

### **Sensing the City exhibition as urban room**

The collaborative exhibition held by project members at the Herbert Gallery, Coventry (13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Jan 2020) was curated by two professional exhibition curators from the Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre. Its designation as an 'urban room', culminating in a one-day symposium at the Gallery entitled "Sensing Coventry: an Urban Salon", represented a conscious attempt to institute a public debate in the city about the desirability of establishing such a facility during Coventry's year as UK City of Culture in 2021, whose organising team, Coventry City of Culture Trust, sponsored the exhibition and symposium (both key events in the practical **dissemination of research**). Thus, the exhibition cast itself additionally as a forum for discussion among citizens/visitors and this proved to be a significant factor during the week-long event with attendance remarkably high (compared to the Herbert Gallery average) and varied in its make-up from primary school groups to landscape architects to map designers. For general photographic documentation of the exhibition, see: [https://www.enterinhabit.com/sensingthecity/exhibition/sensingthecity\\_exhibition\\_photos.html](https://www.enterinhabit.com/sensingthecity/exhibition/sensingthecity_exhibition_photos.html)

The urban room initiative has been taken up by Coventry City of Culture Trust now with a view to introducing one for the duration of 2021 and, as a prototypical model, *Sensing the City* is pleased to have played a significant part in bringing this about, ensuring that it will exist as part of a national UK network: <https://urbanroomsnetwork.wordpress.com/>

The exhibition catalogue's introduction details the aims of the exhibition as a whole as public event and as research and therefore has had a crucial part to play in the **dissemination of the project's research** alongside the ephemeral event of the exhibition itself. Above all it highlights the way the project work has focused on the neglected experience of *people* in the city centre, raising several pertinent questions for the public and setting out to address – and, indeed answer – those in its content. Nicolas Whybrow's "Conjunctions" micro-project in particular has set out to show how the twin post-war predominance of traffic and commercial activity has effectively reached a point of exhaustion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as medium-size cities in the UK struggle to reinvent themselves in the face of citizens no longer seeing any reason to make use of city centres (particularly for retail purposes). Arguably, the planning of city centres around the needs of car traffic has had its day in so many ways, not least in terms of pollution and the health and wellbeing of citizens. In placing the figure of the human being spatially at the centre of its enquiry, "Conjunctions" has touched on many of the most urgent issues facing city centres, pertaining in Coventry to the post-war rebuilding plans for the destroyed city. It consciously stands the current state of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist designs and utopian thinking in relation to the way they have played out in time some 75 years later and at a point where the scope for rethinking and innovation is timely with a global climate emergency being declared and the city being in a position via its status as UK City of Culture to address questions of cultural infrastructure. To give one example of "Conjunctions" particular relevance to 'real world' issues: the anonymous portfolio makes the proposal to stop car traffic on the problematic superstructure of the inner ring-road and repurpose the latter as an urban wild, with tree planting, opportunities for walking and cycling, small and large-scale pop-up events and so on. This is an issue that is now being seriously discussed within the city, as a local newspaper item from January 2020 shows: <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/radical-idea-could-transform-coventrys-17471388>

### **"Conjunctions: Some Road Maps (in Multiple Moods)"**

The initial concept and design for what has emerged during a 3-year research process as the "Conjunctions" portfolio is outlined on the *Sensing the City* project website at the following address: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/theatre/research/impact/sensing/microprojects/citycity>

Entitled "Citycity: a Coventry Sensography", as it originally was, the delineation offers a thorough contextualisation of the micro-project at the point of inception, including projected practical

methodologies based around walking practice and ‘embodying atmospheres’ which were indeed implemented in the **research process** as it focused on the way selected aspects of the built urban environment impacted on the figure of the pedestrian as implicated user. The eventual form of the “Conjunctions” portfolio, which I will now explain in terms of its **research insights**, is clearly traceable to this original concept.

Each of the four ‘road maps’ presented in the “Conjunctions” portfolio relates to a segment of Coventry’s inner ring-road, either a certain junction or one of its so-called ringways (the stretch of road that connects the junctions), intentionally presenting it in a particular *mood*. Conceptually these moods are derived in part from the grammar of language; in particular, the way such linguistic constructs work effectively to conjure divergent spatio-temporalities – the sense of time, or the temporal, in space equates to its *temper*. Each road map indicates the mood it is intended to convey in its title, not unlike the tempo allocated by composers to their musical scores to evoke a certain *feel*. Thus, for example, the subjunctive mood of “Bare City” turns out to have a hypothetical premise underpinning it – a futuristic vision of urban space that inflects its atmosphere in a particular way. But some of these moods are also coinages which, while trading on the notion of linguistic spatio-temporality, conjure their own particular sense of urban space. Most obvious in this regard is the ‘hyper-junctive’ mood of “White Noise: a Farrago”, which is intended to project a sense of the clamour and claustrophobia of the built environment around the section of the ring-road to which it relates, producing a form of ‘permanent, pregnant present’. So these mappings can be said also to derive from immediate, embodied responses to the actual sites in question and to what those sites evoke in their specificity. Here, the methodology of ‘sensitised walking’ as fieldwork practice that underpins the creation of the portfolio is doubtless key in establishing appropriate moods. The mappings that follow function as ‘felt stake-outs’ of the sites involved, forming their own reconfigured architectures, which, perhaps a little like Robert Smithson’s ‘non-sites’, deliberately avoid conforming to the abstract representation and supposed exactitude involved in conventional cartography but seek instead to present mappings as ‘living approximations’ that are, moreover, dynamic and in constant flux. As Voorhies explains, Smithson’s gallery-based non-site installations gather together various site-based artefacts, far less to reproduce or represent the site in question than to project a form of approximation which also situates the spectator in a particular way: “Smithson’s arrangements of these components ‘point’ to actual sites often situated within landscapes on ‘fringes’ or ‘boundaries’. Taken together, the disparate parts function as the *non-site*, an index corresponding to the *site*, located somewhere outside the gallery confines” (Voorhies 2017: 23). The effect was “thereby [to] theatricalise the experience of the work for the spectator, asking more from him or her, and positing a set of relations that challenged the rarefied space of the modernist exhibition site” (ibid: 32).

As the umbrella title for the road maps, the term ‘conjunction’ itself would seem to capture the sense of an encounter or coming together in space and time of differing generic entities, which, one may further assume, produce certain effects via their association with one another. (It is perhaps no more than a happy coincidence in this regard that the noun ‘coven’ itself refers to a ‘coming together’.) These collaged components relate not only to the chosen aesthetic form of the cartographic assemblages but also to the fact that the infrastructure of the ring-road as a whole, with all its many slip roads and roundabouts and crossing points, also forms a conjunction. The ‘coming together’ implied by a conjunction is, moreover, one of time and space: the space of the junction as a simultaneous juncture in time. The potential associations that follow from this appear to chime with what Barbara Maria Stafford terms a ‘hedonic’ methodology, which she sees at work in the reflections of the empiricist philosopher David Hume who

was similarly investigating our fast, fluid, and adaptive responses to the environment, the ways in which we intertwine sensing with acting and moving in the world. [Hume] argued that there were three simple principles underlying learning from experience. First, there is

the remarkable circumstance of resemblance, ie. the fact that 'ideas and impressions always appear to correspond to each other'. Second, the tendency to make mental connections between things that happen together ('the principle of contiguity') was something that Hume termed the mind's desire to 'gravitate' – as fundamental to human nature as gravitation is in the world of the physical body. Third, this commonly prevailing 'gentle force' linking perceptions becomes strengthened in memory to form 'constant conjunctions'.

(Stafford 2006: 151)

Functionally road junctions, of which the Coventry ring-road has nine in total, in themselves imply a form of spatial switching station or nodal point at which approaching traffic is facilitated to choose its direction and continue on its onward journey as appropriate. So *conjunction* suggests not only a phenomenon of greater complexity in its constitution – a junction of junctions – but also something that leaves rather more to coincidental convergences comprised of the materiality of the ring-road itself, the traffic that it seeks to facilitate, the pedestrians that attempt to negotiate it, the built environment around it, as well as to ideas, myths and histories relating to it.

#### On authorship and anonymity

Now to the question of possible explanations for the 'performed absence' of acknowledged authorship of the "Conjunctions" portfolio, which is presented as perhaps the work of an artist or, with its somewhat low-tech production qualities, that of a committed 'amateur urbanist'. On the one hand anonymity means never being given credit for what one has produced; on the other it gives untrammelled licence to project radical, cheeky or awkward propositions to the point of 'preposterousness', with impunity as it were. While the latter naturally runs the risk of derision and easy dismissal, it can also open the door to a space of opportunity, just enough for the proposed ideas to begin to gain traction, driven in part by the intrigue of who the creator might be. (One need only think about the performative aesthetics of Banksy's clandestine and anonymous urban interventions to recognise the appeal of such a position.) There is no better instance of perceived preposterousness in "Conjunctions" than the road map 'Bare City: We'll Live and Die in These Towns' whose fundamental point of departure would seem to be to promote what urban planners would view as the utterly irrational, logistical nightmare of closing the city's inner ring-road to vehicular traffic altogether, and for good. Attaching authorship, and, therefore, singular ownership to such a notion provides a ready target for instant rejection, whereas if it is merely a free-floating idea of unknown provenance that persists performatively through reiteration – akin to the circulation of a rumour – the chances of it eventually being taken seriously for the more profound, genuine problematics it is ultimately getting at are potentially enhanced. As Chatterton reminds his readers in his disquisition on unlocking sustainable cities, there is an old anarchist saying that goes: "be realistic, demand the impossible" (Chatterton 2019: 3). In this view the apparent non-attribution of a subversive idea arguably paves the way for collective ownership to materialise more readily since there is no obvious 'agenda' or coercion involved. Anonymity emerges, then, as a deliberate tactical tool, which proposes, moreover, that a conversation about urban space should include the voices of the ordinary, everyday non-specialist citizens and users of the city, as opposed merely to those who hold executive sway as members of professional planning and decision-making bodies, whether that be urban planners and designers, architects, engineers, cultural or urban policy-makers or, indeed, academics. Following from that, the viewer of these psych-geographical text & image drifts-on-the-wall is positioned as just such an enfranchised 'thinker and feeler' about the city, the implication or invitation being to contemplate the question: what would your own city-space cut-up or collage look like? What would *it* prioritise?

At the same time, a crucial aspect of the "Conjunctions" portfolio as presented is its formal *interpretation* via both the wall-mounted explanatory texts accompanying the display in the gallery and the expanded version of these texts in the catalogue. While the 'authoritative voice' of the named academic doing the interpreting is certainly identified as a certain 'Professor Nicolas

Whybrow from the University of Warwick' (ie. me personally), it effectively amounts to a *persona* that is part of the fictional mechanism in play. This becomes apparent by virtue of clear hints in the portfolio that the anonymity is merely *performed*. In other words, the portfolio as presented, including its interpretation, on the one hand covertly grants itself the privilege of simultaneously being both author *and* critical interpreter and, on the other hand, in doing so implicitly admits to the fictionality or ambiguous blurring of this device in order to subvert its own authority and return the onus of forming an opinion to the viewer him/herself.

#### A conclusion

It is no coincidence that the "Conjunctions" portfolio refers to itself as a road map. Apart from the obvious, mundane sense implied by this – of it being some form of representational depiction of Coventry's ring-road – it is also indicative of its self-appointed role as the director of a kind of 'way forward'. But, while the road map may share the sentiments of a Julian Dobson, who advocates cogently for a "theory of change" based on a collective stewardship of UK city centres, one that can be navigated effectively with "a plan setting out the steps along the way and what you think you'll find when you get there" (Dobson 2015: 266), or a Paul Chatterton with his persuasive manifesto demands for "real change", involving among other things a car-free, post-carbon, commons-based sustainable city (Chatterton 2019: 124-8), the methodology of "Conjunctions" is far less prescriptive than *suggestive*. Indeed, the fact of its non-disclosure of authorship is testament to that. In other words, via its focus on indicative spatio-temporal *moods*, as opposed, say, to evidence-based data gathering, it appears to work from a form of intuitive sensing – a sixth sense perhaps that tunes into all kinds of felt complexities relating to the composition of the urban environment. Apart from pointing to the inherent shortcomings of cities, this emphasises, if anything, the tragic failure of over-prescriptive maps and plans *per se*, to their well-intentioned idealism and desire to predetermine urban behaviours and practices by design. And Coventry stands as a particularly potent instance of a post-war vision that has shown itself to have been somewhat misplaced, or at the very least exhausted now, for all its benign civic aspirations – a lost future that haunts the city. For the likes of Richard J. Williams, cities achieve form via *unforeseen* processes relating to the way citizens interact with its various social, cultural, financial and political complexities (Williams 2019), and, as Richard Sennett has shown, master-planning commits the error of assuming that citizens wish to live an ordered, preordained life: "The simplification of the city follows from this assumption and the result is not good. A stable, balanced life is a life losing energy – and so is a stable, balanced city" (Sennett 2018: 237). "Conjunctions" clearly has the future of the city – Coventry city centre in particular – at heart. But its concern is to engage creatively and thought-provokingly with its dysfunctions, its voids, its silences – in short, with what pervades the city's spaces discreetly and can only be discerned affectively by a form of embodied intuition whose fine sensibilities have the capacity to navigate between the fragilities of life and the close proximities of death.

#### Bibliography

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