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REVIEW 

The Mancunian Way

The Alchemy of Concrete

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About the Urbis Research Forum

Introduced in the summer of 2009, the Urbis Research Forum seeks to provide an informal space for discussions exploring urban issues. The forum brings together people who live in cities, people who work trying to design, manage and improve them and people who study or analyse them.

The forum is also a space to encourage dialogue on the past, present and future of Greater Manchester.

Forum activities include talks, walks, roundtable discussions and special events. The proceedings are published online through the *Urbis Research Forum Review*.

The Urbis Research Forum is run by a steering group including staff from Urbis, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester.

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From the Editor

The Mancunian Way. 2 miles of award-winning concrete, an elevated motorway and a classic example of post-war architecture. Yet the Mancunian Way is much more than an urban motorway, more than a functional passage through the city. The very name of the motorway links us to a certain local esteem, city vision and culture. Its importance rests not only in the structure itself, but also in the spaces that surround it and the people and places that are shaped by it. Its successes and problems are a reflection of the modernist vision.

What follows is the proceedings of *The Mancunian Way: The Alchemy of Concrete*, a session of the Urbis Research Forum held on 26 August, 2009. Together the articles draw out the layered experience of the Mancunian Way and an often derided architectural style.

In his article, *The Alchemy of Concrete: Towards an Imaginative Geography of the Mancunian Way*, Julian Holloway presents the motorway as holding imaginative potential, where stories and creativity can emerge drawing on both its rational and spiritual meanings.

Maureen Ward provides an account of the easily forgotten Brunswick Estate. In her article *The Everyday Life of the Mancunian Way: An Exploration of the Mundane* Maureen offers insight into a community physically and culturally shaped by the motorway.

This is the first edition of the Urbis Research Forum Review.

Enjoy!



The Alchemy of Concrete: Towards an Imaginative Geography of the Mancunian Way

Julian Holloway

Introduction

Concrete has a significant duration. Combine this with the unlikelihood of the Mancunian Way being radically altered or obliterated in the foreseeable future and it seems as if this road is here to stay. If this is the case then, it seems imperative that we think about how we can live with it beyond the mundanity and banality of the daily commute, the traffic jams and the pollution (noise and atmospheric). Therefore, does this concrete structure, which is woven into so many people's everyday lives, have the potential to be something else? Can we live with the Mancunian Way differently? Can we transform it, at least symbolically or through narrative, into something different - even if this is only a temporary shift in our habitual co-existence with such a thoroughfare? My aim here is therefore to suggest a few ways in which we can reappraise or renovate this road into something more magical and less mundane. What I endeavour to achieve here involves using the things we find around the motorway as sort of springboard for an imaginative geography of the Mancunian Way such that its concrete becomes a little more mysterious and magical. In tandem I want to trace some of the experiences of walking next to and under a motorway such that we can make what seems a series of dead spaces live a little.

Walking with/near/next to a motorway

So what is it like to walk near, around and even on a motorway? The first response to this is quite obvious: the experience of walking a motorway is a radically different one to driving it. Elevated motorways were designed for the efficiency of moving people, cars and goods. Yet they also give people a different spatial experience of cities - one of speed, of particular elevated vantage points and a

specific visuality. Susan Robertson in her paper on the Westway in London talks of this visual mode as a cinematic one. Similar to the Mancunian Way, being on the road in the car you get:

... a melting of one scene into another, one view disappearing before another one is set up, echoes and hints at of past and future views, sudden transitions and connecting links.⁽¹⁾

This cinematic experience could be said to be similar for all motorways, although the dynamics of the mobile *mise-en-scène* will vary from road to road. What makes the elevated motorway different is that height gives you a vantage point to look out over the city. Clearly this only really given to passengers in the car - drivers have too much else to concentrate on to really take full advantage of this aerial view. I've had this pleasure a number of times, this sense of transient visual mastery over all we travel, because I've only been a passenger on the Mancunian Way - I don't know how to drive.

Elevated motorways were meant to symbolise the pure clean path of traffic flow and circulation over and above the dense city. The modernist dream was to clear the messy nature of cities and replace it with rational and efficient paths of circulation. Yet it seems that the shortness of the Mancunian Way only allows this experience to be relatively temporary and limited: the driver and passenger are soon returned to the dense and complicated nature of city life. The limits to this modernist project are clearly symbolised by the unfinished spur - it literally is a spur to nowhere (figure 1). The dream of pure and efficient flow seems to go nowhere like the spur. The sense of take-off into a bright new future when you hit the elevated section is

cancelled out by the impotency of the spur to nowhere. Did the modernist dreams of purity, rationalism and efficiency come to an end with the spur to nowhere?



Figure 1. *The Spur to Nowhere*

I would argue that to walk around, with and next to a motorway like the Mancunian way is certainly to do something different to these modernist dreams of circulation and rational planning. Certainly the sensual aspect of walking is different to that of the car. This is not to say that driving or being driven is not an activity full of sensations – Tim Edensor has shown that driving on a motorway is a very much a sensuous activity.⁽²⁾

The sensations of walking with a motorway will no doubt be different for each individual, yet some commonalities can be traced. Initially most striking is the aural: the different levels of sound are remarkable on walking with the Mancunian Way. The rush of the traffic and the rumbles overhead are accompanied with drops in the noise level as you enter the subways and the underpasses. The sound is qualitatively more intense as you go over the Hulme footbridge, but then proceeds to encircle you in an almost hushed drone as you stand in the middle of the sunken pedestrian roundabouts. Other sounds can combine into a discernable urban soundtrack when the

clatter and clump of the skate-park adds a backbeat to the monotonous swoosh of the road above. Then there is the memory of sounds, only recoverable if you wish to make the effort, that fade away as you drift through the acoustic footprint of the road.

Walking also gives rise to a series of sensations from the textures underfoot. Most obviously are the differences as you move from pavement and road, with their harsh affordance, to the occasional and more forgiving sponginess of grass. Yet along the way these sensations are accompanied by the odd crunch of discarded car parts – such as indicator lights and various bits of bumper. On rainy days, when the infamous and crushingly regular Mancunian drizzle interjects, textures beneath the feet change again: on such days movement becomes more treacherous as oil and petrol fumes condense and mix with rain to make walking akin to skating.

Walking with a motorway, with all its concomitant sensations, arguably represents the flipside to the dreams of purity of modernist planning regimes. This is not to say that walking in and of itself is some resistant strategy to the projections of modernism, but to walk certain places can add something different to what they were intended for. This becomes clear and apparent when one comes face to face with the physical barriers that stop mobility on foot. Some bits of the Mancunian Way are simply not accessible. There is health and safety involved here, but these barriers become symbolic of the desire to move away from circulation by foot to the smooth stream of traffic. Motorways like the Mancunian Way are not meant for human bodies.

Nevertheless on occasion the road itself does become a place for bodies: once a year the road is closed for its annual spring clean. Yet the only bodies allowed on it during this time are certain legitimised and legitimate persons - although tales of other less official bodies and loiterers inhabiting the road at these times abound. And there are those times when subversive types like the Reclaim the Streets movement seek to occupy the road

like they did in 1999. Less anarchically, the road becomes a place for bodies when the protective cocoon of the car breaks down and fails in its securing containment and the lone driver is forced to realise there is no hard shoulder as they venture forth to seek the cause of their malaise. On such occasions the road becomes, albeit temporarily, something different.

It is the underpasses that are meant as social spaces where bodies might gather. Indeed, in the past they have been. But it seems that the realisation of that vision has never been fully achieved. Perhaps then with others we might realise them as a spaces to gather. Perhaps we might make these spaces into little oases where we, in Joe Moran's words, could "bask together in the road's bountiful shade".⁽³⁾ Perhaps we can transform these mostly dead spaces into places to gather and live – surely then Manchester's post-war planners would be happy with us?

Alchemical Connections

The second way to shift our co-existence with the motorway, to transform its meanings and perhaps even its presence, is to let it act as the basis for connecting ideas. After all, motorways are all about connection and circulation. The Mancunian Way was originally built to connect two sides of the city centre in order to let goods and people move more freely. What happens then if we take this idea of connection and do something else with it? What sorts of stories emerge?

There are many connections to be made and stories to conjure. Making stories out of and tracing connections between places and their different histories, particularly in cities, has become of late something of a professional pastime, but everyone can and should do it: urban imaginaries and storytelling should not be the preserve or right of some literary elite. Some of these stories will be as useful as the spur to nowhere is for traffic circulation in Manchester, but some might just throw up interesting connections. Some of the

connections we make might seem fanciful and obscure, but part of storytelling is to be playful. Some might allow imaginative geographies to be summoned that make our everyday interactions with spaces and places somehow different. Perhaps these connections might even make the places we live and dwell in magical. At the very least I hope that the metaphors that arise from these connections are useful in thinking about and appraising the place of the Mancunian Way in our landscape and our social consciousness – something the following hopes to attain.

On a previous trip around the Mancunian Way, as we went through the UMIST part of the University of Manchester campus, my colleague Steve Millington told me of Newton's tree. I'd never seen or heard of this. Hidden away in the grounds of UMIST is a small plaque stating (figure 2):

The three apple trees (Flower of Kent) in this bed are scions of the tree at Grantham under which Sir Isaac Newton is reputed to have conceived his Theory of Gravitation.



Figure 2. Newton's Apple Tree

Sir Isaac Newton famously came to a revelation about gravity when an apple fell from a tree. William Stukeley, Newton's first biographer stated: "when formerly, the notion of gravitation came into his mind. It was occasioned by the fall of an apple, as he sat in contemplative mood".⁽⁴⁾ It seems that the location of the actual tree where this world

changing revelation occurred is much contested - King's School in Grantham claims the location as does Woolsthorpe Manor in Lincolnshire, the birthplace and family home of Newton.

Newton's work on gravity and his discoveries on the refraction of light are not my concern or interest here. The first thing I thought, the first connection summoned, upon discovery of these trees was alchemy. Sir Isaac Newton was an alchemist – he wrote around 1.2 million words on alchemy and he corresponded with John Locke and Robert Boyle on the subject. Most of Newton's writings on alchemy only exist in manuscript form – they were rediscovered by John Maynard Keynes when he bought them in 1936 at Sotheby's. Indeed, Keynes stated that Newton "was not the first of the age of reason: he was the last of the magicians".⁽⁵⁾ It does seem strange that someone who is often labelled as one of the founders of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution would dabble in the strange and occult world of alchemy – but it is indeed so.

It would be impossible for me to fully describe what alchemy is or was here. Many people know it as the attempt to turn base metals into gold. To do this the alchemist sought a mysterious substance that would perform this transmutation. This substance was known as the Philosopher's Stone. But alchemy was much more than an attempt to produce gold. It was a spiritual discipline where the goal was harmony with the divine and spiritual. Alchemy was a practice to achieve spiritual enlightenment or mystical ascendance. The 'Great Work' as it became known was an attempt to unite the body and the soul. The Philosopher's Stone or Elixir of life would bestow this unification or transmutation and lead to spiritual growth and prolong life. The Philosopher's stone was the agent of change in nature.

Thinking about the Mancunian Way and alchemy I started making different connections between the two. These are meant to be

playful links – I am not suggesting that the Mancunian Way can be seen as some alchemical project with occult significance. Thus I am not suggesting there was some occult conspiracy to enslave the population of Manchester. What I am suggesting is that through making these playful connections one might actually say something meaningful about the place and significance of the Mancunian Way in this city. So what sort of playful and imagined connections can we make between the Mancunian Way and alchemy?

One of the key aspects of the Mancunian Way in its planning, design and implementation was a focus on circulation. Links can be made here with Alchemists and alchemical ideas. Firstly, one of the greatest alchemists Paracelsus (also known as Theophrastus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim) discovered the circulation of the blood a good century before it was 'officially' recognised by William Harvey in 1628. Second, images of the circulation and in particular cyclical nature abound in alchemy and mysticism. The Great Work of alchemy was a circular one, working with the cyclicity of nature. The most often used symbol for this was the Ouroboros - the dragon or snake eating its own tail. It became a symbol of the Great Work in that it represented infinity and wholeness, and thus a symbol of the mystical union of opposites, the soul and the body – also known as the chymical wedding or the final stage of alchemy, the rubedo. The purity achieved with the chymical wedding of alchemy is arguably reflected in the purity of flow and circulation of the Mancunian Way. For the alchemist the achievement of harmony could take a lifetime to complete. For Manchester the Ouroboros of the inner ring road took 39 years – 1965 until 2004 – so roughly half a lifetime (see figure 3).

The concept of bringing opposing forces together in union is at the heart of alchemy. Alchemical texts abound with the union of opposites: the sun and the moon, light and dark, and male and female. This is why the hermaphrodite is such a central and often

repeated symbol in alchemy. The Mancunian Way won the Concrete Society award in 1968. According to Joe Moran the Concrete Society motto is 'Concreti Corroboramus' – "having come together we strengthen". Was the award then a signal that Manchester had achieved the Great Work by using base matter in a mixture to realise the unity of urban rationality and urban chaos? Had the Mancunian Way achieved some form of urban unity with the building of the road that the Concrete Society recognised?



Figure 3. The Manchester Oroboros

Third, can we liken the engagement with matter (dark stuff) in alchemy to the engagement with concrete? Alchemy was a process. Through working on different materials and substances, the alchemist was working on the self. In other words, the search for the mysterious substance that allowed transmutation was a work of transformation. In transforming matter the alchemist was transforming themselves. With reference to concrete, Adrian Forty, Professor of Architectural History at UCL states:

...despite what the cement manufacturing industry would have us believe, truly speaking, concrete is not a material at all, but a process. If we think of it as a process, it becomes easier to recognise that of all the ingredients of concrete, the most important and the most decisive for the final result is labour.⁽⁶⁾

Perhaps then the labour involved in alchemy can be likened to labour of concrete. The process of the Great Work finds echoes in the process of building motorways. The attempt at unity and purity with the divine finds resonance in the purity and rationality of more secular perfection. The alchemist worked on materials to achieve individual perfection. Planners of the 50s and 60s worked on materials to achieve a social perfection – they were alchemists of concrete.

Finally, one of the central maxims of alchemy, and indeed many mystical and hermetic traditions was 'as above, so below'. This phrase comes from one of the founding texts of alchemy and magical practice *The Emerald Tablet* by Hermes Trismegistus. This text was translated by Newton: his version was 'That which is below is like that which is above, that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing.' At its simplest this means that what happens on any level happens on every other level; everything in the macrocosm happens in the microcosm and vice-versa. The Manchester Evening News dubbed the Mancunian Way 'The Highway in the Sky'. The modernist dream of efficiency and rational planning was to be realised in this elevated motorway away from the chaos of the old city. So are there echoes of the modernist vision of purity and mobility in the alchemist desire for divine perfection? Were the modernists laying down a blueprint in the Sky, as above, that would translate to the ground, so below? The 1945 development plan for Manchester was written with the hope that the road would be part of the beginning of a new age for the people of Manchester and the human race in a wider sense. The social perfection and harmony envisioned by rational planning can be arguably seen as an echo of the alchemist's desire for spiritual perfection. One way in which we might see rational post-war planning is as a secular version of the Great Art.

Conclusion

So to conclude, the Mancunian Way was part of a utopic vision for a city in the sky, where traffic would flow easily and life would be composed of smooth and clean lines away from the messiness of the city in its unplanned form. These meta-narratives seem curious relics of the past in today's society and culture: all we have left are traces, in concrete and words, of these grand visions. I have little reverence for the totalities that seek to eradicate messiness and chaos from the urban. The Mancunian Way succeeded in separating individuals in their cars from the communities that it courses through. This is no good thing. Yet I cannot but yearn for at least a reinvigoration of the municipal and civic pride that coursed through these visions, even if their outcomes were often less than satisfactory. Left to private finance initiatives and organisations with little other vision than profit and the contentment of business, a sense of planning for the collective good and public pleasure is hard to find (perhaps places like Urbis are the only remaining vestiges of this). It is significant therefore that the plaque for Newton's tree bears little resemblance to the actual garden: I can only spot one tree that looks like an apple tree and hence the plaque becomes a simple relic of a technological and even alchemical age where dreams and visionaries made bold and sometimes beautiful statements in concrete and other materials. Yet do we need a new alchemy of concrete, where matter is worked in order to dream and quest for a twenty-first century social perfection?

Notes

- (1) Roberston, S (2007) Visions of urban mobility: The Westway London, England, *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 86.
- (2) Edensor, T (2003) M6: Junction 19-16: Defamiliarising the mundane roadscape, *Space and Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp.151-168.
- (3) Moran, J (2009) *On Roads: A Hidden History* (Profile Books: London), p. 5.
- (4) Stukeley, W (1936) *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton's Life* (Taylor and Francis: London)
- (5) Keynes, J M (1972) "Newton, The Man". *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes Volume X*. (MacMillan: London). pp. 363-4.
- (6) Forty, A (2001) Naked Ambition, *The Architect's Journal*, <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/home/naked-ambition/183973.article>.

The Everyday Life of the Mancunian Way: An Exploration of the Mundane **Maureen Ward**

Between the geographical and the allegorical there lies another Mancunian way; more prosaic, more mundane perhaps but vital and lively nonetheless, reflecting the lived experience for many who like myself dwell beside Manchester's most famous icon / eyesore; a whole generation brought up with the Mancunian Way as a daily fact of life, so familiar as to be virtually invisible, even nondescript. After the facts and figures, the statistics, the mythology and the flights of fancy, what remains is a different reality, the quotidian that lies beneath.

Embarking on this peculiar project with three ostensibly different agendas, interests and expectations, the act of circumnavigating the structure quickly reveals our commonality - an almost perverse affection for the flyover and a desire to rehabilitate its tarnished reputation. Indeed, over the weeks that follow, as we swap stories, ideas and anecdotes about the Mancunian way and our individual perspectives coalesce to enrich and enliven each expedition, we uncover much that remains concealed when traversing it from above. An early revelation is that this trope for movement, progress and speed, now paralysed as a static monolith usually endured from behind the wheel in a perpetual traffic jam, becomes suddenly revitalised at this angle; a sinuous, malleable, even vulnerable beast, an amphitheatre for a symphony of sounds, textures, colours and scents. Similarly we are quickly disavowed of any conventional notion that the structure is an exemplar of Modernist discipline and perfection as even the most casual examination exposes a series of cul de sacs, non sequiturs, errors and mishaps forty years in the making, the eventual outcome a jumble of grand and ill conceived ideas, many of which never made it off the drawing board - a fitting metaphor for the city as a whole.

Colloquially the Mancunian Way implies not only a site or location but a way of life. It is frequently employed by the city council as a shorthand for its particular way of doing things, a city that has 'made it'; yet it arguably carries undertones as much pejorative as celebratory for its typical swagger and self aggrandising posturing. Walking the Mancunian Way then becomes a metaphor for a critical celebration of an unacknowledged city, one flawed in both design and execution, a city always in flux, always changing, never realised, its failed schemes and botched ambitions in this context illuminating and strangely humanising. On each walk we detect another layer or stratum, discovering an archaeological artefact as fascinating as any Roman road or causewayed enclosure, its body a palimpsest of the scars and carbuncles of successive civic overhauls, additions and erasures, its skin a patina of obsessive redecoration and renewal, the overall effect a vast lumbering patchwork quilt that has the city's debris continually swept under it, whilst overhead life whizzes by unconcerned.

Doreen Massey's⁽¹⁾ exploration of a progressive definition of place (formulated interestingly from a short analysis of her own locality Kilburn, whose description sounds not a million miles from our own inner city districts, Brunswick included) expands places not as fixed or static singularities but as fluid multiple entities, not frozen in time but processual, becoming ever more pertinent for me as we embark upon this more formal exploration of an old friend, its underpasses and elevations, my daily shortcuts to and from home. Brunswick is a small but distinct neighbourhood, nestled under the Mancunian Way, as much a product of the wholesale clearances as the ring road itself, replacing the old Chorlton-on-Medlock district of terraced

houses, shops and factories with a smaller footprint of high-rise, deck access and maisonette flats around a scattering of playgrounds, parks and squares. The story of Brunswick is inextricably linked to the history of the Mancunian Way - it simply would not exist without it - and life under its patronage has taken on a particular tenor. Nowhere more than Brunswick can the legacy of the 1945 Manchester Plan and the dominance of its proposed ring road be seen on the cityscape, dissecting it into distinct and separate zones; the educational / cultural zone around Oxford Road as the only concrete evidence of the city's educational and political / scientific heyday. The National Computing Centre opened by Harold Wilson, the purpose built Northwest BBC complex and the UMIST campus were all built at the height of the 1960s technology revolution, with the flyover centre stage, symbol of a brave new era for travel, transport and technology. Brunswick then was merely a makeshift neighbourhood grafted on after much of the original plans were mothballed, a temporary solution to the burdens of the housing shortage.

For Brunswick now the motorway is less a means of transport or an engineering marvel than a place. On paper it is a dead end created by the construction of the road scheme, a mini council estate, that much maligned post-war British experiment persistently understood as a disaster and now as rare and endangered as that other native species - the red squirrel. Condemned in the popular imagination, then by politicians and planning departments as grim and awful spaces, council houses and a generation growing up in them bear a certain stigma, portrayed as victims or at best survivors of this failed modernist utopia. Yet this viewpoint prohibits any possibilities for re-assessing the period of the '*concrete jungle*', its uniquely urban environment, and the ingenuity of communities who adapted to and re-imagined city life, community and public space, a re-assessment urgently needed if we are to tackle the challenges facing central government, planners and local authorities as

cities continue to expand.

In de Certeau's⁽²⁾ much quoted hypothesis, all the efforts of planners and architects regarding the city, its grand buildings, skyline and topography are meaningless without people, imbuing the streets with a patchwork of stories and memories - tactics for surviving the excesses of the planners and their remote 'celestial' eye. A city is therefore more than its structures; it is a tapestry woven out of our shared experiences and nowhere can this be seen more vividly than on the residential lengths of the Mancunian Way, a stark reminder that despite the best laid plans for the perfect city (and the city is of necessity constantly being rethought, replanned, re-envisioned), it is people who take space and turn it into place; people who give it vitality and meaning. And as we walk under and around the remnants of all this grandiose master planning, we can clearly see vernacular shoots of unruly exuberance sprouting through as a generation of Mancunians continually adapted to these inauspicious surroundings, glimpses of new urban forms, activities and sub cultures evolving and thriving in the nook and crannies beneath and around the motorway.

The Brunswick section of the road not only exhibits the usual ghostly traces of urban creativity such as graffiti art and tagging but has openly incorporated the structure into its daily life, home to activities as diverse as basketball, skateboarding, parkouring and the unexpected pleasures of its own irregular book stall. The proximity to the flyover and the compact nature of the estate, effectively cut off from the rest of the city by two other arterial roads, London Road on one side and Upper Brook Street on the other, has encouraged certain foibles and quirks to develop and mature; windows have triple glazing as standard to keep out the noise from the juggernauts roaring past our living rooms and Venetian blinds were added at some point to rest our weary eyes from the constant glare of the motorway arc lights. Cut off from surrounding neighbourhoods Brunswick might be perceived as something of a backwater, a forgotten segment of the city, hardly noticed by

passersby on the way to other more exciting destinations nearby, merely a thoroughfare to the station or university, but for its residents this little patch is a verdant network of extended families, friends and neighbours.

Nowhere did we see this more acutely than in the highly signposted and managed intersection created by the merger of UMIST and the University of Manchester, replete with cycle lanes, a canopy of soft lighting, manicured grass, high railings and perplexing new seating (already appropriated by skaters and free-runners and stenciled suitably with urban aliens) aimed as steering students and staff safely across this unpredictable No man's land dividing the new supercampus. Only the foolhardy are meant to pass the 'cyclists dismount' sign beside the muddy underpass and onwards into the uncharted terrain beyond. The campus map steering people across college grounds depicts the estate unnamed and curiously blank, like the unexplored territories of medieval cartographers... *the world ends here; there be dragons!*

An unsignposted, inadequately lit tunnel under the slip road is our route into Brunswick proper, its permanently waterlogged underpass cleverly rendered crossable by nifty local interventions of makeshift bricks, planks or old tyres. Once across, the estate has many unexpected delights – first light sees the park busy with impromptu tai chi sessions, alongside joggers, dog walkers and assorted martial arts training as the day progresses; afternoon sees mums and toddlers dawdling in the mini playground before ambling home for tea; for nature lovers there is always the sporadic sightings of the local flock of brightly plumed parrots to look forward to, as well as for the eagle-eyed a fierce and imperious kestrel swooping and circling for likely prey. Evenings see the local football and basketball teams come out for practice and whilst night time can seem less salubrious, as is true of much of the city, a lucky few are often rewarded with a close encounter of the vulpine kind or the nocturnal amblings of the

hedgehog community. And in recent years, attracted by cheap rents and the proximity to the city centre, a creative community has colonised the tower blocks harbouring an ever changing line-up of cottage industries, including an independent publishing venture, a number of micro recording studios, an internationally known artists run space and a clutch of signed and unsigned bands, all busy doing their thing. Necessity really is the mother of invention.

The Mancunian Way from the freeway is one thing; a blur of tarmac, a hinterland of unknown districts, the odd flash of urban graffiti, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. The view from beneath, from under the belly of the beast is quite another matter, revealing a wealth of architectural detail and ingenuity as great as the inside of any medieval cathedral, providing entertainments, a plethora of home grown activities and events, plus an unexpected wealth of species and wildlife in its secluded stretches of accidental wildscape. From this new vantage its glazed tiles and unexpected bursts of geometrically patterned concrete add texture and charm displaying a sensitive side to this mighty car carrier. The landscaped borders so crucial in providing a sound barrier for residents now shelter dragonflies, butterflies and bees and respite to all manner of passing swans, migrating geese and the occasional prehistoric looking heron. There is even an allotment and wild garden doing its best to survive its unlikely conditions.

If the field of visual culture takes as its premise, "the study of the visual as a study of perceptions at any particular cultural moment"⁽⁸⁾ then we can begin to consider the Mancunian way as a fluid series of reflections on the continual changes imposed upon the urban landscape, a never ending journey of civic hopes, generational aspirations and shortcomings, whilst around and below it the ebb and flow of everyday life adapts and evolves around it, a two way process by which the flyover does not simply impose itself on various local communities but is imposed

upon, inscribed and humanised in turn. In sharp contrast to the typical assessment of the Mancunian Way as a monolithic, immovable static object, disrupting and fracturing the genuine and original fabric of the city, a brief walk⁽⁴⁾ beneath the Mancunian Way reveals a microcosm of the urban landscape as a whole, as unpredictable, sinuous and fast moving as the traffic that flows on it 24/7, its perennial play of tensions offering new and potentially invigorating ways of reading the built environment. What started life as an erasure has in time nurtured, harboured and been softened by the vernacular, the mundane and the ordinary; the overlooked lived experience of the everyday urbanista, adaptable, hardy, inventive and subversive.

Notes

- (1) Massey, D (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN.)
- (2) de Certeau, Michel (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, [trans. Steven Rendall] (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.) 1984.
- (3) Przyblyski, J and Schwartz, V (2004) *The 19th Century Visual Culture Reader* (Routledge: London) p.8
- (4) Anyone intrigued enough to want to continue their exploration of Brunswick, the moated kingdom of Manchester, might try this unofficial guided walk through the district - <http://diaryofabluestocking.blogspot.com/2008/12/walk-through-brunswick-heart-of-city.html>

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