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# Walking in the Modern city: pedestrian experiences of post-war Birmingham

David Adams



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

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**Abstract**

Whilst the act of walking has been a central focus of many authors in their attempts to comprehend the effects of modernisation processes on everyday life in the city, there has been little empirical exploration of the relationship between how pedestrian practices were imagined and proposed by post-war planners / architects and how they were experienced 'on the ground' by local inhabitants. Drawing on research conducted in Birmingham – a city radically reconstructed with vehicular rather than pedestrian movement in mind – this paper uses a series of oral testimonies with local residents to highlight their different experiences of living with the reality of a city designed around the needs of motorised traffic. The paper concludes by arguing that the local narratives and the qualitative experience of urban walking practices could be a source to which current and future planners (and decision-makers) might look in order to better understand how walking can be further encouraged in urban environments.

**Key words:** *Post-war reconstruction; oral history; walking, mobility, Birmingham*

# Walking in the Modern city: pedestrian experiences of post-war Birmingham

David Adams

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

## Introduction

Much recent academic attention has focused on the apparently relentless processes of modernisation which has hastened the pace of everyday life, bequeathing faster and more hectic cities (see, for example, Castells, 1996; 1997; 1998; Virilio, 1986, 1991, 1995). In the popular imagination at least, contemporary cities appear to be sites of continuous circulation (Latham and McCormack, 2008). Interpretations of the deleterious impacts of this ceaseless rapidity within society have been well covered elsewhere (e.g. Zola, 1874; Berman, 1983; Harvey, 1982), and there are arguments to suggest that modernisation involves the inevitable 'speeding up' of everyday life and the enticing replacement of slow spaces with faster ones.

Notwithstanding the importance of these accounts, it is also necessary to reaffirm the message that urban sites have not only long been characterised by vortices of speed but also countervailing forces of slowness (Latham and McCormack, 2008) and the relative leisureliness associated with the act of walking has, for instance, been a central focus of many authors in their attempts to comprehend the effects of modernising processes on everyday life in the city (Benjamin, 1973; de Certeau, 1984; Debord, 1967; Sinclair, 2002). Whilst there has been some substantive topical academic debate that explores contesting urban mobilities in modern cities (Cresswell, 2006, 2010; Sheller and Urry, 2006), Middleton (2009, 2010, 2011) has suggested that there has been a lack of systematic empirical explorations of the actual practice of walking. Similarly, Cresswell has recently called for a politics of mobility and that the act of walking should also be considered as an embodied practice where the heterogeneity associated with different pedestrian experiences cannot be overlooked (Cresswell, 2010, p. 17). Reflecting on these concerns, this paper aims to situate and understand the practice of urban walking in the experiences of post-Second World War reconstruction of Birmingham by drawing on a series of oral history interviews with residents who lived and worked in the city during this time.

The focus on Birmingham is particularly significant in relation to debates surrounding modernity, mobility and pedestrian experiences: the city's officials led by the City Engineer and Surveyor, Herbert Manzoni, a powerful figure nationally and locally in his profession,<sup>1</sup> were called upon to reconfigure the city's transportation infrastructure in the interests of generating efficient circulation of vehicles, people, good and capital. In particular, the bold plan to route traffic away from the city centre along a new high-speed inner ring road resulted in the realignment of many old roads and the clearance of districts of traditional architecture in an effort to ensure that these types of flow were unhindered (Gold, 2007; Larkham, 2007). While progress towards rebuilding during the post-war years was initially slow, held back by national

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<sup>1</sup> Later Sir Herbert Manzoni CBE.

shortages of materials, labour and finance, the extent of the transformation of the city centre by the time of the celebratory opening of the inner ring road in 1971 was astonishing: Birmingham had been transformed by the early 1970s into a great “transatlantic city” known for its “gleaming new buildings ... its expressways ... its hustle and bustle and enterprise” which offered a tantalising “glimpse into the future” (Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974, p. 479; Foster, 2005). Although Birmingham’s approach to reconstruction has recently been criticized for “exemplifying the failures of utopian planning” and that the redevelopment resulted in a city centre not attuned to the existing spatial practices of city centre users (Parker and Long, 2004), the aim of this paper is to explore and the practice of everyday walking in the often ignored experiences of urban pedestrians who lived through this period of rebuilding which has left a legacy – both in physical and imaginative terms – with which residents, planners and policymakers are still trying to come to terms (Gold, 2007).

### **Post-war Birmingham and pedestrian movement**

Within the city centre, the deliberate decision, following Manzoni’s advice, was taken in the early 1940s not to proceed with an overall city centre post-war reconstruction plan (Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974). Even though there was no ‘fixed’ plan, it could be argued that the ideas, concepts and visions for the redevelopment of the city centre were underpinned by two key planning principles that attempted to secure a certain distance (in both space and time) from the pre-war city: firstly, the segregation of pedestrians and motorised traffic facilitated by the construction of the inner ring road and the recommendations for the development of pedestrianised precincts and secondly, the dedication of specific spaces for shopping, leisure and recreational land use (Adams, 2011).

In a city where the motor-car had been so pivotal in creating pre-war economic prosperity, it was unsurprising that Manzoni’s plans for the reconstruction of Birmingham included a network of new, car-friendly boulevards and ring roads. Here, the approach adopted in Birmingham connected with national considerations about the profligacy of cars sitting in continual traffic jams, as well as with continuing forebodings surrounding the number of road accidents that occurred before the outbreak of the Second World War (c.59,800 people were killed between 1930 and 1938 in Great Britain; see Tripp, 1938).

Proposals for a ring road had been mooted by the local politician and planning campaigner John Nettlefold as early as 1906 (Nettlefold, 1906) and the tentative plans for an inner ring road around the central business district drawn up around 1917-18 followed much the same line as that which was eventually planned in the early 1940s. These plans were closely allied to Manzoni’s schemes for rebuilding five central redevelopment areas that encircled the city and they were dependent on large-scale slum clearance to make room for the widened roads. Given that the ‘motor vehicle’ was fast becoming the ‘fundamental consideration of modern urban life’ (*Architect and Building News*, 1959, p. 480), Manzoni and his colleagues believed that the most appropriate way of reliving congestion was to ‘link up’ the thirteen arterial roads that formed a “kind of loop” around the city centre (Manzoni, 1968). A special Act was obtained in 1946 giving powers for the road’s construction and the compulsory acquisition of property.

Construction work began on the inner ring road in 1957 delayed by rationing and the poor national financial situation. The first section, originally called Smallbrook Ringway, was raised above natural ground level, and (in parts at least) car parks



were provided underneath the carriageway. The south side was designed by the local architect James Roberts as a slender office block with ground-floor shops and with its curves mirroring the speeding cars in the street below it (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the highway proposals in Manzoni's plan adapted the rationale that underpinned Tatton-Brown's plan for London by distinguishing between pedestrian traffic, local traffic and rapid highway traffic (Gold, 2007). Manzoni later explained that "traffic [with] no business in the city centre" was to be separated from vehicles which "*had* business within the centre", and that "ideally – pedestrians should not cross the carriageway of the ring road" (Manzoni, 1961, p. 268). He also suggested that there was seemingly little scope for inactive traffic or waiting cars along the route of the inner ring road:



Figure 1. Smallbrook Ringway: the first section of the inner ring road to be opened was lined by the Ringway Centre (photograph by Leslie Ginsberg, c.1960: Ginsberg collection, Birmingham City University archive).

"It should, I think, be pointed out that while part of the 8 feet strip will be used by omnibuses for the loading and unloading of passengers, the remainder will be for vehicles making temporary stops, for examples, for the setting down of passengers for short calls at shops. It has never been intended that this 8 feet strip should be provided for parking and we have always been very careful to refer to it as a waiting lane ... waiting vehicles could be restricted to a period of say twenty minutes" (Manzoni at a meeting with the Ministry of Transport, 1956, National Archives, MoT, 122 / 3).

The phasing and design of the ring road changed, as such, the close development of frontage buildings for commercial and retail use was dropped. This related to the Ministry of War Transport's preference that vehicular roads should be separated from pedestrian routes and that inner ring roads should not be fronted with "shops of types which attract crowds" of pedestrians (Ministry of War Transport, 1946, pp. 30-31).

This belief in the need to maintain flows of vehicular traffic also necessitated the construction of numerous flyovers and underpasses, adapting a particular variation of the multi-level arrangements for street intersections envisaged by Le Corbusier (Gold, 1998). For one key contemporary commentator, some of the mechanisms Birmingham used to grapple with traffic management were remarkably perceptive. Eight years after the publication of the hugely influential Buchanan Report on *Traffic in Towns* (Buchanan, 1963) its lead author, Colin Buchanan, commented on the ring road; believing that “for the drive, energy and the ability to find resources, it is an example to other towns” (Buchanan, cited in *Drive*, 1971). For others, however, the design of the ring road, and its impact on existing pedestrian movement, was viewed in a more critical fashion. The overall scheme was described by the contemporary commentator Aldous as “essentially an engineer’s strategy, first functional and only incidentally as an afterthought concerned with aesthetics or social fabric” (Aldous, 1975). In one of the most pointed missives, the architectural critic Leslie Ginsberg, Head of Birmingham School of Planning at the time, famously critically commented that

‘Unhappily this looks like being the greatest traffic and town design tragedy yet to afflict an English city. There does not appear to have been any real traffic survey, or assessment of future probable needs: only the most limited volumetric counts and the feeling that a new pipeline would somehow clear the other choked lines’ (Ginsberg, 1959, pp. 289-290).

Strident concerns over the segregation of people and traffic were levelled by two other contemporary critics: John Tetlow, a consultant architect and planner and the then Chairman of the Advisory Committee of Birmingham School of Planning and Anthony Goss, a former senior lecturer at Birmingham School of Architecture. They caustically suggested that the ‘pedestrian is treated like a second-class citizen, driven down steps and ramps into subterranean passages ... [i]t does not yet appear to have been understood in Birmingham that there is more to redesigning its city centre than keeping traffic moving’. In essence, the underlying belief was that these massive new roads were not designed because of their capacity to open up vistas in the town (a consideration for some planners in other towns, such as Thomas Sharp in Salisbury), but rather to create more efficient traffic flows (Larkham and Pendlebury, 2008). Seen from this perspective, it could be argued that the practice of walking as envisaged by Manzoni and other key local government officials was positioned as a functional mode of transport and essentialised as an instrumental activity.

Away from the ring road, there was also a desire to create slower spaces where pedestrian movement could flourish. These ideas were expressed in the opinion of the then City Architect, Sheppard Fidler, who forcibly argued against new buildings lining main fast-flowing thoroughfares (including the inner ring road) and instead recommended building pedestrian precincts. These ideas can be clearly seen in Fidler’s 1958 campus-style masterplan for the moribund Civic Centre (which included a proposed new central library). The design of the Civic Centre was underpinned by a belief that shopping could be a leisured activity, replete with verdant, open spaces removed from the flowing traffic of the ring road (Foster, 2005). However, by 1965 Fidler’s masterplan was out of favour, superseded by a much revised plan by his replacement, J.R. Sheridan-Shedden, and local architect John Madin. By this time the new central library had taken virtually its final form. Madin had an original vision of a building faced in travertine marble, set in landscaped gardens with fountains and waterfalls – this never materialized. This approach to the Civic Centre area marked the beginning of a trend towards ‘precinct’ design, one which sought to accommodate

a leisured and 'time-rich' pedestrian shopper. With the exception of the investigation of the post-war reconstruction of Coventry by Hubbard and Lilley (2004), sustained work that empirically examines the practice of walking itself within Modernist urban environments is, perhaps, underdeveloped in the history of planning and architecture. The remaining sections of the paper weave together an interpretation of the planners' representations of the city with oral history narratives as a way of exploring the mobilities that were inherent in residents' experiences of Birmingham's reconstruction.

## Research context and methods

Concerns with slower perambulations are, of course, strongly associated with writings in urban and social theory; and walking features heavily as a form of engagement with the urban public realm and the explorations of people's sense of place (see, for example, Benjamin, 1983; Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1960). More recently, Pinder (2001) has critically explored some of the contemporary fascinations with '*flâneurial*' experiences of urban walking, as typified by writers and artists such as Ian Sinclair and Janet Cardiff. The French poet Baudelaire is credited with providing perhaps the first portrayal of the *flâneur* in his celebrated essay of 1863, *The Painter of Modern Life*; however, Benjamin – in *The Arcades Project* – was to provide a more thorough description of the urban 'wanderer' and his experiences of the Haussmann-inspired reconstructed nineteenth-century Paris, a treatise that was to cement Benjamin's position as the 'patron saint of cultural studies' (Solnit, 2000, p. 198).

There is also a strong association between these ideas and the psychogeographical accounts of the city developed by the *Situationist* movement during the mid-twentieth century (see Debord, 1967; Pinder, 1996); whereby the physical act of 'drifting' around and through the city was one way in which citizens could disrupt the homogenising effects of planned urban space (Pinder 1996). Although heavily criticised by feminists (see, for example, Scalway, 2006; Simonsen, 2004) for being inherently a masculine idea, '*flâneurial*' or peripatetic movements make it possible to read and understand cities and these notions have been invoked by a number of authors and artists as a means of engaging with the city (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Phillips, 2005; Pinder, 2001; Rendell, 2006). Despite the renewed interest in urban wanderings – as typified by the work of Ian Sinclair and others, some authors have been particularly critical of the concept of pedestrian movement as a means of understanding the city (Macauley, 2000). Amin and Thrift (2002, p. 11) question the 'poetic sensibility' attached to these writings is overtly theoretical and almost impossible to distil as a methodology for urban research (see also Emmison and Smith, 2000).

There is little in the work of those theorists, such as de Certeau (1984), that engages with the people that walked and their routines, habitual and daily pedestrian experiences in post-war cities. And yet, seeking to unearth the ways in which plans and the actual built infrastructure alter the experiences, routines and movements in everyday city life is a subtle and intricate task and, as is well documented elsewhere, exploring the manner in which individuals engaged with elements of reconstructed cities is burdened by clear limitations (cf. Gold, 1998, 2007; Hubbard and Lilley, 2004). Although there have been some recent illuminating 'performative' methodological explorations into how people interact with planned urban environments (see, for example, Spinney, 2009, 2010, on cycling), Letherby *et al.* (2010) have raised specific concerns over the extent to which some of these mobile

methods are being positioned as an original way of 'tapping in' to a more authentic experience. In an attempt to address some of these criticisms, Middleton's work which brings detailed interview material into conversation with research on the effectiveness of contemporary transport policy, perhaps provides the clearest exploration of specific experiences of the practice of walking in the city (Middleton, 2009, 2010, 2011). In-depth interviews therefore provide a valuable resource for understanding pedestrian movement to be framed and discussed within a specific context, and they have the potential to make visible how participants themselves made sense of their mobile practices on foot and the meanings that emerged (Bissell and Fuller, 2011). The obvious difficulty here is one of retrospection; for example, many of the respondents reflected nostalgically on a changed city so substantially different to that which they experienced during their childhood or teenage years.

Despite these limitations, and following the approach developed by Riley and Harvey (2007) in their exploration of the geographies of farming cultures using oral history narratives, this research adopted a biographical and reflexive method to interpretation. In this sense, the interviews moved beyond the use of semi-structured interviews towards an approach which elicited more conversational narratives to explore "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they think they did" (Portelli, 1981, pp. 99-100). The interviews themselves therefore offered a space to conduct a reflective analysis and they investigated general issues concerning an individual's feelings about the changing urban landscape during the 1950s, 1960s and the early 1970s. In relation to this paper, it is particularly interesting to focus on the opinions that people expressed about their shifting walking practices and routines (how they got to work, how they went shopping, how they spent their leisure time, and so on).

These interviewees were recruited through an appeal to local history groups, a website appeal, and through a poster display in the city's central library. Fifteen interviews (averaging forty minutes) were conducted between October 2007 and April 2008 with residents who had lived and worked in the city during the post-war period. Three group interviews formed part of the research methodology and, in total, twenty-two people agreed to take part in the project.<sup>2</sup> As well as talking to local people who remembered Birmingham in the post-war years, attention was focused on gathering contemporary written accounts. These came mainly through letters written to local newspapers, especially *The Birmingham Mail* and *The Birmingham Post*.

## **Experiences of walking in the reconstructed city**

### **Pedestrian mobilities and vehicular traffic**

Whilst the separation of people and traffic along the line of the inner ring road was designed to allow for more efficient traffic flows, some residents perceived that the patterns of flow imagined by the planners and highway engineers actually interrupted existing pedestrian routines in unanticipated ways. For example, by 1969 when the ring road was nearing completion, several letters submitted to the *Birmingham Mail* suggested that there was a degree of dissatisfaction at the way in which established pedestrian practices were radically altered:

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<sup>2</sup> In the following text, to protect individual anonymity, respondents are identified solely by first names and dates of birth (as respondents' ages may indicate something of their engagement with the city and the reconstruction at the time).

“When the city [centre] was being ‘designed’ (??), I would have thought the traffic should have gone underneath, with many car parks, leading off the roads, then the pedestrian could have walked freely across streets from shop to shop with NO STEPS and no unnecessary miles of detours” (Wilkin, 1969).

‘[T]he railings round the roads I deplore; they make one feel herded. The underpasses should never have been made for pedestrians. The planners should have put all traffic underneath, and with people able to wander everywhere, it would be heaven to shop ... I hate going in to shop [I just] get out of the centre as fast as I can’ (Andrews, 1969).

In a similar way, during the interviews, one resident of north Birmingham recalled his frustration with negotiating the inner ring road, which distorted his daily routine of walking to reach his place of work in Digbeth (south of the Bull Ring):

“When you were young, well, it was easy to get through [in the 1950s]; you could cut through all of the back streets and it didn’t seem so far at all and it didn’t seem to take long at all [to reach the city centre]. To me, it was either under or over. It seemed to take much longer ... afterwards... in the mid-60s” (oral history interview, Thomas, born 1942).

In this regard, Thomas’s attentiveness to how his routine was ‘temporally’ disturbed reveals something about his physical relationship with an element of the reconstructed built form (Middleton, 2010). Maureen, a resident who lived in the centre of Birmingham, suggested that the seemingly mundane act of trying to cross the inner ring road during the 1960s caused a certain alteration in how she interacted with this aspect of the built form, which subsequently meant that she had to change her route in to the city core:

“I thought actually the part around Smallbrook was good with the ground floor shops. Further round [the ring road], again, when I tried to walk, it cut off Suffolk Street and all around there. You didn’t see people walking across there except to go to the theatre. It [the ring road] did cut off a lot of the shops ... . I found my own way around it in the end; it was just too much bother to get over there” (oral history interview, Maureen, born 1934).

Maureen’s recollection can be understood in respect to how her walking practices were shaped by the spatial constraints imposed by the Suffolk Street section of the inner ring road. For example, her memory of how “it cut off Suffolk Street” proved to be particularly problematic; especially when she was eager to proceed to the shops. The means by which Maureen negotiated her ‘path’ meant that she learnt how she avoided this route choosing instead to find a more ‘suitable’ way to walk to the shops. Maureen’s consideration of how she “found her own way in the end” is suggestive of how she became more spatially aware of negotiating the new environment and this also begins to highlight the complexity associated with how paths were formed in the post-war city (Massey, 2005). Any concerns for existing pedestrian routines were seemingly overridden by the City Council’s seemingly prevailing belief that the ring road would ensure the unconstrained circulation of vehicular traffic, thus helping to boost the city’s post-war economic prospects:

‘Industry in and around Birmingham was very much interdependent; for instance, many small firms in the city centre manufactured components for assembly in factories on the outskirts. ... Joseph Lucas’ twelve factories employed 300 vehicles on transport within the city. The average time for a

cross-city journey of 5 miles was 30 minutes and an increase in their average speed from 10 m.p.h. to 12 m.p.h. would save £20, 000 a year. On this basis the saving of such an increase in speed to the total of 28,000 goods vehicles would be of the order of £2 million a year' 21<sup>st</sup> (unpublished notes of Minister of Transport's meeting with deputation from Birmingham City Council, 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1956).

In an interesting inversion of this position, and despite the City Council's suggestion that pedestrians should avoid traversing the ring road, Peter, who was working at the City Council during the late 1960s and early 1970s, recalled how he and his colleagues regularly used the perimeter of the newly-completed road as a means of facilitating forms of *pedestrian* movement.

"[The ring road] did help in that [people] could walk around on the outside ... but it was a big help if you were working like I was in Broad Street and I had got to go down to Snow Hill Station, I could walk down the side of the ring road. So [it] became [a] way to get around for pedestrians. [It was] very much used by commuters in that way to get into offices and that" (oral history interview, Peter, born 1931).

### Spaces for leisured activities

Burgeoning 'modern' ideas surrounding the coalescence between shopping and leisure, free from the dangers of traffic, were most evident when we consider the site for the Bull Ring Shopping Centre (Figure 2). The City Council planned complete rebuilding of the area after the bombing raids of 1940 had destroyed some of the surrounding buildings, and most notably caused significant damage to the historic Market Hall. By 1958, however, the Council had to accommodate the Ministry of Transport's preference for separation of roads from pedestrian routes (see Larkham, 2007).

Ideas surrounding how leisurely pedestrian perambulations were certainly weaved in to the promotional literature accompanying the opening of the Bull Ring Shopping Centre where the centre was to be promoted as being 'the most advanced shopping area in the world' and when it opened its doors towards the end of 1964 the centre promised 'complete segregation of pedestrians and traffic' (*Birmingham Mail*, 28 May 1964). The advantages of how shopping could be a leisured and comfortable experience for city centre users were explained by the developers, the Laing Development Company:

'The Bull Ring Centre project offers a new concept of city centre shopping designed to afford complete shopping comfort in an air-conditioned atmosphere. ... Facilities will be provided for entertainment and recreation so that the scheme will become an attraction at all times' (Laing Development Company, 1964).

Consistent with emerging ideas in retail planning, it was argued that the centre was also intended to fulfil the 'sociological requirement of shopping' where people were encouraged to 'wander about, to cross from shop to shop, to enjoy the variety of display, and to feel part of the shopping area (Burns, 1959, p. 73). For some respondents, the creation of the Bull Ring Centre did generate more 'leisurely' experiences. Steven, for example, recounted how he would often use his lunch hour to stroll from his office in the city centre to the Bull Ring and sit and 'mingle' in the

Manzoni gardens. Here he explained how he constituted the experience of the shopping centre as having the capacity to make him feel more relaxed:

“[The Bull Ring Centre] was somewhere to go and it was exciting and you’d go and you have er a coffee in the coffee bar there. [And] when I was working there in ’65, ’66 and ’67, working at Lewis’s erm you’d go in your lunch break, everybody would go down there. You got a sandwich, [and] in the summer you would sit in [Manzoni] gardens [and] watch the world go by and in the winter you’d sit inside the Bull Ring out of the weather and you may do a bit of shopping you know” (oral history interview, Steven, born 1949).



Figure 2. Aerial perspective of the Bull Ring (artist unknown) (Laing Development Company, c.1964, reproduced with permission).

Shoppers embarking on shopping expeditions were able to ‘remain under cover at all times while they shop in the heated air-conditioned concourses and malls and the general retail, fish and meat markets’ (*Birmingham Post*, 29 May 1964). Several respondents certainly felt that the location of the shops in an undercover environment was a good idea because it did, indeed, make their excursions into the city more convenient:

“You [could] walk straight through the double doors into basically the main part of the Bull Ring Centre; the centre par with all the escalators and from there of course you could go up and out into the [markets], or stay in there in the shopping side ... . It was certainly a more efficient way to shop – you could be in and out in a relatively short space of time - so you could walk into that and out into the Centre without being in the open air basically” (oral history

interview, Peter, born 1931).

It is also interesting to note that, in some ways, Peter was far from being the leisurely shopper envisaged by the planners: although able to access the shopping centre by car, several of the (male) respondents suggested that they neither had the desire nor the time to stay indoors for long periods. In his reference to the time-saving attributes associated with the shopping centre, it could be argued that Peter's narrative is evocative of how time dedicated to shopping was considered to be a resource not to be wasted (Thrift, 1977). Viewed through this particular lens of temporality, other intriguing issues begin to emerge: perhaps most notably, some of the female respondents – especially given the dominant gender roles of the period – were keen to stress that the undercover centre ensured that their shopping expeditions were more time-efficient. This was something generally remembered by those who were more likely to take children into town with them on their own:

“It was sort of er ... you could start at one point [of the Centre] walk all the way through and come out wherever and there was no need to come all the way back again and retrace your steps. You could just do your shopping and just get out!” (oral history interview, Sheila, born 1932).

It is by exposing these narratives that we can start to unearth some of the multivalent temporalities associated with the experiences in walking in post-war Birmingham, something that is explored below. The above recollections also begin to question spatial and temporal assumptions that were inherent in the planners' and architects' conception of the Bull Ring Centre as being a leisured space where shoppers were expected to 'wine and dine without setting foot outside' (*Daily Telegraph*, 28 May 1964).

### Legacies of the past, and altered routines

Critical reflections of the Bull Ring area have been brought into sharper focus since the more recent wave of redevelopment that has occurred in the area during the early 2000s. In fact, a general feeling of dissonance between the planners' notion of space and the residents' experiences of the Bull Ring area during the post-war period has been unearthed in more recent media coverage (Parker and Long, 2000). For example, commenting on the opening of the futuristic Selfridges department store (on the site of the 1964 Bull Ring Shopping Centre), several letters to the *Birmingham Evening Mail* raised serious concerns over whether the planners and architects, in their collective attempts to re-cast the city's identity as being progressive and cosmopolitan, were about to repeat the same 'mistakes' of the 1960s (Parker and Long, 2004).

Hammerson's redevelopment of the Bull Ring (as 'Bullring') was completed in 2003. The intention behind this project was to revitalize inner city retailing after a decade in which developers focused investment on out-of-town sites such as Merry Hill in neighbouring Dudley (Spring, 2003). One of Birmingham City Council's key objectives was to redress this balance, and more importantly, to stem the flow of shoppers and the associated economic benefits from travelling out of the city.





Figure 3. The new redeveloped “Bullring”, completed 2003  
(author’s photograph)

The arrival of the inner ring road in the early 1960s enforced separation of parts of the city, both physically and perceptually. Before this happened, the Bull Ring was part of the city centre; pedestrians walked down the hill from New Street and High Street into the market area. In an effort to revert back to this situation, one of the key facets of the latest redevelopment was the closure of a section of the inner ring road (the Queensway) at St. Martin’s Circus, linking New Street Station and Moor Street Station by a bus-and-taxi-only road, thus ensuring that pedestrians can now cross at surface level. Additionally, part of the appeal of this development is that pedestrians can now walk to and from the surrounding streets without having to negotiate any steps, traffic-dominated roads or other barrier to get to the shops. This appears to work in practice: one female respondent (who regularly catches the train into Birmingham New Street) recalled:

“Because you come, go in one side [from Smallbrook Queensway], like go into the Bullring shopping centre, go through Debenhams, come out the other side [and] you’re at the market area, that’s because I like, the way I like it because it is very similar to how I remembered it years ago during the 1950s, when it was just a direct line from point A to point B – get what you want and go home” (oral history interview, Sheila born 1932).

For this person, the aspirations of the planners to make the centre more legible and to save consumers time has been successful. Others, however, clearly find shopping expeditions more time-consuming: one respondent recalled that before the latest development, her regular routine during the 1990s involved catching the bus into town, do her daily shop and catch a bus home again, whereas the same journey after the opening of the Bullring in 2003 became a ‘major expedition’:

"I find it very confusing. Even now [after several years since the opening of the Bullring] I can walk in there and I can't find nothing. It really confuses me when I walk in there. You see, we don't know where anything is – we always go through the one entrance where the [statue of the] bull is and we'll say 'now, where do I want to go?'... we don't know where anything is... it takes so much longer" (oral history interview, CW, female, born 1958).

This sense of confusion is further underlined when we consider the reconfiguration of the inner ring road. The connectivity of the inner ring has been broken at the Bullring – indeed, only cyclists, buses and taxis are allowed to take the service road under the new shopping centre which connects the parts of this road. This is one component of a policy of trying to encourage a more 'sustainable' approach to transport, with part of the inner ring at the back of the Bullring having been transformed into a 'bus mall' to service the new shopping centre. The new bus mall in particular, had a particularly troubled opening, resulting in the then Birmingham City Council leader Sir Albert Bore commenting that the 'outstanding success of the Bullring has put an unexpected demand on what was intended to be a solution to keeping traffic flowing' (*Birmingham Post*, 28 October 2003). Claude, for example, recalled his annoyance with the alteration of the inner ring road:

"They need to do something about it, the [buses] just can't get into their places, it's just chaotic. They've got to move them buses around somewhere ... and then you've got lights at the top [at junction of New Street and Queensway] which seem to be more on than off you know and lights at the bottom. That's chaotic that is. Around about half past nine in the week – it's really snarled up – you just can't get around ... it takes ages to walk over there!" (oral history interview, Claude, born 1935).

This reminds us that planning can never increase the speed of the city in all respects; acceleration is after all, necessarily accompanied by a relative deceleration (Verilio, 1986). As Amin and Thrift (2002, p. 43) contend that the contemporary city is 'unprecedentedly based on mobility, and, moreover, a mobility that seems to increase year on year', they note elsewhere that modernisation creates speed *and* slowness. To some extent, these 'grounded' narratives begin to capture the changing experiences of (relative) speed and slowness.

## Conclusion

While there is a substantial literature that suggests both triumphant and disapproving accounts of the acceleration of urban life, the real challenge for researchers is to explore the kinds of mobilities that have shaped and that continue to shape western cities (Cresswell, 2010). In contrast to some of the more abstract theories of urban walking within much academic writing, this paper has sought to explore pedestrian movement in the context of the experiences of those who navigated their way through elements of reconstructed Birmingham: a perspective that has been seemingly been lost in many 'traditional' accounts that have captured the city's redevelopment (Adams, 2011). The paper's broader contribution lies in engaging with, and uncovering the oral history narratives, as a means of examining these often neglected experiences of urban pedestrians and it can be argued that it is these understandings that need to be considered by contemporary pedestrian policymakers if they are to comprehend the dynamics of the period that brought unprecedented change to the city – and left a legacy with which residents *and* planners are still trying to come to terms (Gold, 2007). It also acknowledged that certain practical and

theoretical challenges associated with embedding these types of narrative into public policy especially given the generalising parameters within which policymakers have to work (Middleton, 2010).

The research presented in this paper also demonstrates the importance of gathering data on the experiential dimensions of walking that brings in to focus a range of issues surrounding people's pedestrian experiences and the emergent spatio-temporal patterns of walking in a modernising city. Most fundamentally, perhaps, the narratives of local people who lived through the rebuilding exposes the complex topology of time-space revealing that it is not the product of a linear, singular, or predictable process of change (Latham and McCormack, 2008). Rather, the 'grounded' spatial practices and knowledges of residents sought to channel energies of the city in particular spatial and temporal directions (Hubbard and Lilley, 2004). More specifically, perhaps, the oral history stories exploring the connection between walking and body not only demonstrate how pedestrian experiences were mediated through the interaction with the built environment.

Finally, the use of oral history has the potential to provide another point of access into the shaping and making of urban space, and methodologies that can assist in acquiring a deeper understanding of urban walking practices and the interconnections between people, memories of place and the built form, are crucial to contemporary planners and policymakers. It is only by acknowledging the significance of pedestrians' embodied experience that future planners' will generate a more nuanced understanding of how walking can be further encouraged.

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