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Chapter 1 Ring Cycle: a Coventry Convolute
Nicolas Whybrow

On page 42 is reproduced a map discovered recently on an enemy aerodrome near Berlin. It is a plan – a plan for destruction – prepared with typical German thoroughness. We too must prepare a plan – a plan for RECONSTRUCTION – and having drawn the plan, we must put it into operation with even greater thoroughness.

(Corporation of Coventry 1945: 44)

The epigraph above is the concluding paragraph of The Future Coventry, a comprehensive brochure published in 1945 by the Corporation of Coventry, without a named author but under the auspices of the city’s chief architect Donald Gibson, to accompany a public exhibition entitled “Coventry of the Future”. The “map on page 42” referred to is a copy of the German Luftwaffe’s “Sonderausgabe! 7.40” (special edition, number 7.40) intended “for official use only” (Nur für den Dienstgebrauch!) and depicts central and southern areas of the city of Coventry as they were in 1940.

Accompanying the map is a legend that lists key installations relating principally to the warplane industry – Armstrong Siddeley Motors Ltd., Humber-Hillman Co. Ltd., Alvis Ltd. and several more – and these are numbered and highlighted in bold outline on the map. If nothing else, the rash of demarcated sites makes it clear why Coventry presented itself as a desirable target to the German Air Force in World War 2. It is striking, too, that these various factory complexes, some of which covered vast tracts of land, occupied central urban areas, in among municipal amenities, residential homes, as well as cultural and ecclesiastical institutions of the medieval city. Small wonder really that the notorious night of bombing on 14th November 1940 produced as much collateral damage as it did. Some commentators have tried to argue that Coventry was selected for its status as a medieval city – one of the so-called ‘Baedeker bombings’ – but, as Canon Dr Paul Oestreicher, a former director of international ministry at Coventry Cathedral, pointed out in a letter to the Guardian newspaper in 2009:

Had Hitler wished to destroy a centre of Britain’s medieval heritage, he would have gone for York, Canterbury or Oxford. Coventry was a centre of the armaments industry, some of it within a stone’s throw of the cathedral. That Dresden was destroyed in retaliation is an oft-repeated myth. Dresden was far down on the RAF’s comprehensive list of targets and therefore not destroyed until near the end of the war.

(2009: 33)
In retrospect Hitler infamously coined the verb *coventrieren* (to coventrate) as a term that would come to be applied to any such planned acts of urban blanket bombing by the *Luftwaffe*. This has had the effect of raising the attack on Coventry to the level of myth; other cities in the UK were hit at least as badly if not worse, some even preceding November 1940. The *Luftwaffe*’s “plan for destruction” on page 42 of *The Future Coventry* is, then, what one might call a (sky-)blueprint, paving the way for the enactment of a yet-to-be-named *coventrieren*, “prepared”, as the final paragraph declares, “with typical German thoroughness” (1945: 44). The cultural stereotyping in evidence here, which implicitly equates efficiency in the benign activities of everyday life with being similarly accomplished in turn at liquidation and devastation, is perhaps tempered by the stated ambition for “even greater thoroughness” that follows in the antithetical, writ-large “plan for RECONSTRUCTION” on the part of a collective “we” (44). In other words, ironically, “we”, the then citizens of Coventry, should aspire to be more German than the Germans in the thoroughness stakes – but, of course, to positive ends. I will return to the inherent, post-war idealism of vision and tone relayed by the pamphlet’s final flourish later. Suffice it to note for now that

[over 30,000 people visited the [“Coventry of the Future”] exhibition and were overwhelmingly supportive; 20,000 copies of the lavish brochure *The Future Coventry* were sold and once again the press, not always well disposed to local Labour politics, was effusive. The Chamber of Commerce supported the revised shopping precinct layout and Labour was returned with an increased majority at the October [1945] municipal elections.

(Gould and Gould 2016: 24)

What interests me more just now, however, is, first, that there is an unstated, yet implicit appropriation and reversal of the phenomenon of *coventrieren* suggested by turning *destruction* into *reconstruction*. Thus, its singular association, as signifier, with a paradigm of blanket bombing and at-a-stroke devastation of a city (or, indeed, cities) is effectively ‘hijacked’ and repurposed constructively – call it *détournement*, if you will – to be allied instead with a new post-war dawn of exemplary civic urban planning and building. Thus, the planning and realisation of urban design and architecture potentially emerges as the precise antithesis of war and a war-mongering mentality.

Second, in the light of the recent discovery of an anonymous unpublished portfolio of contemporary ‘Coventry mappings’ entitled *Conjunctions: Some Road Maps (in Multiple Moods)*, the implications of which this chapter sets out to analyse and discuss, the similarly chance unearthing of the *Luftwaffe*
map “on an enemy aerodrome near Berlin”, as *The Future Coventry* claims (1945: 44), appears to serve as a fitting historical corollary (if not precedent). *Conjunctions* appears also to concern itself centrally with the aesthetic infrastructure of Coventry today, surfacing as it did at the time of the city’s successful bid in 2017 to be UK City of Culture and the City Council’s development at the same time of a comprehensive ten-year cultural strategy (Dixon et al 2017). In particular, *Conjunctions* addresses the effects on the habitability of the present-day city produced by the inner ring-road, which was constructed, of course, in the wake of the destruction wreaked by WW2 and as an immediate consequence of the ‘best-laid plans’ for the city presented in *The Future Coventry* in 1945.

Not only is the provenance of the WW2 bombing blueprint vague, then, but the lavish *Future Coventry* brochure itself refrains from disclosing its own precise authorship, merely declaring that it is “Published by the Corporation of Coventry”. Arguably, for all its attempts to take the views of the post-war public into account, this suggests a form of paternalism by an authority that need not identify itself or be accountable in person: thus, more an unveiling perhaps of ‘we know what’s best for you’ than a ‘so, what do you think?’ As such, the points are set for a critical examination of the *Conjunctions* document, authored by unknown-but-knowing hand – possibly an artist but perhaps simply a committed citizen or amateur urbanist – some 75 years later. And here the tables are turned again: undisclosed authorship serves rather as a subversive tactic, as we shall see, than covert paternalism. It is deliberately unofficial and far from ‘lavish’ in the manner of its presentation.

*Conjunctions and convolutes*

For the purposes of this chapter I have chosen to refer to the four road maps comprising the *Conjunctions* portfolio – presented here only in part but in full as eResource items (see items 1.1-1.5) – as a ‘convolute’ in recognition of certain affinities with the spirit and form of Walter Benjamin’s fragmentary *Arcades Project*. Benjamin’s mammoth work, unfinished in his lifetime and not finally edited into publishable shape until 1982, is organised in essence as an A-Z of so-called convolutes – essentially meaning sheaves of paper – each of which bundles together associative quotations and reflections relating to a particular theme. In sum the convolutes represent a response to the perceived state of western civilisation in modernity as manifest paradigmatically in both the architectural form and socio-cultural purpose of the 19th century Parisian shopping arcade whose gradual ruination, moreover, encapsulated the *Zeitgeist* or *Jetztzeit* (nowness) of the contemporary moment in Benjamin’s view. N5 As the English translators of *The Arcades Project* explain:
In Germany the term *Konvolut* has a common philological application: it refers to a larger or smaller assemblage – a bundle – of manuscripts or printed materials that belong together. The noun ‘convolute’ in English means ‘something of convoluted form’. [...] ‘Convolute’ is strange, at least on first acquaintance, but so is Benjamin’s project and its principle of sectioning.

(in Benjamin 2002: xiv)

‘Convolute’ reflects, then, the ‘strangely’ challenging collaged form of *Conjunctions* but also references in turn a 20th century architectural paradigm affecting most cities (re)built in the post-war era, that of the brutalist urban ring-road. Its complex, concrete infrastructure has invariably produced tortuous convolutions for both the motorised traffic it was designed to accommodate and, as it happens, the hapless pedestrian seeking to negotiate a way past it so as to access the city centre.

So, like Benjamin’s 19th century arcades, the inner city ring-road stands as both an affective presence and an allegorical signifier of its age: of post-war idealism followed by failure and decline, in this case of the fantasy that the motorised vehicle would be the instrument of improved mobility and wellbeing, and therefore needed to dominate urban design and planning. In truth, as Paul Chatterton states,

> Almost all urban ills can be told through the rise of the private fossil fuel powered automobile: unnecessary road deaths, the global pandemic of urban air pollution, mounting greenhouse gas emissions, geopolitical wars, the concentration of corporate wealth and mounting consumer debt, depression, status anxiety, obesity, alienated streetscapes, the decline of vibrant life and the corrosive effects of individualism (we are all familiar with road rage, predatory driving and traffic tantrums).

(2019: 17)

At least three performative writing methods relating to the city are proposed by Benjamin’s life’s work as a whole, all of which are underpinned by the notion of both city and text as spaces of encounter and contestation. That is, as momentary, fractured intersections or dynamic assemblages that have the potential to produce impromptu, thought-provoking conjunctions as well as disjunctions. One method, encapsulated by Benjamin’s several city essays, which are referred to as ‘thought sketches’ (*Denkbilder*), often propose a form of dialectical thinking or ‘conceptual intervention’ (*plumpes Denken*) – to use a Brechtian term (in Fredric Jameson’s translation) — in
their presentation of urban scene. A second form of writing, relating to the collection One-Way Street, is described by Susan Sontag (as Pile and Thrift point out in City A-Z) as a “mosaic of aphoristic paragraphs, captioned by placards of urban scenery” (Pile and Thrift 2000: 306). In their highly perceptive commentary on Benjamin’s montage methodology at work in this “enigmatic analysis of the intersection of modernity and the city”, Pile and Thrift show how seemingly unconnected phenomena are pulled together under a certain heading (or “urban placard”). Any meaning, they argue, is not stated but merely proposed by the form and, therefore, materialises via an ’active reading’ or, again, a ‘conceptual intervention’:

These juxtapositions are a montage of urban images. But these images are meant to be read side by side, and in moving between them they are meant to reveal something of the present, if only a glimpse. [...] Benjamin hoped to set in motion a train of thoughts that would keep moving. But he was not intent on destroying what was already there; far from it, he was attempting to recuperate the ruins and dust of the modern city and to reassemble them into something that was genuinely new, genuinely unimaginable.

(307)

For Benjamin, collecting – or catching at the fragments of civilisation – was an obsession. It could manifest itself, for example, in thoughts whilst unpacking his vast personal library of books, N7 or in a preoccupation with the itinerant figures of both the flâneur and urban rag-picker as cultural historians-cum-archivists, operating at very different levels of the social scale. One of the convolutes of his Arcades Project – exemplifying the third of Benjamin’s urban writing forms – is itself entitled ‘The Collector’ (convolute ‘H’), but the monumental work as a whole is, of course, an unfinished collection in its own right. As intimated above, effectively it is a vast archive of reflections and quotations or, as Graeme Gilloch phrases it, “diverse incongruent elements [...] rudely dragged from their intellectual moorings” (1997: 19). Where One-Way Street condenses montage into well-turned, often cryptic, meditations, Benjamin’s Arcades Project appears – and this is not meant disparagingly – to resort to ‘throwing the raw materials’ at its reader. As Timothy Morton puts it, he “shows how sheer juxtaposition can speak volumes. Benjamin practices a form of environmental criticism – not of bunnies and butterflies, but of the distracting, phantasmagoric spaces produced by modern capital” (2007: 150). Again, it is a text that is required to be performed into action: an encounter with fragments in discursive space. At the same time, it is a text effectively organised as the replication of a key architectural feature of the 19th century European city – the arcade. With its apparent order and promises of the fulfilment of urban dweller’s desires, Benjamin was
characteristically more interested, in fact, in the implications of the arcade’s demise, seeing it as the epitome of the transiency and inherent ‘will to decay’ of the ‘phantasmagorical capitalism’ invoked by Morton above. In *The Arcades Project* there is an evident attempt to examine the intersection not only of modernity and the city but also – as there is in the “constellation of aphorisms as a street” (Frisby 1994: 101) that make up *One-Way Street* – that of urban and textual space. In other words, Benjamin seeks to write the city performatively, as an active replication of its movement in time, thereby endeavouring to bridge the gap, as Buck-Morss has suggested, between the practical space of everyday experience and that of conventional scholarly discourse (1989: 3).

Benjamin was, of course, an incisive commentator on photography (in an age of emergent mechanical reproduction). As Gilloch points out with reference to two key publications by Benjamin: “Photography and motion pictures provide models for the depictions of the urban complex. Benjamin exhorts writers to ‘start taking photographs’ (*Understanding Brecht*) and to deploy themselves ‘at important points in the sphere of imagery’ (*One Way Street*)” (1997: 18). Photographs did not really figure in Benjamin’s own vast *oeuvre*, so this is where the *Conjunctions* convolute clearly diverges from his collaging praxis while simultaneously responding to his exhortation, seeking as it does to experiment with a range of intersecting text and photographic image configurations in the various mappings it presents. Where Benjamin may refer to images of the city in his assemblages, they remain textual ‘thought sketches’; here, in *Conjunctions*, it is visual images, seemingly accumulated by its anonymous author by walking in and around Coventry’s ring-road, that are in play precisely in conjunction with the gathered quotations and text fragments that are reminiscent of Benjaminian practice. While each of the mappings has its own form and feel, the overall aesthetic conjured in response to an ‘attuned walking’ practice approaches perhaps what Morton refers to as a “lyrical atmosphere”, which “is a function of rhythm: not just sonic and graphic rhythm (the pulse of marks on the page and sounds in the mouth), but also the rhythm of imagery, the rhythm of concepts” (2007: 168).

Each of the four ‘road maps’ presented in the convolute 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. They function as ‘felt stake-outs’ or ‘soundings’ of the sites involved, forming their own reconfigured architectures. A little like Robert Smithson’s ‘non-sites’, they 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” (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” (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. (In this regard it is perhaps no more than a happy coincidence, given that Coventry is the object of attention, 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, i.e. 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’.N9 (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. These are 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. This implied complexity returns us neatly to the convolute and the implied entanglement it proposes as “something of a convoluted form” (Benjamin 2002: xiv).

Sent to Coventry: what Tom saw

Before mining the road maps themselves for suggestive meaning there is one final speculation to be indulged. This relates to possible explanations for the mystifying absence of acknowledged authorship of the Conjunctions convolute, which, as indicated earlier, could be the work of an artist but also, 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 its first road map, “Bare City: We’ll Live and Die in These
Towns”. Its 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” (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, thus, 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 psycho-geographical text and image drifts-on-the-page is positioned as just such an enfranchised ‘thinker and feeler’ about the city. The invitation here is to contemplate questions such as: what would your own city-space cut-up or collage look like? What would it prioritise?

This methodology also finds an echo in the form of Benjamin’s Arcades Project, which, as Richard J. Williams points out, “is remarkable for the way it itemised, in minute detail, the workings of capitalism in a city [...] in a vast compendium of quotations and musings all centred on the architectural structure of the arcade. Benjamin managed to show how form and capital were linked in complex ways, in which authorship and representation were often ambiguous” (2019: 32). Extrapolating from such a textual notion of equivocal authorial provenance, Williams’ links this to the question of ‘urban authorship’; that is, why cities look the way they do (as his book is literally entitled). Using the example of Venice, he suggests that the city “is interesting because its overwhelming, complex and often spectacular reality couldn’t be the result of any conscious design; instead, authorless process made its impact on the way the city looks” (2).

There is a somewhat contrived, but potentially fertile, way in which such a denial of authorship can be made to link conceptually with two mythical tropes associated specifically with the city of Coventry: those of the figure of Peeping Tom on the one hand and the informal, punitive practice of
being ‘sent to Coventry’ on the other. The former refers to the hapless citizen of Coventry who dares to sneak a look at Lady Godiva as she parades naked through the streets on horseback in protest against her own land-owning husband Leofric, the Earl of Mercia, for imposing overly heavy taxes on the good folk of the city. Godiva's defiant act is the result of a challenge thrown down by Leofric to ride naked through the city if she wishes him to retract, which is accepted by her on condition that the citizens refrain from peeking at her as she rides by. Unable to resist, and thinking himself adequately concealed to get away with it, Peeping Tom transgresses, thus letting down the whole town, and being duly punished by being struck blind ie. he is denied one of his senses. N10 The origins of the phrase ‘sent to Coventry’, meanwhile, are obscure, although Conjunctions itself engages in plausible conjecture precisely on this point, linking it to the presence of several monastic orders in the medieval era – Carmelite, Carthusian – who observed vows of silence. But its modern-day meaning is clear: being sent to Coventry signifies being ignored, marginalised or ostracised in some way and, therefore, similarly condemned to a form of punishment by sensory prohibition, in this case a ‘muting’ of the oral function. Like the non-disclosure of authorship of Conjunctions, both of these tropes invoke forms of sensory denial circumscribed by the situation of the urban environment: of sight on the one hand and orality on the other. In this there is a certain common ground to be identified which defines itself around the insights paradoxically afforded via instilling forms of denial. In fact, the art historian Caroline A. Jones has theorised such a subversive trope, which she relates back to the predominant visuality of 19th century culture, as “blind epistemology” wherein a specific refusal to be overwhelmed by ocularity and spectacle paves the way for “different kinds of thinking and feeling, pursues alternative sensory modalities, and exhibits an openness to difference” (2016: xi). In Conjunctions, then, the denial of sight is effectively reversed; it is the author who is unseen as he or she attempts to speak from the silence of the margins – a masked peeping Tom who discloses what he observes without getting caught.

**Cars and concrete**

In May 1940, just six months in advance of the Luftwaffe bombing, a public exhibition entitled “Coventry of Tomorrow: Towards a Beautiful City” had already laid out comprehensive plans for further changes to both the civic centre and the city’s residential suburbs (Gould and Gould 2016: 9-11). In fact, there had already been substantial pre-war initiatives to reconfigure the chaotic and claustrophobic medieval city, with many of the timber-framed gabled buildings in the centre razed for the purposes of road-widening and slum clearance (Stamp 2007). Curated by the city’s municipal architect Donald Gibson, the exhibition was intended to instil in the people of Coventry a desire to engage with the planning and design of their city. Proving highly popular, the plans drew significantly
on Lewis Mumford’s influential, then recent *The Culture of Cities* (1938): “Mumford rejected what he described as monumental, backward looking, grandiose planning in favour of the ‘poly-nucleated city’ based on smaller communities surrounding grouped cultural institutions like the civic centre of ‘Coventry of Tomorrow’, to give a ‘social basis to the new urban order’” (Gould and Gould 2016: 11).

In an irony not lost on Gibson, the German bombing later that year would effectively clear the way for his proposals to be expedited through a succession of iterative revisions. These were all offered up for public scrutiny as plans and models. Key developmental phases beyond “Coventry of Tomorrow: Towards a Beautiful City”, which sought implicitly to echo the title of Le Corbusier’s similarly influential publication *City of Tomorrow* (1929), included Gibson’s “Intermediate Plan” (Stage 1) in 1941, leading to the decorative “Ultimate Plan” (Stage 2) for the city centre the same year, with its clear zoning of cultural, civic and commercial functions (14). This plan was effectively reiterated in 1944 with a 3D scale model, revealing among other things a grade-level inner ring-road design. But, ‘ultimate’ or not, it was superseded a year later, in 1945, by a revised (and compromised) “Suggested Plan” devised for the aforementioned “Coventry of the Future” exhibition, which also produced the lavish brochure *The Future Coventry*. According to Gould and Gould, “most dramatic of all” in this revised plan was the hierarchy of a “vastly expanded” ring-road (21-22). The well-received plans emphasised a modernist urban ethos of clarity and pragmatism: clean lines, functional zones and moderate heights to buildings. Above all, though, the centre was to be significantly pedestrianised, incorporating abundant green areas and even a pond. So, an open, rationalised civic centre for working people, many of who were employed in the evolving post-war car industry. Even the inevitable ring-road that was foreseen at the time aimed to integrate pedestrians and bicycles and was conceived as an attempt to absorb and redirect traffic, restricting its congestive incursion into the centre as far as was feasible. Finally, 1951 witnessed the presentation of Gibson’s “Coventry Developmental Plan”, but by the time he left in 1955 it was clear that its principles too “would need substantial revision” to take into account a booming post-war population dependent, moreover, in large part on the burgeoning motor and engineering industries (35). His successor, Arthur Ling, was by no means unsympathetic to Gibson’s projections and ideals, but felt himself bound to introduce not only the ready material of concrete – as against Gibson’s more refined “vocabulary of brick, slate and travertine” – but also to facilitate city centre car parking, leading to a “radically transformed” ring-road whose former aim precisely of deflecting traffic away from the centre now became compromised (35-6). It is striking in this evolution, not to say corruption, of post-war urban planning how its essential motive effectively echoes that of the *Luftwaffe*: in both cases the emergent form of the city centre, whether premised upon destruction
or reconstruction, has been determined by identifying the city’s engineering industries as its object of attention.

So, in an age of cars and, moreover, in a city that not only produced them in abundance but also had a far higher than average rate of ownership nationally once post-war shortages had subsided, the dream of pedestrianisation and giving precedence to people proved elusive. As Kenneth Richardson observes: “In 1965, for instance, Coventry had 146 cars per 1,000 of the population while the national average was only 107 per 1,000” (1972: 303). Moreover, the never-had-it-so-good years of the 1960s also signified the existence of an urban population of well-paid car workers looking to exercise their new-found consumer potency in a city centre which they invariably sought to access via the vehicles they owned. Very quickly, then, Gibson’s original plans for a modest grade-level inner ring-road, designed to accommodate bicycles and pedestrians drifted towards the grade-separated concrete colossus of today, an urban motorway whose reconceived function effectively witnessed the prioritisation of traffic into the city centre where a series of multi-storey and linked rooftop parking facilities attempted to deal with the sheer volume involved. A further decisive feature of both the historical drift of modernist dream-plans and the tragic flaws driving them is seen in the way that Coventry ended up paying dearly for its predominant tethering of its prosperity and well-being in the boom years to the car industry. When the global economy declined and production faltered in the 1970s, the whole city was pitched into the mire of terminal bust as the lay-offs, strike action and relocations so characteristic of the onset of drawn out de-industrialisation and recession became the order of the day. By the time the ring-road was completed in 1974 it would take on the representational aspect of an ‘out-of-date future’, designed as it was for a far smaller volume of traffic. Moreover, once in place it proved by no means easy to be decommissioned further down the line should Coventry’s future urban planners have been so inclined. In other words, it was an irreversible infrastructural monolith whose flawed presence persists well into the 21st century, in spite of being conceived to last only 25 years. As such, it stands as the unofficial monument to the post-war fate of Coventry – a ‘lost future’ of failed promises that haunt the city to this day. In his seminal book Urbanism and Transport: Building Blocks for Architects and City and Transport Planners (2015), the German transport scientist and urban planning theorist Helmut Holzapfel identifies a general trend in post-war European planning premised on accommodating vehicles, one that continues to hold into the 21st century: “The unimpeded flow of automobile traffic is still depicted as the mark of a ‘well-functioning city’ or even a ‘well-functioning country’. It was a false basic logic in which the planners of the 50s and 60s were ensnared, and it has led to an entirely undesirable form of urban development’ (2015: 52).
Holzapfel’s book as an exemplification of this view – in both the English translation and the original German edition of 2012 – is the oceanic expanse of Coventry’s Ringway St Patrick’s (which, by coincidence, features similarly in “Bare City”). The author has this to say about the effect of the ring-road on the city centre: “Cities such as Kassel in Germany and Coventry in England are places where the city centre has become a mono-functional wasteland of consumer shopping. The residents of the city of Coventry can hardly reach the centre on foot. At various points pedestrian tunnels still exist that are highly unpleasant to pass through” (52-3).

Under Arthur Ling and the city engineer Granville Berry, the ring-road evolved “in effect [as] Britain’s first urban motorway” (Gould and Gould 2016: 58). Motorways, urban or otherwise, are not pedestrian or cyclist friendly at the best of times – no one would risk their life by venturing anywhere near the current road – and so an elaborate system of subways and bridges had to be devised to facilitate passage between centre and suburb. Their various convolutions, requiring “tortuous and uncomfortable detours” (59), only underscore the degree to which these were built far less to enable pedestrian flow than to compensate for the crass privileging of the ring-road: “[T]he road was mostly elevated but, with the slip roads, it formed an almost impenetrable barrier around the city, limiting both vehicular and pedestrian connections” (59). Without question the ring-road became the single most incisive post-war intervention into the built environment of Coventry after the war. Although some locals are known to express affection for it in a we’ve-got-used-to-it kind of way, and it also fits with the current trend of revisiting and championing brutalist aesthetics in architecture, both the physical interruption of the central cityscape and the implicit effect on the immediate urban infrastructure is, well, brutal. Its sudden turn-offs, tight bends and fatally compressed traffic merging zones at its junctions, represent – ironically for ‘motor city’ – an invitation to crash, but practically speaking one also has to ask: is it necessary to have such an elaborate structure around a city centre that is a mere mile in diameter and takes but ten minutes to traverse on foot?

The whole city centre has been built around coming to terms with cars, parking included, of course. In the “Dysjunction” road map Julian Dobson points out (in the cited extract sub-headed ‘Car cost’) the inherent absurdity of cars spending the majority of their time in city centres parked up, needlessly occupying space once they have performed their commuting function (2015: 118). He also reminds us of the fact that parking functions more often than not as a convenient revenue raising activity for local authorities (178). The fact that IKEA was invited in 2007 to set up shop in the centre rather than the outskirts of the city (uniquely in the UK) – tucked just inside Junction 7 of the
ring-road, with three of its seven levels dedicated to car parking – seemed indicative of continuing urban planning priorities. It also draws attention to the slow emptying, if not death, of provincial city centres in the UK. Inviting IKEA to locate its store in the centre was evidently an attempt to draw people into the city and generate renewed life in the face of retail’s rapid transference to online consumption and a general, widespread culture of stay-indoors screen and phone introspection. (The failure of this project, even at a level of attracting customers to its store alone, emerges just as I write these words: in February 2020 IKEA announced the closure of its Coventry branch owing to inadequate footfall and consistent losses since its opening.) For a city the size of Coventry the question of what a centre is for in the 21st century is key. As the “Bare City” road map appears to imply, not only is the era of cities organised around the private car over (see the cited extract ‘Drivers of change’, Harris 2017: 25) but what will replace it is dependent on being able, first, to attract people into the centre and, second, on creating conditions that will encourage them to be motivated to interact and stay (see the cited extract ‘Ring cycle’, Gehl 2010: 10-13). In Gould’s and Gould’s concluding view:

[T]he ring-road has drawn a tight collar around the city centre, using and blighting acres of valuable land and severely restricting access ... [T]he necessity for an urban motorway, especially one which is so tortuous to navigate, is now debatable. Were it to be replaced by an at-grade boulevard with the level pedestrian crossings and cycle lanes Gibson intended, Coventry would be a much enhanced city.

(2016: 143)

“Bare City: ‘We’ll Live and Die in These Towns’ (subjunctive mood)”

The first ‘road map’ under scrutiny – reproduced in part at the end of this section but available in full as a pdf in this book’s eResource facility (see item 1.1) – appears to provide a form of conceptual blueprint for Coventry’s notorious inner city ring-road to be converted into a New York City-style High Line development. It presents an assemblage of subtitled and attributed quotations against a photographic backdrop of part of the road itself (identified as Ringway St Patricks, which runs between Junctions 5 and 6) and one of the citations, entitled ‘Taking the high road’ (Lindner 2016: 53–4), invites the viewer to draw comparisons with the High Line. “Bare City” no doubt carries deliberate echoes of the Situationists’ famous Naked City screenprint of 1957 which depicts Paris as a fluid and continuous psycho-geographical ‘map of experience’. As Hussey explains: “The Naked City is the negative corollary of de Gaulle’s programme – the so-called ‘reconquest of Paris’ – which aimed to evacuate the working classes from Saint-Lazare, Gare du Nord and Place de la République
and move them to the neo-Corbusian barracks of Sarcelles. It is a map of a city which is being emptied of human activity and which is in the process of becoming a dead site, a city without telos” (2002: 220). *Naked City* aside, the main title of the road map also appears to reference Giorgio Agamben’s complex notion of ‘bare life’. This is premised to some degree on identifying a growing global ‘precariat’ – essentially human beings who find themselves existing in implicitly sanctioned circumstances of acute risk and vulnerability that embrace poverty, homelessness, modern slavery, enforced migration and so on. The road map’s subtitle, meanwhile, represents the title of a 2007 album by the then emerging Coventry band The Enemy.

While nothing is stated directly in “Bare City”, and only its images tie it specifically to Coventry, it would appear to propose a form of *step change* – literally as well as figuratively as it happens – in Coventry ring-road’s future role. This would see the road turned among other things into a green eco-area – an ‘urban wild’ of natural growth – intended primarily for people to interact but, above all, be in the city centre. As the influential urban designer and architect Jan Gehl has shown, what makes cities work ontologically is based on opportunities for walking, talking and hanging out, the engagement of the senses, and self-generated mobility. According to him, this is why the ancient urban infrastructure of Venice – car free to this day – is still held up as a model for “working with the human dimension” (2010: 12). Other activities and features could, like the High Line, include installing site-responsive and participatory artworks, but there are any number of other potential uses – transient and permanent – that arise once private cars are removed from the equation (including conducive forms of public transport). From pop-up cinemas to open markets, these could be located specifically to take into account the undulating as well as twisting and turning architecture of the ring-road.

The inaugural events in 2017 of both Coventry’s bid to bear the mantle of UK City of Culture in 2021 and the launching of the city’s Council-led 10-year cultural strategy (supported by the Arts Council of England) afford a ‘perfect moment’ to reassess the effect of the ring-road on the city in all its urban complexity. In a sense what the found road map of “Bare City” represents is a form of ‘future archaeology’, conjuring an image not only of the present city but also of a hypothetical *becoming* city – a city cast in the subjunctive mood of ‘what if...?’

*Inreach*

The lower Manhattan High Line initiative cited in “Bare City” represents the exploitation – positive and otherwise – of an *obsolete* site, and is also bound up with controversial questions relating to the
aestheticisation of post-industrial landscapes (Edensor 2005) as well as the fetishisation of ruins (Lindner 2016). By contrast, the Coventry ring-road proposal made here represents a radical repurposing of a structure that is still very much in use. The proposal would naturally pose a considerable practical challenge for urban (traffic) planners, but it is also conceivable that it might pre-empt inevitable obsolescence and ruin. In other words, its realisation would imply remaining necessarily responsive to the shifting temper of the times, with the improved lives and futures of the city’s citizens as its objective. Some potential benefits: first, it would directly address the pressing threat of pollution from noxious vehicle exhaust fumes and the less well-known source of deadly particles released by braking, mitigating it by introducing ‘lungs’ to a city centre bereft of green ‘breathing space’. Second, it would offer opportunities for citizen health and well-being activity by opening up space to move freely, interact and play: to walk, run, cycle, skateboard and so on. Third, it would eradicate the sheer physical and sensorial threats of traffic that perennially exist for the pedestrian based on incompatible levels of velocity and sound, to say nothing of olfactory contamination. And, finally, it would provide a way of enticing into central areas Coventry’s diverse suburban constituencies – ethnic, racial, cultural, faith-based, for example – who, in an echo of the divisive center-périphérique-banlieue scenario found in Paris, tend to exist in discrete immobile community enclaves. Providing all citizens of the city with a motive – beyond IKEA – to foster a relationship with the centre, to witness and participate in the novelty of a repurposed ring-road that does not merely function as an intimidating exclusionary barrier, has the potential to engender an unforced socio-cultural mix and flow. This would be a process entailing the creation of a diverse and inclusive centralised space of urban community – in rather than outreach – born essentially of the common purpose of striving to ‘live well’ in the same place. Moreover, the predominance in the current centre of a campus habitus comprised of a residential student presence – itself microcosmically differentiated – would thereby be ‘usefully diluted’ to form a more integrated and representative urban population.

The Coventry ring-road was built in phases over a 17-year period (between 1957 and 1974), so the implied repurposing of it would be wise to follow suit. In other words, step change in steps. The “Bare City” road map, which covers but one of the nine ringways, itself formally suggests a vision of change in stages, heralding a new dawn of radical, drawn out and sensitive urban reconstruction in the 21st century. And, as Lindner’s disquisition on the High Line also emphasises, an ethos of slowness both in the initiative’s unfolding and in the rhythm it imposes on the pace of urban life through its focus on walking and lingering (‘pause, delay, detour’), is key (2016: 58). While stressing the positive in the cited extract included in “Bare City”, Lindner is not so wide-eyed as to be oblivious
to the fact that the complexity of which he speaks also contains highly problematic aspects, which throws into relief the imperative of taking local circumstances into account. This would include, as David Harvey warns in Rebel Cities, the fact that “[t]he newly created High Line in New York City has had a tremendous impact on nearby residential property values, thus denying access to affordable housing in the area for most of the citizens of New York City by virtue of rapidly rising rents. The creation of this kind of public space radically diminishes rather than enhances the potentiality of commoning for all but the very rich” (2011: 75).

The first quotation in “Bare City”, which, unlike the ones that follow, has no sub-heading of its own, is assumed to be a form of signature introduction by the unknown artist/amateur urbanist. In this they effectively cast themselves as the “photographer” to whom there is reference here, thereby making a small gesture towards identifying themselves as the originator of the road map. The centralised surveillance of public space that haunts, and implicitly criminalises, their activity serves perhaps as an explanation as to why anonymity has been preserved in the Conjunctions convolute as a whole. Worth noting, finally, is that the example of Park Fiction’s project, cited under ‘Form follows fiction’ (Bishop and Williams 2012: 168), refers to Hamburg’s regeneration of its harbour area, the major HafenCity development, whose plans were initially presented in 1997 as a top down policy approach designed to attract a ‘creative class’, as in Richard Florida’s The Rise of the Creative Class (2002). As the quoted authors Bishop and Williams point out elsewhere, Florida “seems to be more concerned with the consumption of culture than with its production” (2012: 167). The premise of Park Fiction’s project, which eventually proved successful in its realisation, is to sow the seeds of a ‘preposterous idea’ relating to urban design by spreading the rumour of its actual occurrence.

INSERT Figure 1.1 “Bare City” road map sample (p.1 of eResource item 1.1). Caption: Fig.1.1 Sample from “Bare City: ‘We’ll Live and Die in These Towns’ (subjunctive mood)”, Conjunctions: Some Road Maps (in Multiple Moods) (anonymous portfolio), 2020.

“Dysjunction: These Towns Will Live and Die (disjunctive mood)”

The second road map – also reproduced in part at the culmination of this section, as well as being available in full as a pdf in eResource (see item 1.4) – steers us a little further to the west of the city centre. It focuses exclusively on Junction 7 of the ring-road, which is significantly elevated at this point. More importantly perhaps, where “Bare City” amounted to a speculative projection in the subjunctive mood – a utopia, indeed – this mapping effectively forms an antithetical counterpart in the ‘disjunctive mood’, presenting as it does a dystopian portrait of the ring-road’s underbelly or that which lurks in its shadows. This is reflected in “Dysjunction’s” inversion of “Bare City’s” subtitle – foregrounding towns rather than people – which obviously riffs at the same time off the title of
Jane Jacobs’ seminal book on urban living *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (of which more later in this chapter).

**Road drift**

As traffic flies past overhead – steering westwards, Ringway Queens flows into Ringway RudgeN16 – the implicit, abject effects of the ring-road’s sheer brutalist *presence* seem to come floating down to the junction at ground and sub-ground level. Exiting the ring-road, vehicles fade tentatively into a restrictive traffic merging zone where those joining from the left pitch into view at the last moment, necessarily having to cut rudely across the paths of those vehicles leaving, before drifting down a narrow single-lane slip road to a lopsided grade-level roundabout below. Hemmed into the latter’s centre, directly below the curving belly of the ring-road’s fly-over, is a car parking compound, chock full with vehicles. Quite how they have managed to find their way in there is for locals to know and visitors to the city to scratch their heads at. Meanwhile, in the ‘armpit’ between Butts Road and Meadow Street, where another slip road feeds cars up to the ring-road, Coventry’s river, the murky Sherbourne, all of a sudden vanishes underground, filtering through an elaborate trash-trapping grate (Fig 1.2). Briefly reappearing on the inner side of the ring-road at Junction 7, and then again down an obscure alleyway in the depths of the city centre, the Sherbourne has been culverted since the municipal architect Donald Gibson began to implement his post-war programme of rebuilding the city for the modern age. For all his cleaned up vision of a civic, functionalist, Corbusian ‘city of tomorrow’, even he did not foresee the blank terminal architectures of the 7-storey IKEA and Skydome Leisure Complex squeezing themselves into the crook between Croft Road and Spon Street on the city centre side of Junction 7.N17 As Gould and Gould describe these later interventions:

> The architecture was the architecture of ‘tin’ industrial sheds and the buildings were crammed against the ring-road and surrounded by service roads with no obvious fronts or backs, except that a ‘fake’ 19th century factory façade faced Spon Street in an attempt to ‘blend in’ with the medieval street. Nothing in its appearance or use enhanced the complexity and grain of the area and this was compounded by the addition, on Queen Victoria Road of the seven-storey IKEA store (2004-7 by Capita Ruddle Wilkinson of Peterborough), the only such in-town store in Britain. (2016: 134-6)

**Insert Figure 1.2. Caption:**

Fig.1.2 River Sherbourne at Butt Road and Meadow Street, Junction 7, Coventry Ring-road. Photo: N. Whybrow.
Above all, though, it is the labyrinthine, charcoal-grey brick and concrete complex of underpasses, stairwells, and pathways that confront the pedestrian wishing to enter the city centre from the nearby residential neighbourhoods of Earlsdon and Spon End that assert the ring-road’s dominance and seem to consign all other forms of urban life to the margins. Effectively forming a defensive barrier akin to the wall that once surrounded the medieval centre, the architecture of Junction 7 forces a convoluted meander upon the pedestrian, who is lured down into a grubby, sub-grade level series of tunnels and turns, which disorients just at a point when he or she would wish to pass through as directly, safely and conveniently as possible. As William H. Whyte – cited in “Dysjunction” – observes in his detailed analysis of street behaviours, urban walkers almost always “look to take the shortest cut. In some pedestrian malls curving pathways have been outlined in the paving. Pedestrians ignore them. They stick to the beeline” (2009: 57). One measure of Junction 7’s failure of the person on foot is that there isn’t even an obvious alternative beeline to speak of. Thus, the pedestrian is implicated in a blurred mise en scène that recalls precisely Kevin Lynch’s influential critique of illegibility in The Image of the City (1960), which is also cited in “Dysjunction” and was, ironically, published at the very time at which Junction 7 was being constructed. Famously, in Lynch’s view, the built environment of the city needed to conjure for the situated pedestrian-protagonist a viable mental image that would clarify and facilitate ease of movement. For Fredric Jameson, Lynch’s crucial contribution to urban design theory rests on his suggestion “that urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmappability of local cityscapes” (1991: 415).

Gordon Cullen, whose similarly influential Townscape appeared in 1961 and is quoted in “Dysjunction” under the sub-heading ‘A drama of juxtaposition’, similarly advocates that a city’s visual components should ideally unfold as a form of embodied scenography for the pedestrian. This should not only propose a clarity of form in the composition of the built environment but also determine that the ambulant pedestrian’s relationship to that composition was the measure of its success. By coincidence, Cullen, who was a leading figure at the time in the influential journal the Architectural Review, contributed a tiled mural to Donald Gibson’s new Lower Precinct design for the centre of Coventry in 1958. Itself adopting in part a quasi-architectural montage form of juxtaposed image fragments, it depicts a panoramic cityscape of key graphic elevations relating to Coventry buildings past, present and future, as well as symbols of the city’s traditional industries (Fig. 1.3). In the meantime, and as an indicative instance of the degree to which urban infrastructures are constantly shifting ground, Cullen’s mural has been banished to the lowest end of the precinct owing to 21st century developments relating to improving access for shoppers – effectively a ‘de-motion’, as we shall see. It is plausible to assume that the anonymous creator of “Dysjunction” had the formal
perspectives of Cullen’s townscape murals in mind as they worked on the composition of their own projected montage of Junction 7.

Insert Figure 1.3. Caption:
Fig.1.3 Tiled mural (1958) by Gordon Cullen, Lower Precinct, Coventry. Photo: N. Whybrow.

Theatrum Coventry

The unknown author is also likely to have been conversant with the succession of iterative designs for the zoned, poly-nucleated city that emerged from Coventry City Council’s architecture department both during and in the immediate aftermath of WW2. Arguably, “Dysjunction” represents an attempt to enact its own mapping, a staging focused more on performing a spatio-temporal narrative than projecting an idealised blueprint – a ‘theatrum Coventry’ to invoke de Certeau’s important recognition of atlases as theatres (1984: 121). It is a mapping that seeks to document a residual drift in time, confronting the reality of the present – what the then-becoming post-war city has become – with the recent past: what future or ‘tomorrow’ was being dreamed of (or up) for the becoming city in the heady era of 1950s and 60s civic planning and rebuilding. In other words, it marks the hopeful, subjunctive mood of ‘then’, drifting entropically towards the disjunctive reality of ‘now’. As Jeremy Till, who is cited in another capacity in “Dysjunction”, puts it:

The great modernist projects, with all their utopian drivers, could only ever stand for a better future, they could never actually provide it in full. [...] Any attempts at complete ordering and control in architecture are bound to fail, as all those things that are suppressed [...] come back to haunt the ideal. Time, users, waste, the unexpected event, dirt, chaos – all these and many more may be banished to the periphery of the artificial stage that a new building erects, but all are waiting in the wings to rush on when the photographer has left. 

(2008: 126-7)

In fact, the perceived drift in time would align itself closely with de Certeau’s point about atlases as theatres, wherein the narrative figurations of cartography, which “had the function of indicating the operations – travelling, military, architectural, political or commercial – that made possible the fabrication of a geographic plan, [...] like fragments of stories, mark on the map the historical operations from which it resulted” (1984: 121). And, if the portrait of Junction 7 represents a theatre, perhaps its performance can be seen as that of a flawed protagonist in the historical tragedy that is the projected ‘city of tomorrow’. It is the epitome, in fact, of the failed enactment of an all too neat blueprint-as-playscript, whose unseen structural design error was, for all its claims to provide for a pedestrian scene-scape, to focus on buildings, zones and urban layouts (for vehicles)
rather than bodies and movement in space. A double tragedy, then, invoking the compromised drift away from a modernist urban planning vision whose civic, commons-orientated intentions were in many respects morally laudable and good, but which already contained the seeds of their own demise in taking the abstract ‘perfection’ and totality of the plan or map to be the territory. As Richard Sennett explains in *Building and Dwelling*:

> Baron Haussmann – and after him Albert Speer, and after him Robert Moses – made wilful master plans, disregarding people’s desires and needs. But the vice of top-down master-planning is not the same as trying to see the city on a big scale. Another kind of big scale thinking arose as a reaction against the place-wrecking power of the free market. It is how Mumford and other Fabians thought about countervailing master plans: as in the garden city, these were meant to provide everyone with access to good housing, jobs and public services. In time [...] such aspirations have faded from conscious debate and deliberation. The reason for this fading vision among progressives is partly a matter of how ‘big’ relates to ‘good’. Master-planning of Mumford’s well-intentioned sort assumes people want to live a stable, balanced life. The simplification of the city follows from making this assumption, and the result is not good. A stable, balanced life is a life losing energy – and so is a stable, balanced city.

(2018: 237)

As it happens, far from the unplanned effects of the bombing itself, the most significant instance of ‘life getting in the way’ of Gibson’s “Beautiful City of Tomorrow” pre-bombing public exhibition model of 1940 and his follow-up “Ultimate plan” of 1941 (reiterated as a model in 1944), lay in two related underestimations. These were, first, the profound effects of burgeoning car use as a phenomenon affecting all advanced global economies in the post-war 20th century and, second, that the city of Coventry itself was actually the hub of car manufacture in the UK and, therefore, centrally implicated in the boom taking place. As we have seen, the city experienced enhanced levels of private car ownership among its citizens after the war, many of whom were also directly involved in the industry itself.

If Cullen’s mural captures the optimistic, anticipatory vision of a Phoenix-like rebuilding of Coventry in the 1950s and 60s, “Dysjunction” seeks not so much to mourn or regret the infrastructural decline of that vision (from the 1970s onwards) as to point to the residual evidence of its original blind-spots. In that sense it represents a figurative ‘demolition’ of the architecture of the mural, whose
own life has been subject to a form of ‘de-motion’ in being relocated in reduced form to a less prominent part of the city centre precinct (Gould and Gould 2016: 39). As Matthew Goulish observes: “To demolish, according to the Latin (de- moliri) means to deconstruct, literally to reverse (de-) a mass (moles). [...] The Latin instructs us. Demolition cannot eradicate, but only reverse physical functions and existence” (2014: 80). Here, then, this ‘mood map’ of the ring-road, and Junction 7 in particular, would seem to serve as a synchdochical portrait of the deconstructed city, using both the motifs and form of Cullen’s mural as its point of departure. It records a drift, but not that of the pedestrian or, indeed, Situationist “small group of adepts” in the city (Lavery 2006: 111); rather it is the drift of a road in time and space and, by figurative extension, the drift of the city itself. That spatio-temporal drift, moreover, is also one that can be understood as performing the prevalent mood or sense of the locale, as in ‘catching its drift’, at which point the effaced pedestrian can be said to stage a reappearance: the ring-road’s drift, its sense, projected as the pedestrian’s “scarred mental image” (see Lynch 1960: 45), evokes an atmosphere constituted of defensive concrete barriers, the rush of traffic and a bemusing labyrinth of pathways and tunnels that are figuratively reminiscent of the gutters and drains that receive and process the city’s effluences. Contemplating the post-war fate of the culverted Sherbourne River at Junction 7 underscores the image (Fig.1.2), as does Jan Gehl’s conclusion regarding the disavowal of the ambulant citizen in post-war planning and design:

Planners quickly learned that pedestrian underpasses and bridges were exceedingly unpopular and only worked if tall fences were also built along the road. [...] Pedestrian underpass systems had the additional disadvantage of being dark and dank, and people generally feel insecure if they are unable to see very far ahead. In short, the often expensive pedestrian underpasses and bridges were in conflict with the basic premises of good pedestrian landscapes. [...] Today the world is full of abandoned pedestrian underpasses and bridges. They belong to a certain time and a certain philosophy.

(2010: 131-2)

Riffing off the rectilinear collaging of symbolic object fragments visible in the form of Cullen’s mural, “Dysjunction” appears to present a perspectival montage. In this a juxtaposing of vertical portrait formats – customarily reserved for the capturing of people or ‘figures’ – is used to represent the structural landscape of the ring-road environment at Junction 7. The use of a portrait format where landscape dimensions would otherwise be employed to capture the horizontal contours of the cityscape, throws into relief an implicit ‘absence of humanity’. These are portraits without people.
This aspect of the montage seems to propose, like Cullen’s mural, a form of architectural construct in its own right — perhaps an artwork-as-architecture. This seeks to evoke, if not celebrate, a kind of negative or tragic sublime based on the sheer scale and brutal(ist) presence of the ring-road as it swoops overhead. If this represents a form of ‘theatrical backdrop’, foregrounded detail, which deliberately skews perspectival scale, magnifies the sense of entropic drift: a spatio-temporal ‘near’ to the ‘far’ of post-war urban planning visions. Meanwhile, the detritus of quote-snippets grafted on to the scene-scape, offers, like the work of taggers, a momentary writing of the city. Thus, as a fragmentary whole, “Dysjunction” performs a psycho-geographical drift on the page, what the artist Wilfried Hou Je Bek might call a “city-space cut-up” (in O’Rourke 2013: 7), whose grainy, somewhat rough and ready presentation echoes the feel of the location, as it simultaneously maps the recovering life and re-death of a city.

**INSERT Figure 1.4 “Dysjunction” road map sample (p.1 of eResource item 1.2). Caption:**

Fig.1.4 Sample from “Dysjunction: These Towns Will Live and Die (disjunctive mood)”, *Conjunctions: Some Road Maps (in Multiple Moods)* (anonymous portfolio), 2020.

**“Still Life: Som[n]a in the City (adjunctive mood)”**

1961 and all that

The first two years of the decade of the 1960s, but 1961 in particular, serve as a running point of reference in this third road map. Gordon Cullen’s *Townscape*, whose spirit effectively sets in motion the sequence of set-piece ‘still lifes’ presented here, was published in 1961, N18 as was Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and key texts of the Situationist International movement, including Kotányi’s and Vaneigem’s on the pivotal notion of unitary urbanism.

Meanwhile, as we have seen, Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* had been published just the year before. All of these publications are concerned in their own unique ways with urban living, with spatial scale and movement and, above all, with the social and physical human body being, like the technical instruments of a land surveyor, *in measure of the city*. The body as protagonist, including the way its urban surroundings affect and position it, is then the test of whether the city works.

By association key aspects of Cold War German history also figure in this mapping. These relate, first, to the construction of the Berlin Wall, which commenced on 13th August 1961, and, second, to the final demolition of the vast Anhalter railway station right in the centre of that same, about-to-be-divided city slightly earlier that year. At a more parochial level, Coventry’s phased inner city ring-road construction was underway in the early 1960s and the second section, Ringway St. Nicholas between Junctions 1 and 9 on the northern side of the city centre, was completed in 1961 (Gould and Gould 2016: 58). Ultimately, of course, the ring-road is the main focus of attention here and it is
quite clear from the locations featuring in the photographs that form the first stratum of five triptychs in “Still Life” that it is this segment that is being mapped as part of the Conjunctions convolute. (The inclusion of an image of the nearby boarded-up St. Nicholas church in the city’s Radford area supplies a further hint.) Where the ring-road mappings so far have referred to subjunctive and disjunctive moods respectively in their methodological compilation, “Still Life” identifies an adjunctive practice that is reminiscent of the complex, intertwined stratification as well as striations involved in geological layering. Revealing four main strands horizontally (over five panels or pages), whose varied combinations of image and citation in each case provide their own narrative linkages, these can also be read as vertical assemblages whose configuration proposes a similar associative connectivity. As this section of the chapter will try, implicitly, to make clear in its critical framing, there are potential diagonal associations to be made as well. Echoing the various supplementary features of the physical ring-road itself – the slip-roads and pathways and bridges, to say nothing of its unforeseen, unnamed nooks and crannies – an adjunctive practice is premised on an augmentative process of bringing into play, overlaying and facilitating a multiplicity of linkages. Of all the mood maps making up Conjunctions, this one perhaps most closely reproduces the formal methodology of Benjamin’s Arcades Project with its collaging of diverse, associative quote fragments under a particular theme. The full continuous complexity of its horizontal composition is viewable as a pdf document via the eResource link (see item 1.3) where it can be read effectively like a wall tapestry. This conveys a sense of “Still Life’s” cross-referential form, permitting close-up immersion in it. A sample of the road map, showing its first page, is reproduced at the end of this section (as with previous mappings).

Apart from those contributory factors already mentioned, there appears to be another, more personal, indeed autobiographical, dimension in play inasmuch as 1961 is also the year that the anonymous ‘protagonist-creator’ of “Still Life” would appear to have been born. This, one may assume, is the ‘sleeping corpse’ – the performer of soma and somna in the city – depicted in the centre of each triptych, whose face is invariably turned away in a kind of ‘un-portrait’ and who cannot, therefore, be formally identified. Intriguingly, the passport photocopy that offers this potential linkage to the recumbent body, resting in found recesses of Junction 9 and Ringway St. Nicholas, also connects it to the Berlin Wall, with clear evidence, in the form of GDR visa stamps, of visits by the person concerned to the Cold War frontier city. These apparently involved crossings at various borders of the former GDR on different dates, including one at Brandenburg Gate, the main focal point of the Wall for the 28 years of its existence. In point of fact, this stamp will have been issued as a form of commemorative courtesy in the heady days after the Wall had come down in
1989, since Brandenburg Gate itself was not a border crossing point in Cold War times. It should be added that the ‘Nicholas’ in question appears to have been born on the very day, 15th June 1961, that the GDR president at the time, Walter Ulbricht, had famously assured the nation that “no-one had any intention of erecting a wall”, as the State newspaper *Neues Deutschland* reported the following day (Ritchie 1999: 718). Thus, a potential conjunction emerges, via the personal narrative of the figured body, which allies the monumental effect of the building of the Berlin Wall with the localised impact of the ring-road’s architecture on the centre of Coventry. Neil Leach’s verdict on the architecture of the Wall, as representing an inhuman violation or ‘wounding’ of the city that flies in the face of what architecture is for, can, therefore, be transposed suggestively to the context of Coventry:

The building of the Wall, the emptying of the buildings around the Wall, the bricking up of the windows and doors, and the demolition and ultimate erasure of those buildings constituted an architecture of denial. Yet the Wall was not only an architecture of denial, it was also a denial of architecture. The Wall became a form of anti-architecture, a grotesque denial of the very social value of the art of building.

(1999: 216)

As one of the most ruthless urban interventions ever made began to be put in place around the 160km perimeter of West Berlin, another large-scale architectural installation in the city was headed in the opposite direction, precisely for reasons of enforced obsolescence hinted at by Leach. The monumental Anhalter Bahnhof, referred to by Walter Benjamin literally as the “womb of the railways” (1972-89: 246) but perhaps better translated as “the Mother of all stations”, and subject to intense bombing in the final months of WW2, was finally dismantled in 1961. To this day it leaves but a tiny relic of its entrance portal – which has assumed its own mythical form of monumentality in the post-war story of Berlin – and a vast open terrain of wasteland. Meanwhile, the building’s rubble of broken yellow bricks contributed in part to the artificial construction of Berlin’s only hill of significance, Teufelsberg (Maier 1987: 305).

Still life
Fittingly, at least for the purposes of this narrative conjecture, the original St. Nicholas Church in the Radford area of Coventry, situated at the time that little bit closer to the present-day, eponymous Ringway, was particularly devastatingly hit by the bombing of Coventry in November 1940. Several local citizens, making use of the crypt as a bomb shelter, were killed and the razed church was
deemed beyond restoration. Instead it was built anew, using reparation funds allocated to the city, just a little further up the road in the mid-50s. Half a century later, though, it was already being declared derelict and was unceremoniously boarded up – another instance perhaps of the modernist failure to which Till referred in the previous section. The current state of St. Nicholas is depicted in “Still Life” and is striking, first, for the sheer factory-like functionality and monumentality of its design, and, second, for the relative intactness and sturdiness of its yellow brickwork. Perhaps it is rather a building in waiting, resting while someone invents another use for it.

If there is ‘still life’ in St. Nicholas Church – as there has been in the preserved ruin of Anhalter Bahnhof – that notion leads us associatively to Kathleen Stewart’s cited excerpt from a short section of her book *Ordinary Affects*, which is similarly entitled “Still Life” (2007: 18-19). The correlation with the title of the anonymous road map presented here, coupled with the quotation’s insertion at the outset, would seem to accord this passage a paradigmatic role. And it is doubtless the dual sense of the term, as implied by Stewart’s definition, that is intended to send resonating tremors through the various layers of the mapping: still life as something embedded in the everyday, in principle ‘at rest’, latent, yet retaining an inherent dynamic or potential for ‘becoming life’ which may momentarily rattle the foundations of the ‘structures that be’. Uncannily the German verb *anhalten* encapsulates these antithetical senses as well. Literally, and paradoxically, it means both to stop and to continue (or endure). Even more strangely perhaps *anhalten* has nothing as such to do with Anhalter Bahnhof, the terminus railway station, that name being in fact a reference to the region of Anhalt south-west of Berlin, to or through which the trains would have travelled. Nonetheless, the coincidental association of the station’s name with the verb *anhalten* has been subject inevitably to wordplay around its transferable meanings, which doubtless accounts in part for its inclusion here. For instance, in Wim Wenders’ 1987 ‘Berlin film’ *Wings of Desire* the ‘Colombo character’, Peter Falk playing Peter Falk, stalks past the relic of Anhalter Bahnhof muttering something about being told it was the only railway station where it rather than the trains could be said to have stopped. Meanwhile, Walter Benjamin, who harboured vivid turn-of-the-century childhood memories of Anhalter, makes a half-joke about it being the station “where the trains must stop” (1972-89: 246).

The passage from Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* also brings into play the notion that the still life that “pops up” out of the everyday “can be a flight from numbing routine”, turning “the self into a dream scene, if only for a minute” (2007: 19). Here, in the centrepiece of each triptych, we have for all we know a dreaming body in repose, snatching perhaps a revitalising power-nap in the sanctuary of the ring-road’s recesses. Where the “Dysjunction” road map of Junction 7 gave us ‘vertical landscapes’,
here they are ‘horizontal portraits’. That is, landscaped figures temporarily folded into a brutalist cityscape, perhaps showing a sleeping walker – as opposed to walking sleeper (or somnambulist) – or an exhausted flâneur. Where the latter is – or was – generally upright and mobile, engaging in distanced observation from within the safety of the anonymous urban throng, here, by contrast, the solitary figure lies prone and still – embedded, or even interred. With its gaze turned inwards, this figure may see nothing – a Peeping Tom who dare not look – but certainly senses the thrum of the road, penetrating and vibrating through its somniferous body. The figure is not of the crowd, but of the city, finding refuge in its structural nooks and crannies, its voids, yet the scene retains the vulnerability and exposure of an open wound. Thus, it is a vital body, one that still lives, that endures in spite of having the inherent appearance of an interred corpse within unforgiving concrete and brick surroundings. Perhaps, within the tomb-like containment of those locations, the figure even evokes a certain becalming ‘saintliness’, as if its presence were momentarily inserting a humane healing touch to the scars of the city – a ‘curated’ body in both artistic and ecclesiastical senses. As Todd Presner reminds us in HyperCities: Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities, “the original etymology of the term curation mean[s] ‘care of souls’ or, in some cases, ‘stewardship of the dead’” (2014: 148). On the other hand, the horizontality of these un-portraits, coupled with the textural materiality they evoke, marks them out as antithetical to the customary association of transcendence and spirituality with verticality.

The prone body’s association in two of the triptychs with what looks like the freshly-lain tags of graffiti writers similarly invokes a sense of ‘wounding’: urban signs that appear to be a million miles away from Lynch’s image of a beautiful and legible city. Is this both literally and metaphorically the ‘writing on the wall’? Unlike the graphic ‘artwork’ of Berlin’s Eastside Gallery throw-up also depicted in the montage, whose two-dimensional statement is clear and benign, hard-core tagging resorts to a far more mysterious and, therefore, potentially ominous aesthetic from a beholder’s point of view. It is, in fact, far more an art of performance, one that trades not on presence so much as invisibility and evasiveness. Its actors are out there somewhere because their tags say they are, but the public does not know who they are, when they did the deed or where they came from. So, what their tags project is the performance of their disappearance – a silent scream. That would seem to be the moving force – perhaps threat – of the taggers’ activity: their sheer ‘authorless’ elusiveness.

However, in spite of this invisibility they are still performing to a public. While the illegality in itself of their mark-making, but also its execution in often inaccessible, high-risk, forbidden locations, seeks to outwit surveillance and capture, it nevertheless requires to be witnessed after the event, precisely so as to be sanctioned as transgressive by those of the ‘civic order’ who are considered to be ‘within
the law’. In other words, everyday citizens. Arguably, then, as writing, it *hurts*, transitively and intransitively: on the one hand it is the outlaw’s expression of the pain of exclusion and dispossession, bordering on a form of relief-providing laceration; on the other it seeks to strike consciously (and creatively) at what is ‘in law’. Unlike the benign urban performances, observed by Jane Jacobs, of neighbours who ritually nod and smile to one another across the street to indicate that “all is well” (1961: 67), this implies the opposite: all is not well. All the more reason for these ‘signs of life’ to be seen and heard. Susan J. Smith’s conclusion that “we know the cost of so much and the value of so little” when it comes to preserving the order of the city underscores the sentiment (2000: 89). The implicit affinity between the anonymity of tagging practices and that of the faceless, transient body inserted into cavities in the ring-road’s infrastructure, to say nothing of the authorless premise of the *Conjunctions* convolute as a whole, is also worth noting.

The (post-)organic city

It is doubtful whether Lynch’s ‘image of the city’ (invoked in relation to “Dysjunction”), his projected imperative that cities should facilitate a coherent sensory mapping of the environment for its inhabitants, would stretch to embracing the art of graffiti. To Lynch’s credit, though, while according primacy to the visual, as the title of his book implies, it is clear from his citation that his awareness encompassed the entire human sensorium. We not only ‘see’ with our other senses, we are also complex organic beings whose various biological mechanisms connect with the similarly complex force-fields of the city, forming an integrated ecology. Thus, an interventionist structure such as the Coventry ring-road would imply a ‘wounding’ not merely on account of the way it brutalises the immediate visual legibility of the city and, therefore, the physical experience and mobility of the pedestrian/citizen, but also in existing primarily to facilitate maximum vehicular traffic flow. Among other things, as Chatterton’s citation earlier in this chapter shows (2019: 17), this produces a sonic agitation as well as intolerable levels of toxic expulsion, leading to the general pollution of the lived environment with all its associated knock-on effects on human health and well-being. Jane Jacobs’ analogy in the quoted extract of “Still Life” between the “organised complexity” of cities on the one hand and the life sciences on the other paves the way for the establishment of an organic linkage in how circulation takes place in both the human body and the cultural and infrastructural body of the city. This loops us back to Stafford’s notion of hedonics mentioned earlier in relation to the empiricist epistemology of David Hume: “The emergent, cross-disciplinary study I am calling hedonics is intent on finding ways to reinsert the biological into the investigation of cultural practices” (2006: 150). In fact, as Richard Sennett explains in *Flesh and Stone*, William Harvey’s ground-breaking conclusions in the 17th century relating to the circulation of blood in the human
body “helped change the expectations and plans people made for the urban environment. [...] Thus were the words ‘artery’ and ‘veins’ applied to city streets in the eighteenth century by designers who sought to model traffic systems on the blood system of the body” (1994: 256 and 264).

The terminologies and images of human biology flowed easily, then, into those of urban infrastructure. The diagram in “Still Life” of a concentric lymph node with its nine follicles is indeed striking in its optical resemblance to the map of Coventry city centre, encircled as it is by the ring-road’s corresponding nine junctions. The inclusion here of the lymph node is put in sobering perspective, however, by the accompanying description of a cancerous digression in its functioning, a breakdown of chromosomes leading to a “translocation”, as it is called, and the overproduction of the protein cyclin D1, which, in turn, results in the uncontrolled growth of lymphocyte cells. As the excerpt from Flesh and Stone also implies, malformations occur in the body and circulation becomes blocked; ergo the flow of urban actors is subject to structural impediments – meaning literally a ‘shackling of feet’ – that produces unhealthy aberrations and diversions (the said translocations).

As is shown in this extract from Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain, in which the chief consultant of the sanatorium where the novel is famously set holds forth, the human lymphatic system possesses a particular exquisiteness: “Lymph is the most refined, intimate, and delicate mechanism in the human body. [...] People always talk about blood and its mysteries, that special juice, as it’s called. But the lymph, now that’s the juice of juices, the essence, you see, the blood’s own milk, a very rarefied liquid” (2005: 315). But the lymphatic system’s sensitivity is also its downfall, a vulnerability of the body that begins with swellings of the lymph glands: “And there is always a reason for them, though hardly a welcome one” (315). Thus, in the same way that Sennett draws analogies with urban circulations, Mann utilises the metaphor of illness to interrogate the early 20th century ‘death wish’ that lead to WW1 and its aftermath. Just as the body’s lymphocytes effectively begin to destroy its own immune capacities by overproducing and congealing – producing what might be called an ‘exquisite corpse’ – so that war proved to be a monumental exercise in self-harm.

Similarly sobering is the suggestion with such blood cancers that their presumed cause is ‘environmental’. This proposes a connection between urban and biological ecologies that is not merely figurative or analogous but actual: the healthy circulation of blood in the human body, which is what keeps it alive, is placed at risk by the direct as well as indirect effects of ‘negative environments’ whether those be the pollution caused by the toxicities of traffic; crass denials of architecture’s social value, to reference Leach’s expression cited above (1999: 216); or the spectacle of modern capitalism as invoked scathingly by the Situationist manifesto of ‘unitary urbanism’. The
latter also attacks architectures that are not made for people “but without them and against them” and, speaking in 1961, identifies traffic circulation as “the major problem of modern cities”, failing as it does to facilitate healthy “human encounters and participation” (1961: 87). As we saw earlier in this chapter, Chatterton echoes the sentiment from a 21st century perspective, attributing “[a]lmost all modern ills to the effects of the automobile” (2019: 17).

The matter of life and death
The precariousness of ‘life’ and proximity of ‘death’ is encapsulated, of course, in the very title of Jacobs’ renowned book where it applies to (great American) cities but clearly sees the healthy lives and informal, everyday interactions of citizens as the key to sustaining viable urban ‘cultures’. In “Still Life” the significance of this is invoked in the cited passage from Sennett’s Building and Dwelling (2018), where it is allied with the fundamental struggle of life and death forces in play in Freudian psychoanalysis from the 1920s onwards (recalling Mann’s ‘death wish’). Perhaps the supine body, resting in the recesses of the ring-road, is Sennett’s Hypnos, the “daemon of sleep, bringing release from anxiety and the suspension of waking cares” (2018: 83). As the twin brother of Thanatos, the god of death, he seems to hover between life and death, momentarily ‘at peace’ but very much still here and waiting to be roused to consciousness again from this in between state – in Sennett’s terms, via the humane vision of a Jane Jacobs. As with the rhetoric of the Situationists, her vision recognises the tragic flaw that lay hidden in the celebration of the “potency of statistics and the triumph of the mathematical average” in early to mid-20th century urban planning and design (1961: 569). Alternatively, on a less mythical level, perhaps the figure here is the lymphoma patient, in treatment limbo, an aging and infirm body, exactly as old and vulnerable as the crumbling brutalist ring-road that holds it momentarily in place and will doubtless outlast it.

For all the ‘perfection’ both of the science of blood circulation within the body itself and its figurative analogy with healthy urban flow, “Still Life” appears to conclude on a cautionary (yet still optimistic) note with its invocation of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s “body without organs” (BwO) trope. This is understood by O’Sullivan as “itself a kind of surface upon which the ‘I’ is a mere striation. It is in this sense that the BwO is a mechanism, a procedure, for undoing the strata that bind us. [...] It breaks down the subject/object boundary, tears apart, to use the quote from Guattari again, the ‘ontological iron curtain between being and things’” (2006: 115). In other words, the organic metaphor of the functioning city with its clear zones and boundaries, and its ecology of reciprocity and self-containment, is all too neat and, arguably, precisely the error of Corbusian planning.
Instead, in Beltzung Horvath’s and Maicher’s analysis, the BwO, seen as a practical trope for which Situationist practice provides a prime paradigm,

frees desire from capture within apparatuses (of the state and the city) and allows intensities to flow in new directions. Constructing the BwO correlates to a new geography and cartography. […] We want to strengthen the understanding of the BwO as an opportunity to rethink the city as made up of practices that oscillate between stratification and destratification, between the capture and liberation of flows.

(2016: 34)

Thus, a form of re-organ-isation is called for, a term that Caroline A. Jones has allied with the BwO. For her, Deleuze and Guattari “celebrate the delirious potential of this ‘BwO’, a rhizomatic dis-organized self. Representation (culture, art) plays a crucial role in containing and ordering this unformed body – and, equally, can play a role in releasing its utopian potential” (2006: 38).

**INSERT Figure 1.5 “Still Life” road map sample (p.2 of eResource item 1.3). Caption:**
Fig.1.5 Sample from “Still Life: Som[n]a in the City (adjunctive mood)”, *Conjunctions: Some Road Maps (in Multiple Moods)* (anonymous portfolio), 2020.

**“White Noise: a Farrago (hyperjunctive mood)”**

The fourth and final road map in the *Conjunctions* convolute, takes us to the eastern side of the inner ring-road and the segment between Junctions 3 and 4 known as Ringway Whitefriars. This area of the city centre is predominantly Coventry University territory and in many respects evokes precisely a campus atmosphere. But the ringway is also topped and tailed, as it were, by the municipal ‘Elephant Building’ at its northern end at Junction 3 and the relic of the 14th century Whitefriars Monastery at its southern end at Junction 4. The Carmelite monastery finds itself rammed up “uncomfortably close”, as Pevsner and Pickford put it (2016: 237), against the superstructure of the ring-road, whose main overhead carriageway, tributary feeder lanes and forest of supporting pillars rudely bisects the university campus here as the road tears from one junction to the other. The two junctions themselves are the most convoluted on the ring-road as a whole, invoking for the driver nerve-jangling negotiations of multiple converging traffic streams, counter-intuitive compulsions typically to bear left in order eventually to go right, and bamboozling signage. The bird’s-eye abstraction that is the official A-Z map of the city centre conveys a graphic idea of the gnarled entanglement in play here (some unfortunate cartographer will certainly have had their work cut out). At worm’s-eye level, meanwhile, the pedestrian experiences the customary catacomb of subterranean passages on the one hand and, beneath the soaring underbelly of the central
carriageway, the helter-skelter, material immediacy of multiply-entwined slip roads and sheer brutalist concrete on the other. As one drifts on the ground from the red sandstone ruins of medieval Whitefriars, past the 21st century dazzle of Coventry University’s multi-turreted library building and, adjoining it on its southern side, the futuristic Faculty of Engineering, Environment and Computing, into the sublime shadow of the modernist ring-road, and eventually down to the street-straddling, sheet-metal ‘Elephant’ that is – or was – the City Council’s mammoth Sports and Recreation Centre (built in the 1970s), there is a form of ‘hypertextual claustrophobia’ that sets in. Effectively this involves a form of non-sequential teleportation between radically diverging ambient zones as one is continually deferred or transposed ‘by osmosis’ from one ‘auratic silo’ to another. In a related vein, Jan Gehl talks, in fact, of micro-climates within highly delimited urban spaces, “local atmospheric zones [that] can be as small as a single street, in nooks and crannies and around a bench in city space” (2010: 168).

Turning to the anonymous road map of Ringway Whitefriars, as ever the clue is in the title. “White Noise: a Farrago” is suggestive of a blurred riot of visual static produced by this dense urban hotchpotch of a built environment: ‘Whitefriars noise’ on the one hand, ‘Farrago Village’ on the other. The first echoes the situation of the monastery, while the second reflects the recent repurposing of a disused factory site as a tight-knit complex of small-scale arts and crafts enterprises at the nearby Fargo Village (on Far Gosford Street). But the clue is also, of course, in the presentational form of the mapping, whose mood in this case is deemed ‘hyperjunctive’ – a neologism probably coined so as to evoke precisely the sense of an overdetermined, not to say manic convergence of diverse built forms and atmospheres. The elongated collage of colour images – available to view in full as a pdf in eResource (see item 1.4) – forms a panorama (left to right) between Junctions 4 and 3, within which discrete cubist configurations replicate the felt intensity of localised micro-zones within this urban landscape. These include, for instance, the ring-road underpass at Junction 4; the stagey ‘three Graces’ of William Morris (Faculty of Business and Law), Fredrick Lanchester Library and the Engineering, Environment and Computing Faculty, which are positioned centrally; and the ‘White Elephant’ that is the City Council’s Sports and Recreation Centre at Junction 3. The latter occupies a place of affection in the hearts of Coventry citizens, first, for the droll resemblance of its frontage to the ‘sacred animal’ in question, which chimes with one of the symbols of the city’s coat of arms, and, second, for the sheer daring of its monumental presence as its squats on its haunches directly on top of the thoroughfare that is Cox Street. At the same time, the Elephant represents a forbidding fortress without a front door, the enclosed glass bridge that connects it to the listed Olympic-size swimming baths next door being its only point of public access. In other words, you have to pass
through another vast building first in order to get to it. With its windowless, sweeping facades of silvery-grey zinc sheeting, elevated on formidable concrete plinths, its appearance is more that of a nuclear shelter for the masses. Nothing on its armoured exterior betrays anything of the leisure-orientated activities for which it was designed and, now that it is no longer operational, it is precisely the magnitude of this empty monolith that renders its continuing occupation of the site difficult to justify. Elephants supposedly never forget, however, so perhaps it is the cultural memories of infrastructural urban change in time embodied by the building’s presence in the city that should be seen to count for something.

The road map’s discrete zones are suggestive in their distorted, cubist constellations of the way shifting light conditions at different times of day or in different seasons generate varying micro-moods or perceptions of space. They are embedded within a supporting superstructure of ring-road close-ups – the rough-cast fabric of its original cladding, which, with its grainy monochrome hue, seems to create its own version of optical ‘white noise’. Taken as a whole, the horizontal reach of the collage reproduces the elevated monumentality of Ringway Whitefriars, almost as if the ring-road had absorbed into its carapace – engorged perhaps – the ground and buildings pressing up against it on either flank. Gordon Cullen’s 1950s tiled mural of Coventry comes to mind again, of course, with its rectilinear montage of overlapping architectural elevations inserted neatly within variegated ceramic patterning (see Fig. 1.3). But where the latter represents a modernist idealisation of urban form and evolution through the ages, the incoherent farrago that is “White Noise” projects a discombobulating bricolage as well as incremental ruination in time. The ring-road may dominate here but it is visibly depreciating as the striations of material fracture, discolouration and decay in the surface texture of its brutalist cladding betray. At the same time, though, there is evidence of renewal along the Ringway: replacement cladding in two-tone shades of grey, evoking forms of both ‘cuboid camouflage’ – paradoxically drawing attention to itself – and monochrome pixilation, which returns us implicitly to the notion of visual static.

On air
The wide-angled collaged topography of “White Noise” conjures an environmental aura of frenetic excess, temporally captured in a form of synchronous present. Meanwhile, the compressed assemblages of associative and suggestive text accompanying it as a series of five commentaries – written on the back of some postcards to an unknown addressee and linked to selected images of the mapping (see eResource PowerPoint item 1.5) – point towards the potential antithesis of such a ‘hyperjunctive mood’: to what might be called the imperceptible air of the unbuilt environment.
Further, the implied notion that the mythical epithet of being ‘sent to Coventry’ – invoking a practice of active silencing as we saw earlier in this chapter – is more plausibly to be linked with the presence of several monastic orders in the medieval city and their inherently calm, quiet ways of inhabiting the world, is illuminating by association. As such, a potential meditation on the literal and figurative properties of air proposes itself: how in all its invisibility air may not only contribute imperceptibly to the formation of certain moods in the urban environment but also operate as a form of inherent carrier of ‘unseen truths’ which can, moreover, be unpalatable. The conjectural reflection I have in mind occurs, first, via the etymological linkage of ‘cloister’ with ‘claustrophobia’ (from Latin claustrum, meaning cloister). The rump of Whitefriars – which represents the eastern range of the cloister and is but a fraction of the erstwhile monastery site, as the remaining foundation footprint that surrounds it hints at – pertains to the Carmelite monks’ former dormitory as well as spaces of study and prayer. In other words, these exemplify the cloister as a place of desired quiet and stillness – of undisturbed air. Meanwhile, the everyday transposition of ‘cloister’ to a sense of claustrophobia translates adversely as a fear of suffocation (or being ‘cloistered’) and, hence, of being corporeally hemmed in and ‘without air’. Silence and silencing, moreover, resonate unfavourably as aspects of the implied punishment of being sent to Coventry. How ironic, then, that it is the cloister, which traditionally embraces silence as a positive axiom of its very existence, that finds itself condemned to be rammed up (claustrophobically) against the relentless roar of the ring-road’s traffic. Seemingly this is its undeserved punishment. These days, of course, it is only the stored, surplus-to-requirements artefacts of the Herbert Art Gallery “lying there like sick patients in hospital”, that are trying to obtain some recuperative rest.N23

Second, air comes into play in the premeditated form of the breathing building that is Coventry University’s Fredrick Lanchester library. With its five floors of study space, this is supposedly another designated place of silence. Here, however, the air is very definitely intended by design to be on the move and, therefore, implicitly at odds with the equation of silence with undisturbed air. This arises not only in terms of the figurative ‘hot air’ of socialising chatter that apparently has a tendency to pervade the library these days but also, as the road map’s postcard text “Silence (in the library)” intimates, in that it generates its own internal micro-climate. As McGrory explains:

Air is drawn into the building through vents on all elevations into a plenum beneath the ground floor. This feeds air into light wells that is then fed onto the floors by vents at the foot of each. They open and close in response to sensors around the building, checking on temperature and air quality. Air exhausts out through the vents in the perimeter walls to the
towers. [...] The metal constructions on the tops of the towers also have a function. Air rises through the building as long as it can leave freely out of these towers. [...] The metal structures are designed to deflect winds of all strengths to ensure the building breathes. The building monitors its own environment and stores heat to be released at the appropriate time. At night the building sends cool air round itself, so in the morning it will start at a comfortable temperature and with all this the building runs at reduced energy cost.

(2017: 47)

In this case, then, the necessary disturbance of air, its agitation and consequent flow, is more in line with the ‘visual reverberations’, the noise, of the library’s spectacular outward appearance, above all its busy crowd of ten ventilation towers which have led to it being dubbed ‘The Castle’ by students (as it happens another of the symbols on the city of Coventry’s coat of arms). N24 If McGrory’s technical elucidation of the building’s respiratory mechanism conveys a powerful sense of the library as a living, breathing, environmentally-friendly ‘machine for studying’, as with the monastery this masks an irony which is that Fredrick Lanchester was the designer of the first British petrol-driven car, the legacy of which has been those inconspicuous noxious fumes that pollute the air of city centres, choke human breathing systems and attack the body’s various cardio-vascular functions. Meanwhile, the William Morris Building adjoining it on its northern flank, now the University’s Faculty of Business and Law, celebrates another ‘car hero’: the founder of the Morris car company which used the building as an engine production factory (and is depicted on the Luftwaffe’s 1940 bombing plan). An echo of, as well as variation on, the theme of sound waves as disturbed air occurs further north at Junction 3 and is encapsulated by the road map’s postcard text “2-Tone Refurb”.

The latter proposes a linkage between the aforementioned refurbishment of this section of the ring-road with rectangular cladding panels in busy syncopating shades of grey (completed in 2019) and the influential musical genre of 2-Tone – actually a record label – which is closely associated with the city of Coventry and formally celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2019. Amid the ghost town gloom and depression of early Thatcherite Britain, the 2-Tone movement represented a welcome breath of fresh air with its combination of upbeat ska rhythms, soft-core punk and multi-cultural positivism reverberating across the nation’s airwaves.

Finally, and perhaps most incisively, Bruno Latour draws attention to the sheer, yet unacknowledged necessity of air as the non-negotiable essence of that which enables biological survival. In its unwavering but invisible thereeness (or should that be theta’s) air is taken for granted and so paradoxically its presence only becomes perceptible when it begins to disappear:
At first we feel nothing, we are insensitive, we are naturalised. And then suddenly we feel not something, but the absence of something we did not know before could possibly be lacking. Think of the poor soldiers on the front line, deep in their trenches, the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of April 1915 near Ypres. They knew everything about bullets, shells, rats, death, mud, and fear – but air, they did not feel air, they just breathed it. And then, from this ugly, slow-moving greenish cloud lingering over them, air is being removed. They begin to suffocate. Air has entered the list of what could be withdrawn from us.

(2006: 105)

It is not difficult to conclude, then, how much more significant in essence our treatment and shaping of the \textit{unbuilt} environment is: how the quality of the air we are given to breathe for free, as opposed to the infrastructural ‘noise’ of the built environment, is the true test of whether we are building a livable urban future. Even the metaphorical criticism that is often made of the ring-road, that it physically \textit{choke}s the city centre, is based on an assessment of its material presence rather than the noxious contaminated air with which its traffic pollutes the environment. Moreover, as this volume’s Introduction points out – and Carl Lavery meditates upon in his Postscript – in the viral, ‘invisible killer’ climate of Corona the ‘unpalatable truths’ of air’s make-up referred to at the beginning of this section acquire a particular resonance. As all the world’s populations adjust their quotidian behaviours (at the time of writing), seeking to reduce their subjection to the unseen deadly droplets floating outside in the air, there is a palpable sense of the urban infrastructure being overlaid with an entirely revised set of principles relating to how people move within the city, right down to the 2m personal space distance one has been instructed to maintain. In short, it is the air, and the unpredictable threat that it carries, that determines now how life goes on (or not).

\textbf{To whom it may concern}

As their respective titles suggest, the handwritten commentaries to be found separately on the back of a set of five discrete air mail postcards correlate specifically with the sites supposedly depicted on their obverse sides (see item 1.5 in the eResource for the full set). If the ‘hyperjunction’ in sum amounts to a collaged \textit{composition}, these ‘removable postcards’ could be said to correspond implicitly to a form of \textit{decomposition}, undoing the ecology of this allegorical cityscape via a form of displacement that can be equated hypothetically with the figurative dislodgment of selected cuboid panels of the ring-road’s crumbling cladding. Arguably, they represent a further intervention in their own right: a reciprocal disruption of the ‘interference’ already presented by the visual static
generated by the road map overall, one that is enhanced by the sometimes elliptical tenor of the textual inscriptions that bind the postcards together as a set. As such, the postcards appear to reform as their own momentary ‘para-site’. In other words, a site that exists ‘beside’, ‘alongside’, ‘subsidiary to’ or even ‘beyond’. In fact, as Michel Serres has pointed out (in Greg Ulmer’s citation), in French the word parasite, referring in the first instance to an organism or phenomenon “that takes without giving”, incorporates the notion of ‘noise’ as in “the static in a system or the interference in a channel” (in Ulmer 1985: 100). Meanwhile, the anonymity of the phrase ‘To Whom it May Concern’, an open appeal to an unknown recipient, which all five postcards share, to say nothing of the Air Mail stamps, anticipate an unspecified dispersal into the ‘sublime air’ of the ether (sent from Coventry) and thus a further dissolution or fragmentation. As a form or medium of communication postcards are in any case something of an anachronism in the 21st century and so their utilisation here is emblematic perhaps of the ruins of a certain socio-cultural era. In that sense, like the atrophying ring-road infrastructure, they can be said to be temporally ‘post’. Yet, at the same time, by drawing attention to the simultaneous presence of discrete moments in history, from the rump of 14th century Whitefriars at Junction 4 to the obsolescence of the 1970s Elephant Building at Junction 3, they foretell the inevitable ‘future ruins’ of shiny new entities such as the yellow brick library or its ‘noisy neighbour’, the shimmering Faculty of Engineering, Environment and Computing with its hexagonal clusters of windows and angled aluminium facades. Pre-cards as well as postcards, then.

**INSERT Figure 1.6 “White Noise” road map sample (detail from eResource item 1.4). Caption:**
Fig.1.6 Sample from “White Noise: a Farrago (hyperjunctive mood)”, *Conjunctions: Some Road Maps (in Multiple Moods)* (anonymous portfolio), 2020.

**Conclusion**

It is no coincidence that the *Conjunctions* convolute 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’. This road map may share the sentiments of a Julian Dobson, who advocates cogently for a “theory of change” based on a collective stewardship of 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” (2015: 266). Or those of a Paul Chatterton with his persuasive manifesto demands for “real change”, involving among other things a car-free, post-carbon, commons-based sustainable city (2019: 124-8). But 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 or “blind epistemology”, to re-
invoke Jones (2006: xi) – 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 been shown to argue, master-planning
commits the error of assuming that citizens wish to live an ordered, preordained life (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.

Notes
1. In the absence of a date indicated by the map, the special edition’s reference number 7.40 could
plausibly relate to July 1940, with the bombing for which it provided the script occurring four
months later.

2. Baedekers were – and still are, of course – the respected German cultural guides for tourists.

3. Coventry is known as the sky-blue city, hence the playful contrivance here; it has a further aptness
inasmuch as the execution of the Luftwaffe’s ‘blueprint’ was delivered from the skies over the city.

4. The 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale entitled “Reporting from the Front” implicitly explored the
notion of architecture and the built environment as essentially humane and constructive
phenomena that frequently come into their own as a consequence of the adverse conditions of a
hostile socio-political environment or ‘front line’.

5. Benjamin was still compiling the material for The Arcades Project in Paris when he was forced to
flee the city in Spring 1940, culminating in his suicide on the French-Spanish border in September
that year. *Jetztzeit* was the term Benjamin employed in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations* (1999: 245-55).


10. The drama of Lady Godiva and Peeping Tom is variously enacted via vernacular sculptural installations in the city centre (see Noszlopy 2003: 121-5 and 158-9).

11. Indicative of the way Coventry was seen at the time to represent ‘car city of the future’ par excellence was the fact of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) holding its annual conference in the city in 1962 under the banner “Building and Planning for the Motor Age”.

12. The phrase is taken from Robert Smithson’s verdict on the Meadowlands of New Jersey (see Brook and Dunn 2013: 201).

13. The circumstances differ in Coventry but it is striking nevertheless that the US’s ‘motor city’, Detroit, suffered a similar ‘donut’ crisis beginning in the 1960s with its vast centre famously ending up comprehensively dilapidated as car factories were abandoned and affluent white citizens took flight to the suburbs of the city.

14. As the Introduction observes, the circumstances of global lockdown caused by the Corona virus challenge all such assumptions, effectively reversing their desirability in the interests of urban resilience and survival.

15. Very occasionally sections of the ring-road have been temporarily closed down in order to permit events to take place. One, entitled *Motofest*, occurs on an annual basis and perversely witnesses the road being turned into a race track for private rally cars on a Sunday in May.

16. Ironically, given the ring-road’s utter hostility to cyclists, Ringway Rudge is named for one of the city’s erstwhile bicycle manufacturers Daniel Rudge. The late 19th century witnessed the beginnings of a positive boom in the bicycle industry in Coventry and, as Richardson points out: “In one sense,
the most important historical relics destroyed in the air raids on Coventry were the old cycle factories” (Richardson 1972: 33-5).


18. Townscape, published by the Architectural Press in 1961, was reissued as The Concise Townscape later that same year.

19. Coventry City Council appears to have granted St. Nicholas local listed status in the meantime. The architects were Lavender Twentyman and Percy (Gould and Gould 2016: 102).

20. The state of Anhalt merged with Saxony in 1947 to form Sachsen-Anhalt, one of 16 Länder or regions making up Germany.

21. Body-Mind Centring reveals a similar concern with lymph and other bio-somatic systems as Chapter 3 shows.


23. The phrase was used, in fact, by Walter Benjamin upon encountering the works of Goethe and Schiller at their joint archive in Weimar (1972-89: 353).

24. An elephant with a castle on its back figures on the Broadgate Standard (1948) sited at the entrance to the city centre’s Upper Precinct (see Noszlopy 2003: 120-1).