



Centre for Environment and Society Research  
Working Paper series no. 12

# Shaped by memory: oral histories of post-war modernist architecture

David Adams



# **Shaped by memory: oral histories of post-war modernist architecture**

David Adams  
*Lecturer in Planning*  
*Birmingham School of the Built Environment, Birmingham City University*

Working Paper Series, no. 12  
2012

ISBN 978-1-904839-59-0

© Author, 2012

Published by  
Birmingham City University  
Centre for Environment and Society Research  
Faculty of Technology, Engineering and the Environment  
City Centre campus, Millennium Point, Curzon Street, Birmingham, B4 7XG, UK

## CONTENTS

Contents	ii
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	1
Telling tales of the past	1
A Birmingham case study	3
Re-shaping of buildings through memory	7
Conclusion	9
References	11

### Abstract

An important thread of recent scholarship has focused on how architecture can be 'performed' such that it can be understood not merely as an achievement of an individual architect, but as an on-going process of how buildings are 'made' and continually 'remade' through human (and non-human) action. Drawing specifically on recently-collected oral history narratives collected from James Roberts and John Madin, two of Birmingham's most prominent post-Second World War architects, this paper argues that the use of oral history as a way for critically understanding how buildings are 'made' should be approached with some caution and that such accounts conceal attempts to trace the original architectural concept. By situating these narratives within a 'performative' context, it is argued that these narratives should not be considered straightforwardly as accurate representations of the past, but as a way of examining how individual narratives are embedded within an on-going relational process regarding the geographies of architecture.

**Key words:** oral history, design intention, post-war Birmingham, performative

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank James Roberts and John Madin who agreed to be interviewed for this project. I would also like to thank Professor Peter J. Larkham and Professor Phil Hubbard for their generous support and helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

# Shaped by memory: oral histories of post-war modernist architecture

David Adams

*Birmingham School of the Built Environment, Birmingham City University, Millennium Point, Curzon Street, Birmingham, B4 7XG*

## Introduction

In the past decade or so, researchers have responded positively to Loretta Lees's (2001) call for "architecture ... [to] be about more than just representation" and to consider how architectural space is continually shaped and experienced (Lees, 2001, p. 51). One significant strand of the reinvigorated scholarship on architecture has explored how architecture can be 'practised' and 'performed' such that it can be understood not simply as an accomplishment of the architect, but as an on-going process of how buildings are 'made' and continually 'remade' through human (and non-human) action (see, for example, Edensor, 2011; Guggenheim, 2009; Kraftl and Adey, 2008; Llewellyn, 2003, 2004; Strebel, 2011). Recent studies in architectural geography, in particular, provide illuminating insights into the design and inhabitation of buildings that are very different from earlier 'representational' approaches used by art historians, architectural historians and urban historians (Daniels, 1993; Domosh, 1996).

Elsewhere, however, other researchers continue to pursue a more traditional approach to explore how buildings are 'made'. There have been some particularly noteworthy oral studies underpinned by comprehensive interviews with prominent British and European architects/planners and/or architectural theorists that seek to capture and understand the intentions behind the production of post-Second World War urban built environments (Gold, 1997, 2007; Pinder, 2005). It is argued in this paper that the use of oral history as a way for critically comprehending the intentions of architects – specifically during the post-war period – should be approached with a degree of caution. More specifically, it is argued that the architects' accounts tend to follow an autobiographical narrative which consciously or unconsciously obscures any direct attempt to trace the original architectural concept. By situating these narratives within a performative context, however, it is argued that new opportunities open up regarding how these stories could be used to illuminate how designed spaces are 'made' and 'remade'.

## Telling tales of the past

There is a historical ancestry associated with ideas of how architecture should 'practised' and 'performed'. Lees (2001), for example, recommended that architecture should be performative "in the sense that it involves ongoing social practices through which space is continually shaped and inhabited" (2001, p. 53; see also Goss, 1988; Imrie, 2003). There have, of course, been some strident responses to this suggestion in terms of using oral history and in-depth interviews to explore the thick and messy dialogue that existed between different actors in the production and consumption of post-war urban environments (see specifically Adams, 2011; Hubbard *et al.*, 2003; Hubbard and Lilley, 2004; Llewellyn, 2003, 2004). In a related

vein, autobiography, testimonies and letters to local newspapers have been interrogated to highlight the variety of peoples' experiences of living through the process of urban transformation – as a counterpoint to the 'official' narrative of the planner/architect (Finnegan, 1998). A further example of this is the anthropological account offered by Holsten (1989), who combines interview, archival and ethnographic evidence to underline how the architects' conception of Brasilia was destabilised by residents as they sought to evoke the atmosphere of traditional Brazilian street life by turning their backs on the pedestrianised precincts that were designed to act as neighbourhood centres and as hubs of community life.

Along with local people's narratives, there has also been some longstanding interest in exploring the lives and contributions of modern urban planners and architects as an established focus of planning historiography (Cherry, 1981; Krueckeberg, 1983). The seemingly dominant approach remains semi-obituarial, narrowly concentrating on the cult of the 'heroic' planner at the expense of the broader economic, social, and political contexts (Proctor, 2006). The major figures of the twentieth century – Le Corbusier, Lewis Mumford, Daniel Burnham – have been popular subjects, and charismatic and high-profile individuals such as Frank Lloyd Wright have generated a considerable literature, often veering toward hagiography. On the other hand, however, Caro's (1974) significant study of Robert Moses's involvement in the re-planning of New York initiated an interesting debate surrounding the role of the individual in shaping urban outcomes and the strengths and limitations of biography as an approach to understanding societal power structures (Doig, 1990).

It could also be reasonably argued that Gold's work on architectural and urban modernism and, more specifically, his attempts to unpick the relationship between architectural vision and (compromised) reality, informed by extended dialogue and engagement, makes significant strides towards developing a more personalised understanding of *why* British and European architects thought and acted in a particular way (Gold, 1997, 2007). Such in-depth research deliberately works through using a life history approach to elicit information from key informants that would not be easily obtainable through 'official' archival sources, thus revealing highly informative accounts of post-war modernism. However, his interviews support a particularly individualist perspective that limits the range of factors outside of the design that influence the function of a building. Furthermore, when architects are alive and prepared to be interviewed, it is perhaps easy to consider them as infallible and limitless sources which can perpetuate an 'intentionalist' position in historical writing (Proctor, 2006).

To some extent, placing the architect interview within a performative context, further erodes any attempt at tapping into design intention. As Till (2009) has suggested, in contemporary design work the figure of the independent, controlling architect-designer has been supplanted by architecture's 'dependency' on the many others that come together to shape the making of a building (see also Imrie, 2003; Koolhaas and Mau, 1995; Yaneva, 2009). This collaborative attitude towards building design was also prevalent in the post-war period in Britain, with the popular culture in architecture of teamwork and, to some extent, the subjugation of individual freedom, embodied in the names of firms such as Architects' Co-Partnership, the nature of work in public offices such as Coventry City Council's Architects' Department and collaborative projects such as the development of the 'Consortium of Local Authorities Special Programme' (CLASP) industrialised system of construction (Bullock, 2002). In an analogous vein, recognising actors in the process of plan-making is a theme explored and developed by a number of authors. Larkham (2006), for example, argued that commercial consultants often vied for the profitable commissions from cities, and that highway engineers and city surveyors competed

for resources with architects and public health officials (see also Larkham, 1988; Whitehand, and Whitehand, 1984). More recently, research underpinned by a re-working of Latour's (1987) 'Actor-Network-Theory', has begun to unpick and outline the ways in which 'actors' were involved in the decision-making processes that led to the re-planning of reconstructed towns and cities (Essex and Brayshaw, 2007, 2008).

Furthermore, recent research reminds us that many other actors involved with the design and development process – builders, demolishers, maintenance workers, conservationists, home-makers, cleaners, artists, and users – who are all intrinsically bound up with the 'making', maintaining and 're-designing' of a building (Jacobs and Merriman, 2011; Strebel, 2011). Therefore, rather than interpreting architects' narratives as a way of reaching the true meaning of a building, we might begin to consider that these reflective testimonies, actively constructed through the prism of the present, provide an important relational perspective on how architecture is re-shaped materially and symbolically (Jacobs and Merriman, 2011).

### **A Birmingham case study**

The case study is drawn from my research into the post-war reconstruction of Birmingham. The focus on Birmingham is particularly relevant to debates surrounding modern architecture, as the vast programme of realised building projects that occurred during the post-war period is representative of how Modernist-inspired building processes and architectural ideologies came together to form part of the language of reconstruction in the years following the end of the Second World War. Although much has been written about post-war Birmingham (see Borg, 1973; Higgott, 2000; Larkham, 2007) including an official history (Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974), there have been some calls for a reassessment of the influence of actors that shaped the design and rebuilding of Britain's second city (Larkham, 2007; Adams and Larkham, 2012). Even though a wide range of architects was active in Birmingham during the reconstruction period, two are of particular relevance as their buildings dominated certain quarters of the city. This paper concerns the work of James Roberts and John Madin, two of the city's most prominent post-war architects, who have been acknowledged as having a profound influence on the reshaping of the city (Larkham, 2007). They were responsible for the design of three of the city's most significant examples of modernist post-war architecture, the Smallbrook Ringway, the Rotunda, and the Central Library. This paper is based on my experiences of interviewing James Roberts and John Madin while documenting and interpreting their work through the use of Birmingham Central Library archive and other sources. The interviews took place in December 2009.<sup>1</sup>

Architecture as shaped by memory/nostalgia

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the way in which oral history narratives are constructed tends to destabilize the notion of architectural intention. First, it is argued that architects, when later interviewed, cannot be easily considered as the same people as when they engaged in the act of design conception, but must be viewed as observing themselves in nostalgic autobiographical mode, interpreting their histories through the prism of the contemporary context. Secondly, it is suggested that their memories are articulated through a form of narration and story-telling that tends to obstruct direct access to design intention (Proctor, 2006).

---

1 John Madin died in January 2012. The interviews are discussed, and transcripts given, in Adams, 2012.

The way in which architecture becomes shaped by memory becomes apparent once we begin to explore the architects' stories surrounding Sir Herbert Manzoni, the city's Surveyor and Engineer (and architect and planner in all but name from 1935 until the 1950s). A number of recent written accounts have explored the role and achievements of Manzoni (1899-1972), who guided Birmingham through its radical post-war reconfiguration (see, for example, Larkham, 2007; Parker and Long, 2000, 2004). Interestingly, on leaving school in 1940 at the age of 16, John Madin found employment with the City Council, and he was personally encouraged by Manzoni to pursue an architectural career at the Birmingham School of Architecture (Clawley, 2011). Sometime later, however, this sense of friendliness appeared to diminish as a result of their divergent views on comprehensive planning. Here, for example, is one story about Manzoni told by Madin:

"There's interesting stories about Manzoni because ultimately when I came back from the army I was very keen on comprehensive planning and I suggested to Manzoni that there were only about three freehold interests [within the city centre] and what he should do is do a comprehensive plan for the whole of the centre of Birmingham within the ring road. But I thought here was a great opportunity. The city itself owned quite a lot within the ring road and I thought this was a great opportunity to produce a plan ... But he didn't go along with this and so I, I've been frustrated for the last fifty years over this because it there is still no comprehensive plan for the city of Birmingham even now, the present council say they talk about their 'Big City Plan' but there is no plan, there are no drawings, there is no comprehensive development for the city! I just think [Manzoni] hadn't got the architectural concept experience to realise what you could do with a three dimensional master plan for the centre of the city, I just don't think he realised how important it was to do this!"

A similar line of argument has been recalled in other accounts. Here it is again:

"I remember being on a public platform just after I had started my architectural practice, with Herbert Manzoni. I said that there should be a three-dimensional plan, but he replied that it could not be done ... I believe that Birmingham could have been one of the world's greatest city centres. So much of the land in the city centre was controlled or owned by the Corporation. But all that we architects have been allowed to do is to plan parts of the city centre. We are only pawns in a very big chessboard. ... Basically, Manzoni was road engineer. He was a fine chap, and a great friend, but it was his limitation" (Madin, interviewed in Sutcliffe 1967-9).

In a comparable way, James Roberts spoke of Manzoni's 'unsympathetic' attitude towards the re-planning of Birmingham:

"Manzoni I got to know very well but he was, he was, he had no interest in architecture at all, [no interest in] aesthetics at all, he wasn't interested in people or pedestrians. It was cars, lorries, getting things through and out again and so he did considerable damage to the heart of Birmingham I think but there should have been a lot of tender loving care after the war. I remember the first streets and areas were in Union Street in Birmingham just about where the present inverted pyramid which John Madin did [for the Central Library], there was, it was Union Street but it was, it was, there were a couple of very lovely pubs and which we would have kept as fresh as "Wow they've survived". But also on the corner opposite the council house there's was a most wonderful Gothic building which survived all the bombing and that was the reference library. It was a huge great big building where you went up a set of stairs with



wooden insets in them and handrails but that was a building. Mr Manzoni knocked it down after the war, it's escaped the war, [but] he knocked it down because he put the ring road underneath it, the tunnel underneath it, so it came down".

It appears that some reliability can be attached to all of these narratives, as both Roberts and Madin, at various points, worked closely alongside Manzoni. Additionally, all three accounts have two intentions: first, they provide a brief glimpse of both architects' working relationship with Manzoni as practising architects within the city, and secondly, they demonstrate how Manzoni's approach to post-war reconstruction differed from their own thoughts on the rebuilding in terms of failing to consider elements of the existing urban fabric, and for not embracing a comprehensive approach to re-planning the heart of the city. To some extent, this story is substantiated by Manzoni's own testimony concerning reconstruction, and he did, indeed, favour clean, modern designs and it appears that he was less concerned with older architecture (Larkham, 2007):

'I have never been very certain as to the value of tangible links with the past ... As to Birmingham's buildings, there is little of real worth in our architecture. Its replacement should be an improvement, provided we keep a few monuments as museum pieces to past ages ... As for future generations, I think that they will be better occupied in applying their thoughts and energies to forging ahead, rather than looking backward' (Manzoni in 1957 quoted by Foster, 2005, p. 197, who gives no full reference).

Elsewhere, however, other archival evidence could be used to tell a different story to the architects' oral history anecdotes regarding Manzoni's perceived lack of understanding of "three-dimensional comprehensive planning". On several occasions, Manzoni asserted that Birmingham's redevelopment plans predated the bombing raids of the Second World War, and his interpretation of the bomb damage was that it was relatively limited and scattered and that there was no need for a city-wide reconstruction plan (see Sutcliffe, 1967-9; Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974). Unlike the schemes that many other cities were producing at the time, the deliberate decision, following Manzoni's advice, was taken in the early 1940s not to proceed with an overall city centre redevelopment plan: the Council itself already owned many freeholds in the centre and additional freeholds had been acquired along the line of the proposed inner ring road, giving the Council considerable control over how to shape the modern city (Manzoni, 1968). Also, as the city's bomb damage did not draw in substantive funding for reconstruction from central government, the Council needed to attract businesses, and felt that a restrictive plan would be counter-productive: its landholding could exert sufficient control while implying substantial freedom for prospective occupiers (Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974).

Their recollections also provide an example of the way in which memory is moulded into a particular narrative using oral representation. Madin's and Roberts's anecdotes have seemingly been rehearsed before, and drawing on Portelli's "twice-told tales", it could be argued that what we witness through oral history is just one of its many 'repackaged' retellings (Portelli, 1998). Furthermore, this retelling is underpinned by a certain narrative purpose: a purpose that is stimulated by a desire to cast the architects as progressive 'agents of change' whose efforts were burdened by the short-sighted approach of Manzoni the "road engineer" (Madin, pers. comm).

As Proctor argues, in being retold as stories rather than simply remembered as events, such accounts become intrinsically textual and autobiographical (Proctor, 2006). Of course, evidence of textuality is dependent on the situation in which the interview takes place, the type of questions asked and whether the architect has been interviewed before.

However, one clear example of where the narrative became overtly textual relates to John Madin, whose re-telling of his life story appeared to be the result of a certain degree of planning and forethought. In part, this is quite understandable, given the recent renewed academic and lay interest in his work.<sup>2</sup> Elements of his interview contained all the characteristics of a logical textual narrative. For example, he discussed his early architectural inspirations at some length, and he was forthcoming in describing his formative years and his career as a Pioneer Student of the Royal Engineers. He seemed to structure his account in such a way that it could provide authority to support his early architectural intentions. It appears that the central purpose of describing how he developed a mix of creative and more practical skills during his childhood was to demonstrate that his approach to architecture was based on an appreciation of simplicity and pragmatism (C. Madin 2011):

“My parents were very influential inasmuch as on the one hand my mother was an artist and my father was a builder and a very well-known cabinet maker actually and so that I had the practical aspects. I was brought up with these in fact and I decided to be an architect when I was twelve year old. ... because by this time my father had taught me how to lay bricks and do carpentry and so forth. And my mother had taught me to draw and design things so. So it seemed to me the quite obvious thing to do if you want to be creative is to be an architect and that's all how it all started. Before I went in the army I did two years at the school of architecture and then I volunteered for the Royal Air Force because I decided that we had to shoot down these Germans who were bombing Birmingham and everywhere else. And unfortunately after about four or five months training as a pilot they discovered that I couldn't see at night properly! So and then I served in the Royal Engineers for four years in India, Iraq and Egypt. And I, well it's a long story but basically eventually I was transferred to Cairo HQ and I was promoted to a staff captain and I was then put in charge of a development which the Royal Engineers were doing on the Suez Canal. So the reason for saying that is that I already had a year or so of practical experience having done two years at the school of architecture so when I returned back to the school of architecture in 1946 I think it was, I'd already had some practical experience as well as my earlier experience with my parents. So then I qualified in 1950 and I started practice straight away. That's a brief history.”

Although extremely coherent and informative, Madin's story follows an established autobiographical narrative and this account should not be interpreted uncritically

---

2 Some of Madin's work has been acknowledged as being particularly important with English Heritage, the Twentieth Century Society and the friends of the Central Library suggesting that some of his buildings deserve listed status (Clawley, 2011). Nevertheless, not all of his work has garnered such a favourable reaction. Within the city centre, The Birmingham Post and Mail building, for example, belonged to Madin's exploration into the phase of modern architecture often referred to as the 'International Style', and was demolished in 2005. There is also some considerable on-line discussion surrounding the fate of other buildings designed by Madin (see, for example, Foster, 2009).

without acknowledging its socially-constructed nature. Asked where his early inspiration came from, his reply was also punctuated with narrative direction signals: “so”, “I was then”, “so the reason for saying is”, and so forth. As Frisch has suggested, narrative construction is temporally and spatially variable within different socio-cultural and historical contexts; furthermore, memory is being continually reconstructed into a more digestible form for the present perspective (Frisch, 1990). In this sense, like other sources, the oral history narrative is constructed within the architect’s current context.

## Re-shaping of buildings through memory

That the current perspective informs the oral history interview is almost always apparent and this connects with a wider criticism that any retelling of the past is collapsed into a more digestible component (Hobsbawm, 1997; Thompson, 1988). In this sense, such a ‘collapse’ contains the present in which the interviewee is actively involved: the present includes other narratives and interpretation of the architects’ works which they have encountered as well as their own public representations of their work in lectures and writings. It could be contended that a memory of how a building came into being may only exist if it has been revisited on a number of occasions since. There is an example of this in Roberts’s interview, where he described his ideas for the Rotunda:

“It had been a bomb site, [and] during the war it had had a city restaurant which was a place for citizens of Birmingham to have free meals ... It sounds ridiculous, *people have said [on many occasions], “What influenced me?” and I have always said nothing influenced me, it was an idea of seeing a war time view [of the bomb site] and let’s have it up there, a nice vertical feature at the end of the [inner] ring road.* It started off, yes, as a smaller building and it sounds unrealistic and strange these days, [but] so much of my architectural practice and life have been so unrealistic, unbelievable!” (emphasis added).

It seems that this particular memory is only accessible because he has been asked about the rationale for the design of the Rotunda on a number of separate occasions. In this particular part of the interview, rather than being ‘taken back’ to a time when the intention of the design was originally being considered, it seemed that he was recalling the subsequent occasions when he had responded to this question. There is a sense that architects – as with others who participate in life history interviews – review and examine the evidence of their own past, selecting and interpreting it to create personal histories of their life and work.

The present perspective punctuates the architect narrative perhaps most clearly through a response to what are perceived to be inaccurate interpretations of their previous work (Proctor, 2006). This was most apparent during Madin’s discussion of the critical reception associated with the Central Library. Given the decision by the UK government to refuse – twice – English Heritage’s recommendation that the library should be listed, his story provides a rich source through which to understand how architecture is shaped physically and symbolically over time.

He was asked in 1964 by the then City Architect, Sheridan-Shedden, to collaborate on a new<sup>3</sup> civic centre master plan, combining an ensemble of civic buildings,

---

3 There had been plans for a ‘civic centre’ since the early twentieth century, with an international design competition being won by Maximilian Romanoff, although his proposal was deemed too expensive.

including a new library, at the eastern end of Broad Street on the site known as Paradise Circus (Larkham, 2007). Madin produced a large model, showing (amongst other buildings) the Town Hall of 1832-4 and the Hall of Memory war memorial, together with a bus station, student halls of residence, a concert hall and library (Figure 1). In some ways, this approach chimes with ways in which certain landscape architects, in particular, paid attention to the broader architectural forms created by buildings and the wider context in which they functioned (Appleyard, Lynch and Myer, 1964). Madin's plans for Paradise Circus were approved by the council in 1968, and the original scheme was for a central library, with a bus terminus underneath, a school of music and physical sports institute – this was Madin's 'civic heart' of the city (Clawley, 2011). During the interview he was eager to point out that there was a certain level of favourable recognition from members of the public when the scheme was exhibited:

"We had the model for the [Civic Centre scheme, including the library] ...the whole thing and then eventually we built in the model [a] more detailed model for the library itself. I mean I was almost embarrassed because people were so enthusiastic about it. And of course the great thing is when it actually opened there was tremendous enthusiasm about it!"



**Figure 1:** John Madin (second from right) and others reviewing an early model of the Library. Reproduced by permission of Birmingham Library Services.

Construction of the library began in 1969 and the main shell of the building was completed in 1971. The outward form is simple and comprises a huge reference block and smaller lending block to its east, which also houses the first set of escalators leading to the upper floors of both libraries. Adopting a cantilevered design, each floor larger is than the one below resulting in a distinctive inverted ziggurat formation (Foster, 2005).<sup>4</sup> A similar form was adopted for civic purposes in the monumental Boston City Hall design by Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, in 1962 (Larkham, 2007). Madin, however, suggested that the initial design concept was, in part, inspired by more practical considerations:

---

4 Clawley (2011) suggests that inspiration for the design derived from Sant' Elia's drawings for 'Casa a gradinate, and Breuer's 1928 scheme for a hospital at Elberfeld, which had a stepped section.

"I'm often accused of probably [taking inspiration from] America but it's a very practical solution. ... Actually I've never seen the Boston City Hall but of course I don't know how it all happened but it's certainly wasn't, "Oh what a good idea. We'll build a Boston City Hall". It evolved from the need to protect the books! The concept of the library was a centre of learning as well as a reference library and lending library. It was needed to interconnect various subjects or different departments so people who were interested in one subject may become interested in the other subjects so all the main reference floors were linked physically and visually and psychologically".

Madin's original idea of a library clad in Portland stone or travertine marble, set in landscaped gardens, was subsequently altered, and pre-cast concrete with a stone aggregate offered as an substitute by the City Council was adopted instead, leading to some criticism that the library was a 'concrete monstrosity' (Foster, 2005; Gold, 2007; Parker and Long, 2004). The apparent 'failure' of some of the concrete panels was also cited by the Council in 1999 as a reason to demolish the library and pass the site to a commercial developer (Clawley, 2011). With some justification, perhaps, Madin was quick to defend his original intentions for the civic heart of Birmingham, arguing that the City Council's decision to "create an outdoors-style eating and entertainment area" (Birmingham City Council, 1988-9) has eroded his original conception of creating a civic space free from commercial activity:

"Well, while we're talking about [the Central Library] basically what the [city authorities] have now done, the central civic precinct which was beneath the library with an open shaft coming down, which I designed as a civic square with fountains and waterfalls and so forth, this [has] been closed off the atrium to the civic centre with a sort of greenhouse glass type of covering. Then the whole darn thing at the bottom was filled with fast food shops in the middle of the civic centre, in the middle of the civic centre of Birmingham. Extraordinary!"

There are, of course, strong parallels to be drawn here with Lees's (2001) description of the ways in which the commercial arcade of Vancouver's public library was materially and symbolically altered into a site for social interaction. The re-designed atrium of Birmingham's Central Library has, perhaps ironically, become a space for types of civic contact that Madin once envisaged taking place in this space. What is less clear is how Madin foresaw these contacts taking place in the original designs for the open space.

## **Conclusions**

On one level, this paper has drawn attention to the underlying meanings that infuse oral history narratives and points to how one must also maintain a critical attentiveness to the way in which the architect interview is inevitably repackaged into a form for the present context. On another level, situated within there-energized scholarship on architecture as 'performed', it is argued that instead of viewing architects as static 'research subjects', their stories could be used to enrich our understanding of how architecture is 'made' and how it is continually being 're-made'. These narratives should not be considered straightforwardly as accurate representations of past design intentions, but as a way of examining how individual narratives are embedded within an on-going relational process regarding the geographies of architecture.

Whilst this paper is set against a post-Second World War backdrop, it seems that there could be some transference of ideas to the contemporary context. This would involve broadening the rather narrow focus of some accounts, which typically consider solely the producers of architectural spaces, the architects and planners themselves, as the central focus of study, to develop a more integrative dialogue with actors who are all intrinsically involved with 'making' and maintaining of a building. Of course, there are obvious practical difficulties to negotiate here, but oral history narratives could, perhaps, form part of the toolkit used to loosen this positioning, thus enabling researchers to cultivate alliances with various creative practitioners and publics thus exposing renewed possibilities of collaboration.

## References

- Adams, D. (2011) 'Everyday experiences of the modern city: remembering the post-war reconstruction of the city' *Planning Perspectives* vol. 26 pp. 237 – 360.
- Adams, D. (2012) *Stories from the 'Big Heart of England': architects' narratives of the post-war reconstruction of Birmingham* Working Paper no. 9, Centre for Environment and Society Research, Birmingham City University
- Adams, D. and Larkham, P.J. (2012, forthcoming) 'Bold planning, mixed experiences: the diverse fortunes of post-war Birmingham', in Clapson, M. and Larkham, P.J. (eds) *The blitz and its legacy: from destruction to reconstruction* Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Appleyard, D., Lynch, K., and Myer, J.R. (1964) *The View from the Road* The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Birmingham City Council (1988-9) *Annual Report 1988-9*. City Council, Birmingham, p. 6.
- Borden, I. (2001) *Skateboarding, space and the city: architecture and the body* Berg, Oxford.
- Borg, N. (1973) "Birmingham", in Holiday, J. (ed.) *City-centre redevelopment* Charles Knight, London.
- Caro, R. (1974) *The power broker: Robert Moses and the fall of New York* Random House, New York.
- Cherry, G. (1981) *Pioneers in British planning* Architectural Press, London.
- Clawley, A. (2011) *John Madin* RIBA Publishing, London.
- Daniels, S. (1993) *Fields of vision* Polity, Cambridge.
- Doig, J. (1990) 'Regional conflict in the New York metropolis: the legend of Robert Moses and the power of the Port Authority' *Urban Studies* vol. 27 pp. 201-232.
- Domosh, M. (1996) *Invented cities* Yale University Press, London.
- Edensor, T. (2011) 'Entangled agencies, material networks and repair in a building assemblage: the mutable stone of St Ann's Church, Manchester' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* vol. 36 pp. 238-252.
- Essex, S. and Brayshay, M. (2007) 'Vision, vested interest and pragmatism: who remade Britain's blitzed cities', *Planning Perspectives* vol. 22 no. 4 pp. 417-441.
- Essex, S. and Brayshay, M. (2008) 'Boldness diminished? The post-war battle to replan a bomb-damaged provincial city', *Urban History* vol. 35 no. 3 pp. 437-461.
- Finnegan, R. (1998) *Tales of the city: a study of narrative and urban life* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Foster, A. (2005) *Birmingham* (Pevsner Architectural Guides) Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Foster, A. (2009) 'Birmingham Central Library's final chapter' *BD Magazine - Public Sector* - July 2009 ([www.m.bdonline.co.uk](http://www.m.bdonline.co.uk), accessed 20th October 2011).
- Frisch, M. (1990) 'The memory of history', in Frisch, M. (ed.) *A shared authority: essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history* State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Gold, J.R. (1997) *The experience of modernism: modern architects and the future city, 1928-53* Spon, London.
- Gold, J.R. (2007) *The practice of modernism: modern architects and urban transformation, 1954-72* Routledge, London.
- Goss, J. (1988) 'The built environment and social theory: towards an architectural geography' *Professional Geographer* vol. 40 pp. 392-403.
- Guggenheim, M. (2009) 'Mutable immobilities. Change of use of buildings as a problem of quasi-technologies', in Bender, T. and Farais, I. (eds) *Urban assemblages* Routledge, London.

- Higgott, A. (2000) 'Birmingham: building the modern city', in Deckker, T. (ed.) *The modern city revisited* Taylor and Francis, London.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1997) *On history* Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London.
- Holsten, J. (1989) *The modernist city: an anthropological critique of Brasilia* Chicago University Press, Chicago, Illinois.
- Hubbard, P., Faire, L., and Lilley, K. (2003) 'Contesting the modern city: reconstruction and everyday life in post-war Coventry', *Planning Perspectives* vol. 18 pp. 377-397.
- Hubbard, P., and Lilley, K. (2004) 'Pacemaking the modern city: the urban politics of speed and slowness', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* vol. 22 pp. 273-294.
- Imrie, R. (2003) 'Architects' conceptions of the human body', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* vol. 21 pp. 47-65.
- Jacobs, J., and Merriman, P. (2011) 'Practising architectures', *Social and Cultural Geography* vol. 12 pp. 211-222.
- Kruekeberg, D. (ed.) (1983) *The American planner: biographies and recollections* Methuen, New York.
- Larkham, P.J. (1988) 'Agents and types of change in the conserved townscape', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS vol. 13 pp. 148-164.
- Larkham, P.J. (2006) 'The study of urban form in Great Britain', *Urban Morphology*, vol. 10 no. 2 pp. 117-141.
- Larkham, P.J. (2007) *Replanning Birmingham: process and product in post-war reconstruction* Working Paper series no. 2, Faculty of Law, Humanities, Development and Society, University of central England, Birmingham.
- Latour, B. (1987) *Science in action: how to follow engineers in society* Open University Press, Milton Keynes.
- Lees, L. (2001) 'Towards a critical geography of architecture: the case of ersatz Colosseum', *Ecumene* vol. 8 pp. 51-86.
- Llewellyn, M. (2003) 'Polyvocalism and the public: 'doing' a critical historical geography of architecture', *Area* vol. 35 pp. 264-270.
- Llewellyn, M. (2004) "'Urban village' or 'white house': envisioned spaces, experienced places, and everyday life at Kensal House, London in the 1930s', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* vol. 22 pp. 229-249.
- Madin, C. (2011) *John Madin, architect and planner: an illustrated record* ([www.john-madin.info](http://www.john-madin.info)).
- Manzoni, H. (1968) *The development of town planning in Birmingham* Notes from the History of Birmingham Seminar no. 2. School of History, University of Birmingham.
- OMA Koolhaas, R., and Mau, B. (1995). *SMLXL010* Publishers, Rotterdam.
- Parker, D., and Long, P. (2000) 'Reimagining Birmingham: public history, selective memory and the narration of urban change', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 6 pp. 157-178.
- Parker, D., and Long, P. (2004) 'The mistakes of the past'? Visual narratives of urban decline and regeneration', *Visual Culture in Britain* vol. 5 pp. 37-58.
- Pinder, D. (2005) *Visions of the city: utopianism, power and politics in twentieth-century urbanism* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Portelli, A. (1998) 'Oral history as genre', in Chamberlain, M. & Thompson, P. (eds) *Narrative and genre* Routledge, London and New York.
- Procter, R. (2006) 'The architect's intention: interpreting post-war modernism through the architect interview', *Journal of Design History* vol. 19 pp. 295-307.
- Strebel, I. (2011) 'The living building: towards a geography of maintenance work', *Social and Cultural Geography* vol. 12 no. 3 pp. 243-262.
- Sutcliffe, A.R. (1967-9) Transcripts of interviews with H.J. Black, Alderman T.W. Bowen, J. Lewis, J. Madin, Sir Herbert Manzoni, Sir Frank Price, R.F.H. Ross,



- in *Transcripts of interviews with prominent Birmingham people 1967-9* copy in  
Local Studies, Birmingham Central Library
- Sutcliffe, A.R. and Smith, R. (1974) *History of Birmingham 1939-1970* Oxford  
University Press, Oxford.
- Thompson, P. (1988) *The voice of the past: oral history* Oxford University Press,  
Oxford.
- Till, J. (2009) *Architecture depends* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Whitehand, J.W.R. and Whitehand, S.M. (1984) 'The physical fabric of town centres:  
the agents of change', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS  
vol. 9 pp. 231-247.
- Yaneva, A. (2009) *The making of a building: a pragmatist approach to  
architecture* Peter Lang, Oxford.