit and the wider activities of BVSC here:

<https://www.bvsc.org/>

The Awakening

Anne lowe

3rd September 2095

As his eyes gently fluttered open, he slowly began to focus on the puddles of light that had filtered through the gaps on the window blinds. He didn't recognise where he was or indeed where he had been. He lay there on the bed for several minutes, or was it hours? trying to work out what had happened to him and why he was lying here in this room with whitewashed walls and clinical surroundings. Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by the click of the door handle and the entrance of a friendly looking person who, judging by her starched white uniform, he could only assume was a nurse or a medic.

"Good morning David, welcome back"

"So" he thought "my name's David then". He couldn't really remember at first, he smiled back at the friendly face but didn't reply. The nurse moved around the room transferring bits of equipment to different positions, checking readings and writing notes while making small talk.

"It's a lovely day outside, a good day for waking up, the sun's shining, birds singing and everyone is happy".

"Everyone?" he thought "strange comment to make, I'm not sure how I feel yet"

"What happened to me?" he asked. She stopped what she was doing and came and sat next to him

"Well," she said "it's quite a story, the doctors will tell you more. What I can say is that the world has been changing considerably while you've been asleep".

David closed his eyes and sank back into oblivion.

That afternoon the doctors made an appearance. They were very excited that David had at long last woken up, but they were also very careful in their approach, almost like they had something to hide, but in fact it was quite the opposite.

Shock number one – apparently David had slipped into a coma ten years ago after a short but very serious illness. His family had remained supportive attending the clinic most days, chatting to him, reliving memories, playing some of his favourite tunes. He could vaguely recall a humdrum beat and musical sounds at the back of his mind, but that was all.

“Why was I left in a coma for so long?” he eventually asked. He realised that generally life sustaining machines would have been switched off long before this. The doctors advised him that shortly after he went into the coma medicine had taken a massive turn and a new drug had been discovered which could prove hidden brain activity never picked up before, so doctors decided to keep him on life support hoping that one day he might wake up and they could assess this medical breakthrough.

“So” he thought “I’m a bit of a guineapig then”.

Shock number two – although this could be described more of a pleasant surprise. David’s family were all living and healthy although his mother had suffered a minor stroke three years ago, but thanks to modern medicine was now perfectly well. He was beginning to recall the names of his family, his wife Julia and two sons Adam and ?? he couldn’t quite remember his other son’s name, it would come to him eventually. He suddenly realised that his sons would now be sixteen and fourteen years old, no longer the six and four year olds he had left in his past. This thought saddened him, to think that he had missed out on those precious years with his children.

Shock number three – and this was the big one. The world he had left behind, particularly in his home area of the West Midlands was changing beyond recognition. Apart from the fact that many buildings had now been demolished and replaced by modernistic cube like structures, known as hubs, attitudes and rules had also changed during the last ten years, many of which were generally accepted for the greater good. There was less confrontation, disruption and crime on the streets and in public places. Admittedly there were still occasional incidents to be resolved but there were many different ways of dealing with any issues now. David was curious about these changes, however the doctors felt that coupled with all the medical information he was being fed that this was enough for one day, besides his family were waiting outside his room and were eager to see him.

Julia looked very much the same, she had always had a pretty girl like face, just one or two laugh lines now and a hint of silver mingled with her blond curls. The boys were very different, quite grown up, young men in fact. Paul, that was his younger son's name it suddenly came to him.

David began to wonder about his own appearance now but Julia kindly suggested that he looked well considering what he had been through, just a little dark eyed and tired looking. They would let him have a mirror later on when he had begun to improve.

The next few days were filled with all the family news and of course doctors explaining about his future medication. He understood that he was going to need rehabilitation and support for a long time to come. He would need to gain strength back into his arms and legs and possibly learn to walk again. They also told David that apart from his health and wellbeing he may also need assistance in adjusting to the world outside and its many changes.

20th September 2095

At last, the day had arrived when David was well enough to leave the clinic. A medicab had been arranged to take him directly home. Medicabs had replaced old fashioned ambulances forty years ago. They travelled on an airstream created beneath the vehicle. This replaced the old-fashioned wheel and created a much smoother ride. As they were electric powered vehicles it meant that the medics were able to travel with their patients giving them their complete attention at all times. The large one-way windows also meant that you could see out but no-one could see in, so on his journey home David caught his first sightings of the world outside.

Why are there so many drones along the streets?" asked David. One of the medics, Andrew explained that this was part of a recent scheme to try and quash anti-social behaviour in the streets of Birmingham, Coventry and the West Midlands. They had special ground breaking data that could pick up images and send them through to the major centre in the old police headquarters at Lloyd House in Birmingham. The images and area details were then forwarded immediately to the nearest area behavioural hub, wardens would then be despatched straight to the relevant area and the whole process took as little as four minutes. There had been a general vote for this scheme to be put into operation as the public were getting frustrated with the growing anti-social issues.

Also, as a back up to this scheme Andrew explained that many of the secondary schools and academies had opened up their sports hall facilities from 18:00 hours to 21:00 hours, seven days a week so that youth workers could create centres for young people to attend, in a bid to get them off the streets and away from the gang warfare which had been developing within some of the area zones. There were many activities available at these centres and most of the centres were proving to be quite successful. The only drawback was the length of time it took for the local governors to carry the motion through and get final agreements passed. "No change there then" thought David, it was almost like going back to the old youth clubs of the last century, but he thought this was progress.

As they turned into the quadrant where David lived, the sudden familiarity was quite overpowering. His home looked almost the same as could remember. The garden portion a little different – this was possibly down to his mother's green fingers. He noticed that there was now a vegetable patch as well as the colourful flower bed. Julia and the boys were waiting to welcome him home with open arms.

As the days turned into weeks and David found himself settling back into some sort of normality, his thoughts turned to the conversation he'd had with Andrew on his journey back home from the clinic. He began asking his family and friends questions about the changing world. After all he was going to have to embrace some of these changes if he was eventually to become part of society once more.

As time went on David discovered many ongoing ideas for the future. His family and friends would sit with him while he tried to catch up on the news round screen. They would discuss some of these changes together. He discovered that multi religion centres had opened to encourage people of all faiths to worship and join together in discussion of differences within their faiths and to work together as charitable institutions with the hope of acceptance and understanding. This was quite a new concept and David felt encouraged by this idea. There were still groups of people however who were opposed to this. The only answer he guessed for the time being was possibly perseverance. There were also discussion hubs within the midland areas, many set up in public libraries which had fortunately survived the many cuts of years gone by. The Birmingham central library was one example of this. Any subject could be discussed in these hubs within a controlled environment, such as racial issues, equality, environmental issues and gender. Specially trained counsellors were employed to oversee and control these sessions. David thought that when he was well enough, he may go and experience this for himself. Obviously, all of this had come at a price and much funding had been obtained as usual from the public pocket. The cost of living had soared at the beginning of the century following Covid and Brexit and now at the end of the century it seemed to be worse than ever.

31st December 2095

As David laid his head to rest on his first New Year's Eve for many years, his mind was still flooded with all this change. Tomorrow would not only be a new day but also a new year.

David had woken up after his long sleep to an everchanging world. Could it be time for everyone else to wake up too?

A Lesson

Daren Carpmail

“Miss, I’m bored!”

“Now then, Lovebug,” said Miss Mears. “We’re here to learn about history.”

“Boring!”

“Not at all, as you will see. If you find out a bit about how children lived in the past, you might come to realise how lucky you are now.”

Lovebug tried furtively to pick his nose. He wasn’t fooling anyone.

Mona conceded privately that this wasn’t the most gripping part of the museum. This was a class of nine-year-olds after all, but even this section was fascinating in its own way.

The exhibition was called Follies of the Twenty Twenties. Video screens showed buffoonish speeches by dishevelled blonde men—one British and one American. Mona knew that they’d both been leaders of their respective countries, and the thought made her shudder. The kids would learn all about them in history when they were a few years older.

A terrifying figure called Putin gave a speech on another screen. Mona, a history graduate, smirked when she remembered his eventual fate.

There was a glass case full of paper masks and small bits of plastic called lateral flow tests. The children passed these by without much interest. Apparently, pandemics were a real problem back then, largely caused by environmental destruction. Thankfully times had changed—there hadn’t been a pandemic in over hundred years. Healthcare was better now throughout the world.

They moved into the next room. A stand showed a foodbank, stocked with authentic-looking early twenty first century produce. Whenever she saw this exhibit, she was always amazed at the stuff that people ate in those days. So much highly processed food, and all of it packed in plastic.

"Look at this then, children." said Mona. "Back in the twenties, children no older than you often didn't get enough to eat. Their families were forced to queue at places like this for handouts of food. They were called foodbanks, and they were a common sight all over the country."

They gasped.

"People just accepted foodbanks as if they were normal," she went on. "Things got so bad that a famous footballer had to campaign for children to be fed in the school holidays. Imagine that?"

"Miss. Who did he play for?" asked Luna.

Typical kids with their daft questions, thought Mona. She checked her screen.

"Manchester United," she said.

The kids laughed. They couldn't imagine that such minnows had once been a top team.

The foodbank had left them looking thoughtful. Imagine not having enough to eat!

Mona, who had taken previous classes to the museum, knew they'd like then next part.

"Who's up for some gaming?" she asked.

There was a cheer.

The game was called Congestion. It was an interactive way to teach kids about the traffic and pollution of olden times.

The kids plugged in their VR helmets and were immersed in a traffic jam in the Birmingham of 2023. Each of them "drove" one car, and the object of the game was to drive across the city centre. At first, they laughed at all the concrete and enormous roads. Where had the trees gone? Then some of them gagged a little on the exhaust fumes — it was a total-immersion game after all. There were bumps and fender-benders galore as they tried to navigate the streets. They were constantly getting in each other's way and horns were used liberally. The few buses were all stuck in the same traffic as the rest, and there wasn't a tram in sight, although Mona knew that a rudimentary system was in place at the time.

"So, what did you think of that then, class," she asked?

"Ha, that was fun," said Luna.

"Hilarious," added Ezekiel

"You wouldn't want to be stuck in it every day, though, would you?"

They shook their heads.

"Why was it like that then, Miss?" she was asked? "Hadn't they invented the trams and bikes back then?"

Mona tried to explain that yes, trams and bikes had actually existed before cars, but that cars were considered progress in those days.

The kids thought this must be a joke. Miss Mears was famous for her dry sense of humour.

"You're having us on, Miss," said Lovebug. "Did they think dinosaurs were progress too?" He snorted at his own wit as he looked for someone to high-five. There were no takers.

"No, Lovebug. Dinosaurs had gone by then. Even I'm not old enough to remember them."

"So, why did everybody think cars were better?"

Miss Mears sighed and pushed back her brown fringe. "It was all about freedom." She noticed the puzzled looks on their faces. "People thought that driving cars made them free. They couldn't see that it'd be better to use public transport. Anyway, the buses and trams were very basic then, and they had no aerial hydro-trains."

"I can imagine that everybody in the olden days must have been very grumpy," said Luna—no stranger to grumpiness herself. "I would be if I had to drive through that every day."

"Well let's not be grumpy, shall we. Luna? I think it's time for lunch".

The kids filed into the cafeteria two by two, unselfconsciously holding hands. Mona knew that would all change in a year or two.

She handed them their lunches—sandwiches and fruit. All of the ingredients were in season and sourced locally. The days of flying food across the world were long gone.

They chobbled and slurped like only kids can until they'd had their fill. Without needing to be told, they each put their leftovers and wrapping in the nearest bio bin to turn to fertiliser.

“Right then, class,” said Mona. “Now we’re going to the beach,” she quickly held up a hand. “Don’t get too excited though, it’s only a virtual beach.”

Helmeted, they walked across a simulation of Weston Super Mare in the early twenty twenties.

“Miss, why are there bits of rubbish on the beach?” asked Goliath.

“Because people in those days didn’t care enough about the environment. It was just too much trouble to throw stuff away properly,” she sighed.

“But why didn’t it just biodegrade?” Goliath wanted to know. Like all the children, he’d been familiar with such terms since he was a toddler.

“Because it’s made of plastic. It was a common material back then, and it didn’t biodegrade. People used it to wrap stuff in.”

“But that’s mad!” said Luna.

“As you get older, you’ll think a lot of things people did in the past were silly, Luna. Who knows? In a hundred years’ time, people might think that we were stupid.”

“They won’t think that about me,” said Luna, proudly jutting out her chin. My dad says I’m very intelligent for my age.”

I bet he does. Thought Mona.

The kids went on to have a good laugh about how they used to put “poo and wee” in the sea back then as well. Mona, deciding that they’d had enough hilarity for one day, lead them out to the air train for the five-minute trip back to Oldbury.

That night, Mona kicked off her shoes and switched on the wallscreen. On the news they were talking about a new superpower summit between India, China and the USA. She wasn't very interested and switched over to a soap. Someone was cheating on someone else; a girl was pregnant; an old man was getting a new dog.

Her boyfriend came in from the kitchen with their tea—he was a terrible cook but always made the effort.

“You know what, we were renovating some old apartments today,” he said. “Real classy old ones built back in the twenties. You know, in the city centre by the canal? I wonder what life was really like back then. I mean, we're always told how lucky we are to live in this day and age, but is it really true? Don't you ever think you'd like to go back in time and live in those days?”

Mona laughed. “No,” she said emphatically.

A Walk In The Park

Martin Fadden

Seven-twenty in the morning. An ungodly hour in anyone's book. Mist hangs over the lake, November-cold. It hangs over the grassy areas in-between, too, shrouding the outer reaches of a city park. Spiritual, in a funny kind of way- through sleepy, tired eyes. Hovering. Playing tricks. Waiting to be dispelled by heat and time and the gradual unfolding of another day. Here we are again. My son and I. Our weekend routine, thrust upon us. At an ungodly hour, taking in the air. The cold November air. Because he cannot speak. Not in the way you or I would think of speech. I speak for two. Or not, as the case may be. There are no interlocutors here. Not at this time.

The only time that really allows us to be there, in a public space, on a potentially beautiful day. We walk alone- but we will not see that day; not out there anyway. We will see it from the bedroom window, later- or the garden, if we are lucky. Longing perhaps, but with memories seared of the here and now...

The morning started early. The usual routines. A portable breakfast secured in the familiar leather bag, along with essential supplies. Wipes. Phone. Emergency sweets to tame a meltdown. That kind of thing. Just in case. Just in case. An express shower and brush-up. Enough caffeine to get me going and half a banana. Something to get me through the door and driving within the law of the land. The wrench away from his ipad- relatively painless this time. He does not fight. Not this time. He is in the zone for early morning walks. He may not be next week or next month. So we strike on, while the iron is hot. That is the best way. That is always the best way. Push hard when it's going well- but be ready for it to come crashing down around your ears. The algorithm, the cruel algorithm, may choose to shift direction. He does not know any more than I do. Who knows? Somebody must know. Does some being keep a log of these things? Somewhere up there, in the ether? The car starts groggily, like me. He sits nervously in the back seat. His body tensing. Scanning the world outside. I switch on a soothing radio station but it never quite seems to have that Mozart effect, does it? Not really doing what it says on the tin, Wolfgang...

I really should not pick fights with Mozart, I tell myself. There are bigger fish to fry. I have to get my son around a circular walk. Always circular; never there and back. I learnt from those mistakes. I have the scars. But today we pull up without any dramas. It is a good start. It bodes well. But never rest on your laurels. Never expect laurels of any kind, in fact. I am less Roman emperor and more stealth operator because it is I who scan now, not him- looking for the perfect parking spot, the spot adjacent to our preferred entry point. Somewhere with no room for him to question himself, or me; not now, not today, not this morning. We are not in the safety of our own home and the four walls. Because there are no walls in the park. I always think of that when we I am trying to negotiate, trying to navigate, my way, our way, around its beauty. But beauty should not be navigated. It should be cherished; explored, maybe. Except exploring is not a good idea for me and my son. That is because it means we don't know where we are going. And that is not a good idea. I have to walk like I have never seen it before, even if I have planned it a thousand times. I will not be lifting him up and taking him back to the car anymore. Not at his size now. Ten years old, we will work by consent, good faith. We will look for marginal gains, small victories. We will hope for the best...

Small steps are followed by bigger ones. A skip. More skips. He likes to skip. He is happy to be here. Then a pause. His left hand is held up to the sky, filtering the light, the morning sun, which breaks through faint clouds, and the mist- still there, veiling the park and its joys. I look under it, spying out the dips and hollows, the rabbit holes, the rivulets which follow the contours of the land. Ancient land come city space. Heathland, scrub land, neutral to your troubles. It does not judge you; it unfolds, step by step. Because for us nothing is regular. From the boy's intrepid gait, his tip-toed walk, to the way we will devour our breakfast halfway round (too fast; an eye on the clock, an eye on the phone)- always halfway round, always half-way round- we work to a different tune. One we need to play away from the eyes of the masses, the metropolis. Because yes- we are judging them; judging it; we have made decisions, we have chosen this hour to make our way around this municipal space in structured silence. Because I say nothing. No. Not strictly true. I reassure. I cajole, I guide. A commentary that floats into the air with the mist as it tries to fragment. But not yet. Not yet. The hour is not yet blessed. Not enough for that at least. The mist lingers, persists, as the road ahead dips. I watch his tread on the gradual decline, ready for a stumble- but he is on to it, too. Now he sees the edge of the lake, its bird life, its shimmer in the middle distance. Swans beating their wings. Taking off. The flash of white lures him in but for us, a fall could be catastrophic. A grazed knee, a torn pair of jeans, a bump, could send him in to the stratosphere of distress with me, trailing in his wake, grasping at his coat tails as he ascends into another world of unease. A millionaires' club of anxiety...

But no. We are okay for now. He soaks up the sensory offerings of this space. And me too. In my own way. Snatching glimpses, tastes, like a steward at a football match. Because it unfolds. It always unfolds. If only I was like the others, I think to myself. Minor traumas. Minor solutions. Those who are not here at the ungodly hour. Fast asleep, no doubt; or enjoying the comforts of the console and maybe the prospect of a trip later in the day. So what if the parking is horrendous then. We will cope, they say. We will manage, they say. Now that is what I call luxury! But it is okay. This will do. I experience the sublime like everyone else. I bank it all. I keep it locked in the memory for later. And so does he. Light travels through his fingers. He is the true gatekeeper. The mist twitches beyond his hands...

Halfway round. Suddenly I see a figure in the distance. On the other side of the lake, edging towards us. That is unusual for a Saturday morning in the park, at the ungodly hour. No bike; no dog. No discernible sound. Not one that I can hear, at least. Shapeless, amorphous. Silent. At a time when the sound travels. Quickly, lucidly. He spots them, too, surely. He sees more than me. He sees things before I do. He remembers everything, in an instant. I know that. But society will not pay him for his knowledge, his perceptions. His realm does not intersect with ours, with mine. Not yet. One day, perhaps. One day. For now he pushes on, gaining speed, seeing our immediate destination: the swings. Always the swings. Sensory bliss is pulling him in; closer, faster. But I see the figure approaching, faster, too- still hidden by the unearthliness of a November morning. And that is when the crazy questions start to run through my mind. Doubts rise up. Fears enter the icy wraith which surrounds us. Could I fight someone off and watch him at the same time? Could I get him to run for safety? Would he freeze? Right there and then. Like in the movies. I tighten up, instinctively, hands flexing like a gun slinger. No cameras. No witnesses. Not here in the park. I have never seen security cameras in the park. There can only be victims or heroes. Or villains. At the ungodlyhour. But there is no turning back. No chance. Not now. Not with a kid like this. It is one way or the highway. The swings are almost visible now, but not quite. I imagine them, cold and still. Untouched since the previous evening, for sure. Their black iron, slick with the dew of the morning, the almost-frost of the day. I hear my son's trainers grip the ground with assurance. He is leaving me for dead now. So I trip forward, ungainly, trying to close the distance between us. Trying to keep up with him. And still there, a mysterious figure in the mist. Struggling in his wake, I let go. You have to let go, sometimes. He is telling me to let go. Let me go. Let me go! Defeated, I reach the swings after him.

I always reach them after him. Every time. Except this time it feels different. I should be there first. I need to be there first. We tried to cheat the day, to beat the light, and now it is having its vengeance. I see a hooded figure at the swings. Waiting. Waiting for us? The black puffer jacket. Hunched over. They shift at the sound of my steps, the gate swinging on its hinges, creaking into the mist.

Turning around, a ghostly presence flinches slightly, at first- then smiles faintly. She is fixing a child's coat, hugged tight into her knees, hidden from view. Ready for the other swing, the second in the pair. Equally still, equally cold for now. Blonde ringlets break around her fur-lined hood, silhouetting kind, pained eyes. A wave of relief goes through me, instinctively, washing away my paranoia, my fears. Stunned into habit, I begin to follow the familiar, clumsy protocols of the play area and ready my charge for his flight into the still cold morning air. He squints into the sunlight as it breaks over him. He holds tight and waits for my initial push, the tiny impetus, that leads to stellar movement in a matter of seconds. His weight shifts quickly, adeptly. He does not need me now. He flies freely. And beside him, the other child begins to break the rays, too. Younger, their fingers leave one of the metal chains to filter the sun, a smile breaking out across a small, round face. Trajectories merge within seconds. The children move in synchronicity in the ungodly hour. No word passes their lips. No words are needed. Rendered useless for now, the two adults look around awkwardly for a seat, eyes trained to do anything but meet. One bench, coated with water. But then I remember. I am not without purpose. I am not without meaning! I have a cloth. Here. A cotton cloth. In the bag of essentials. Deep down. Beneath everything else. A cloth. A cloth to wipe away the morning dew. The sheen of it still thick, globular. In seconds the wooden bench gleams anew. She smiles. There is room enough for the two of us.

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