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Louise Campbell

In 1953, as the first building of Coventry's new pedestrian precinct neared completion, Donald Gibson told a journalist that he saw his job as city architect 'to mould together the team responsible for planning and design, to tactfully control its creative energies, and to guide its brainchildren through the uneasy adolescence of the committee room to the maturity of concrete.'¹ The statement eloquently conveyed the idea of a new type of architect-planner, someone with an 'unheroic conception of the official architect's position', who was more concerned to assemble a team competent to plan and design than to win for himself personal accolades.² In 1935, the President of the RIBA famously – and controversially - compared the work of the architect in public employment to the quality of the chocolate bars obtained from vending machines: predictable, mediocre in quality and often rather stale.³ Gibson was instrumental in configuring the image of the official architect in different terms, as someone engaged in a work of central importance and significance. Gibson's enthusiasm for applying techniques of pre-fabrication and industrialised building to the construction of houses and schools, and his advocacy of combining the functions of the planner with that of the architect made him a key figure in post-war reconstruction. Coventry, where Gibson was appointed City Architect in 1938, became under his aegis a paradigm for urban reconstruction, and Gibson himself a shining exemplar of the public-sector architect: technically astute, non-hierarchical in his office organisation, with a strong sense of public service.

By contrast, recent writers have painted a rather different picture of Gibson's achievements at Coventry. They have characterised Gibson as a ruthless creator of a modernist city, someone who in his pursuit of a rationally ordered urban environment happily sanctioned the obliteration of familiar landmarks, and suggest that the new Coventry which he devised was received by many of its citizens with indifference or hostility.⁴ How, then, ought we to assess him? Although Gibson's career as a whole still lacks a detailed study, studies of Coventry's reconstruction in terms of local and national politics, together with the architect's personal papers, provide a useful starting-point for an analysis which balances professional concerns,

¹ 'Gibson of Coventry', Building, April 1953, p.139.

² Ibid.

³ H.S.Goodhart-Rendel, cited in B.Kaye, The Development of the Architectural Profession in Britain (London, 1960).

personal conviction and political context.⁵ Gibson emerges as a complex and interesting figure, whose determination to re-shape architecture in terms of new technologies was accompanied by a profoundly humane view of post-war civic life. An adroit politician-architect, Gibson was a pragmatist who was prepared to modify his ideas in the light of experience, events, and local opinion, someone whose concept of the city beautiful ultimately owes more to Patrick Abercrombie and Lewis Mumford than to the precepts of the Congrès Internationaux d' Architecture Moderne. Three aspects of Coventry's early redevelopment will be examined in order to support this view of Gibson as an idiosyncratic blend of the technocrat and the idealist. The cautious, highly circumspect use which Gibson made of graphic techniques to convey ideas about the future shape of that city will be scrutinised, while his attitude to commerce and his attempts to control it will be examined in relation to his concept of civic decorum. Finally, it is argued that Gibson's adoption of some unexpectedly traditional techniques and images - incorporated into the fabric of the first of the new city buildings - conveyed his personal belief in the value of a well-ordered environment, and his conviction that a city whose rapid growth and extremely youthful population stimulated the creation of a new species of civic iconography.

The broad contours of Gibson's career were conveyed with characteristic precision and clarity in a delightful autobiographical picture which he painted in 1971. (**pl. 1**) It begins in 1931 when Gibson worked in the office of Coolidge, Shepley Bullfinch and Abbott of Boston, U.S.A. during his year 'out' from Manchester University, and ends with retirement to the Isle of Anglesey in 1968. It is a species of pictogram, arranged sequentially starting in the top left corner with his departure for the United States, and proceeding in clockwork direction. It features a brief period in private practice in Lincoln after qualifying as an architect in 1932; three years at Liverpool University; marriage to Winmary McGowan, a fellow student at Manchester, and the birth of their four children; work at the Building Research Station around 1935 as scientific officer researching technical failures in buildings; an appointment as Deputy County Architect the Isle of Ely as Deputy County Architect in 1937, where Gibson investigated day-lighting and the design of classrooms in his spare time; to Coventry in 1938 as first City Architect; to Nottingham in 1955 as County Architect, where Gibson and his development group evolved a method of building using a flexible steel frame (the CLASP

⁴ R.Gill, 'From the Black Prince to the Silver Prince:Relocating Medieval Coventry', *Twentieth Century Architecture* 7 (2004), pp.58-86. P.Hubbard and L. Faire and K.Lilley, 'Memorials to modernity? Public art in the "city of the future"', *Landscape Research*, vol. 28, no.2, 2003, pp.147-69.

system); a move to the War Office as Director-General of Works in 1958; an appointment to the Ministry of Public Building and Works in 1962 as Director-General of Research and Development and then in 1967 as Controller General; and his election as President of the RIBA in 1964-5.⁶ The painting, like Gibson's career, is dominated by the distinctive plan of the pedestrian precinct at Coventry.

Representing Coventry: medium and message

Liverpool University's School of Architecture was evidently a formative experience for Gibson. The buildings of Liverpool's spectacular waterfront form the horizon of Gibson's autobiographical pictogram. '...I was...appointed lecturer at the University of Liverpool... nominally instructor in charge of the first year students. However, after my arrival I was invited to accept the lectures on construction to the fourth year students...' he later recalled.⁷ It was at Liverpool, between 1933 and 1935, that Gibson attended the course of lectures on town planning given by Patrick Abercrombie and obtained a certificate in the subject.⁸ Liverpool School of Architecture was just at that time re-inventing itself as a cradle of modernist design. Under Charles Reilly, the School had adopted the Beaux-Arts approach to design and planning popular in American schools of architecture; it also witnessed a vogue for Swedish modernism, which manifested itself in such things as fountains and street furniture, decorative sculpture and well-crafted public buildings. After Reilly's retirement in 1933, a different, more socially conscious and technically-informed modernism began to appear, which supplanted the Beaux-Arts influence while not entirely displacing the Swedish model.⁹ Both Percy Johnson-Marshall (1915 -1993) and his brother Stirrat (1912 -1981) were students at Liverpool during this period of transition, in the middle of the decade. Percy was to place great importance on the stimulus of those 'stirring times', and to the visits made by Erich Mendelsohn and Walter Gropius to the School. 'This changed our direction of thought and design – how to come to terms with technology? ... We were also becoming strongly influenced by social issues, and wished to take part in the "scope of total architecture". We

⁵ N. Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, affluence and labour politics: Coventry 1945-60 (London, 1990) and J.Hasegawa, Replanning the blitzed city centre (Buckingham, 1992); Gibson papers (Private coll., eventually to RIBA/V&A drawings and manuscript coll.)

⁶ Details from biography file, British Architectural Library; 'Donald Gibson', Architects' Journal 20 January 1955, p.77; obituary, Times 26 December 1991 and Guardian 7 January 1992.

⁷ D.Gibson, 'Memoir of Stirrat Johnson-Marshall', Gibson papers.

⁸ Details of Gibson's early career come from a *curriculum vitae* dating from the mid-1930s, and from his 'Memoir of Stirrat Johnson-Marshall.' Gibson gives various slightly different dates for his time at Liverpool, but since Abercrombie left Liverpool in 1935, Gibson must by then have completed his town-planning course.

⁹ For a discussion see J.Sharpley, A.Powers and M. Shippobottom, Charles Reilly and the Liverpool School of Architecture 1904-1933 (Liverpool University Press, 1996).

both decided to go into some form of public service...and this conditioned us for most of our lives' he recalled.¹⁰ Gibson, born in 1908 and their senior by only a few years, was considered by them as a sort of older brother. When Gibson arrived at the Isle of Ely, Stirrat was already working there as chief architectural assistant; Percy was one of the first architects whom Gibson recruited to his new department at Coventry in 1938. Small though it was, the gap between Gibson and the Johnson-Marshalls was to be significant. For Gibson, the excitement of Gropius' visit to Liverpool in 1934 lay less in his architectural and urban vision than in his concept of an entirely new kind of architectural education. Speaking to the Royal Society of Arts in 1940 about approaches to reconstruction, Gibson called for the creation of a Bauhaus-inspired institution, 'a combination of technical school, architectural school and town-planning department, in which students would learn to handle and work on materials in the early years and would be sifted out in accordance with their talents and ability, the most gifted eventually becoming planners of the future environment'.¹¹ And although modernist town-planning concepts informed Gibson's initial plans for Coventry in 1939-40, they were to be consistently countered by the enduring influence of Patrick Abercrombie, whose example encouraged the development of a more moderate, regionalist modernism.

At Liverpool School of Architecture under Charles Reilly during the inter-war period, the architectural perspective had emerged as an art form in its own right. A former student (and subsequently the head of the School) Robert Gardner-Medwin, recalled both the showmanship and the arduous discipline which was involved in producing elaborate renderings of buildings and cities, complete with cast shadows, highlights and reflections.¹² Liverpool students, carefully drilled in producing presentation drawings, scored some notable successes with their draughtsmanship, frequently winning the Rome scholarship in architecture.¹³ That Gibson, who had charge of the new materials gallery at Liverpool, may have been critical of the emphasis which the School continued to place on such drawing skills is suggested by the very sparing use which he made of architectural perspectives for conveying the appearance of Coventry's new city centre. This contrasts sharply with many of

¹⁰ P.Johnson-Marshall, Memoir of his brother Stirrat, Gibson papers.

¹¹ D. Gibson, 'Problems of building reconstruction', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (vol. 89), 27 Dec. 1940, p.78.

¹² R.Gardner-Medwin, *Fifty years of Liverpool architecture: a personal appraisal* (Liverpool School of Architecture exh.cat. 1978), p.1.

¹³ Harold Chalton Bradshaw was the first Rome scholar in 1913; William Holford in 1930, R.P.S.Hubbard in 1932. See Sharples, Powers and Shippobottom, op.cit.

his architect-contemporaries who produced or commissioned striking images of the new cityscapes as part of what Larkham calls ‘a process of civic boosterism’.¹⁴

Gibson’s appointment as City Architect at Coventry in late 1938 brought with it responsibility for a programme of new civic buildings, for Coventry’s population, boosted by its flourishing car and machine-tool industries, had shot from 128,157 in 1921 to 220,000.¹⁵ When Gibson arrived, about 10,000 people a year were pouring into the city to work in Coventry’s armaments factories, then gearing up for war production, and there was a desperate need for new housing and recreational facilities. From 1937, the city council was controlled by the Labour party which favoured a more interventionist approach.¹⁶ The city, it was pointed out, lacked the cultural, social and educational buildings appropriate to a thriving industrial city. It had no theatre, central library, art gallery or public swimming pool; it needed new civic offices and law courts, and a new building for the school of art. Gibson approached the task in a highly rational way. Instead of working on designs for each of these buildings in isolation, using sites as and when they became available, he decided to work on a broader canvas, and persuaded his employers to let him recruit a team of assistants, initially in order to alleviate immediate housing needs. A staff of twenty-eight people, including seventeen architects and two quantity surveyors, were working in the Coventry department by the summer of 1939.¹⁷ In parallel with designing new housing, Gibson and his team worked out a scheme for a new civic area as an entirety. A model was made to convey their ideas for this area, and to demonstrate to the city council the essentially three-dimensional nature of planning, and of the optimum relationships between buildings, streets and greenery.

A conflict rapidly developed between Gibson’s idea of re-ordering the historic centre as a park – a tranquil, well-planted space in a chronically traffic-choked city centre - and the rather different proposals which had been worked out in the late 1930s by the city engineer, Ernest Ford, who was nominally responsible for town-planning in Coventry. This conflict served as the catalyst for a much wider debate about land use and town-planning conducted in the press and by the local amenity societies.¹⁸ Controversy focused on the contrast between Gibson’s design for a long, low range of civic buildings and the medieval buildings which they were

¹⁴ See P.Larkham, ‘Remaking cities: images, control and postwar replanning in the UK’, Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design vol.24 (1997), p.742.

¹⁵ Figures from M.S.Garrett, ‘Background Notes of the Redevelopment of the central Area of the city of Coventry.1924-1958’, p.12, Percy Johnson-Marshall archive, University of Edinburgh library CCC/B/1. Johnson Marshall’s archive is an excellent source of material about the genesis of the re-planned Coventry.

¹⁶ See Tiratsoo, pp.6-8.

¹⁷ R.D.Manning, ‘Coventry. A new official architectural department’, Keystone July 1939, pp.23-4.

¹⁸ See Hasegawa, pp.24-6; ‘Coventry Civic Centre’, Coventry Standard 18 Feb. 1939 and ‘A “City Beautiful”’, Midland Daily Telegraph 8 March 1939.

designed to enfold, and on the proposed removal of the buildings clustered around the cathedral, the parish church and the guild hall. Factories, workshop buildings and slum dwellings were to be demolished, together with the Georgian houses of the cathedral close, leaving the principal historic buildings as isolated fragments in a landscaped park. Although the city engineer proposed to create a quiet civic ‘square’ in the historic centre, his proposals were far more conservative than Gibson’s, retaining many elements of the old street layout, together with the tightly-packed mix of shops, industry and residential buildings which characterised Coventry’s post-medieval development.

An exhibition, ‘Coventry of Tomorrow’, was organised in May 1940 in St Mary’s Guildhall by the recently-formed local branch of the Association of Architects, Surveyors and Technical Assistants (consisting largely of members of Gibson’s office); Johnson-Marshall was branch secretary and organiser. The exhibition, as Johnson-Marshall frankly admitted, was a propaganda exercise, designed to raise public awareness of the need for a co-ordinated approach to planning, and to raise support for conducting a wide-ranging civic survey of Coventry.¹⁹ Johnson-Marshall privately described the situation in Coventry as he saw it: ‘...some fine buildings which very few people care about, streets designed for a fraction of the traffic which now clogs them, most of the shop-fronts rebuilt in the worst “modernistic” manner, acres of drab suburbs, few open spaces in the centre of the city...high land values in the centre preventing proper re-development, and a general lack of any cultural facilities’.²⁰

The concept of the exhibition derived from the classic method established by Abercrombie (and by Patrick Geddes before him) of survey, analysis and plan. Coventry’s existing provision for health, housing, education, transport and industry were charted by means of statistics and photographs mounted on panels. Under the slogan ‘The Idea /To Avoid Chaos we must PLAN our city for all our needs’ were arranged models of modern town-planning schemes borrowed from the Architectural Association, from F.R.S.Yorke and Marcel Breuer, and the MARS group. Architects including Maxwell Fry and Leslie Martin lent models of recently-designed school buildings, and a photographic exhibition of Small Houses was sent by the RIBA. The centrepiece of the exhibition was the model of the proposed civic centre made by the members of Coventry city architect’s department.²¹

¹⁹ Minutes of AASTA meeting of 18 Jan.1940, PJM coll. ABT/E.

²⁰ Letter of 3 May 1940 to Morris, briefing him about what to say in his speech at the opening of the exhibition. PJM coll. ABT/E.

²¹ A catalogue and correspondence regarding loans are at PJM coll. ABT/E, and photographs of the exhibition at CCC/A/1/2.

The response of the public as recorded in the visitors' book was predominantly positive, although one citizen commented acidly: 'A Coventry rebuilt as suggested is what the people need – for health and happiness – but as Hitler started smashing up “improved” Belgium and Holland this a.m. – let's deal with him first!!!' Another enquired wistfully: 'Is it possible so to modify the plan of the civic centre [so] that you retain the lovely old Tudor houses which still remain?'²²

Six months later, in the aftermath of the air raid on 14 November 1940 in which much of the central area of the city was destroyed by incendiary bombs during a single night, Gibson was able to draw upon the work which he and his colleagues had already done, and to exploit the carefully orchestrated demand for bold re-planning. The City Council's position in demanding help from central government was greatly strengthened by having already in post someone capable of planning for comprehensive re-building, and the city architect assumed a position of considerable power. After a lecture given by Gibson in London in 1941, John Summerson suggested that the pre-requisites for accomplishing any major change to the fabric of existing cities were plan, publicity and legislation. In Coventry, he pointed out, the first and second of these were already in place, the third was soon to follow.²³ Rapidly, Gibson and his team extended their pre-blitz plans to include the commercial centre of the city, and choked shopping streets were reconfigured in order to create a largely pedestrianised shopping area. **(pl. 2)** Vehicular traffic was to be re-routed away from the city centre by means of an inner ring road to create what Gibson was later to describe as 'quiet precincts where the movement of people is slow, and close and intimate'.²⁴ This notion of a precinct as a oasis seems to be related to one of Abercrombie's ideas for the Bloomsbury area of London, for which he proposed a traffic-free academic precinct based on the model of the Inns of Court.²⁵ In 1941, however, Gibson described his idea for central Coventry in rather different terms, writing of a 'pedestrian gardenway', constructed along on a gentle slope, 'with water gardens spilling from one level to another and the shops all round them.'²⁶

²² Visitors' book, PJM coll. ABT/E. According to the Keystone, November 1940, p.11, the exhibition received 5000 visitors.

²³ 'The Architectural Association: Coventry city architect on post-war reconstruction', Builder 31 January 1941, p.134.

²⁴ D.Gibson, 'The Third Dimension in Town Planning', Report of Proceedings at the Town and Country Planning Summer School, 1947, p.103. .

²⁵ See J.H. Forshaw and P.Abercrombie, County of London Plan (London, 1943), pp.50-52 for the idea of the precinct as applied to the Bloomsbury area.

²⁶ D.Gibson, 'How We Want to Rebuild Coventry', London Calling, 1941, p.9, BBC album, City Record Office, Coventry.

1941 saw the final victory of Gibson's proposals for re-planning Coventry over the plans drawn up by Ford. 'Unsatisfactory architectural effect' 'Bad streets to remain' 'Badly shaped sites' 'Civic Buildings blocked by shops' 'Bad traffic junctions' 'Industry remained in centre' are among the disapproving comments with which Gibson annotated a copy of Ford's plan.²⁷ The city council, no doubt swayed by Gibson's eloquent critique of his rival's approach, voted by an overwhelming majority to implement the city architect's more adventurous ideas.²⁸ In March 1941, Gibson's designs and plans were published in articles in the architectural press. The contrast between the devastation of the present and the orderly reconstruction of the future which had emerged as the dominant trope of the literature of wartime planning was here displaced by a vigorous critique of laissez-faire pre-war attitudes to development. This was identified as the single most undesirable legacy of the past, one which – in the aftermath of the blitz - could be effaced by dint of a rational and controlled approach to planning. It is noticeable that the seductive imagery of the architectural perspectivist was kept tightly under control. In the Architect and Building News, which illustrated two different architectural treatments of the new square, Broadgate, proposed for the centre of the city, it was argued that '...it is the plan that is of primary importance, the details can follow later'.²⁹ (pls. 3 & 4) The fundamental principles of the new scheme were illustrated by means of rough, schematic sketches. These fundamentals included creating areas of open space allowing an interesting skyline, and freeing up the view of historic buildings. The creation of new amenities like cultural buildings, and a rational grouping of functions, with the city organised into zones designated for different types of building such as housing, industry, commerce, culture and education were to compensate for the partial eradication of the ancient fabric of the city. '...These things will be welcome legacies of the war...[they] must be part of our war aims' claimed the writer.³⁰ The price to pay – the loss of buildings like an ancient almshouse which stood in the way of a planned new road, and

²⁷ Undated plan, Gibson papers.

²⁸ Interestingly, Ford had proposed separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic in 1939. Gibson's vision was not without its critics. A local paper pointed out that his plan involved not only eradicating the existing street pattern but that he was also prepared to sacrifice ancient landmarks for the sake of progress. Midland Daily Telegraph 27 Feb 1941.

²⁹ 'Coventry: A plan for the city centre', Architect and Building News, 21 March 1941, p.193.

A BBC publication also illustrated modern and traditional designs for Broadgate, and quoted Gibson on the subject of the new buildings in the city centre: 'we don't want them all to be the same: we want some individuality.' D.E.Gibson, 'How we want to rebuild Coventry', London Calling, text of broadcast in BBC Pacific Service, p.9. BBC Archive Album, CRO.

³⁰ ABN, p.190. Johnson-Marshall made the accompanying sketches; they resemble Liverpool sketch-designs.

which Gibson proposed should be dismantled and re-sited elsewhere - was, it was claimed, well worthwhile.³¹

It was suggested that, under the umbrella of a rationally-determined approach to planning and grouping, a 'reasonable stylistic diversity in design ...will certainly occur'.³²

Significantly, however, no single vision of a contemporary city emerged. The deliberate variety which was conferred upon the buildings proposed for the new city extended to the techniques used to represent them. In an article in the Architects' Journal, a hard linear style of drawing was used to show proposed new housing in the outlying area of Canley; more traditional perspective drawings were employed to represent the buildings around the cathedral, the new civic centre and marketplace, conveying the different character of various quarters of the city.³³

Gibson registered his dismay on finding the Architect and Building News article reprinted in the form of a pamphlet, entitled Plan for the New Coventry, with a dramatic new photomontage cover. 'The plans were printed by the Ministry of Information (without my knowledge)...It was sent out to the allied world to encourage a belief in our survival, as part of Britain's Propaganda' he later recalled.³⁴ The episode may have provided an uncomfortable reminder of the parallel between the techniques and rhetorical devices of political propaganda, the discourses of planning and reconstruction, and the persuasive methods of modern advertising. For this reason, perhaps, Gibson consistently preferred to use plans, models, and diagrams rather than sketches to convey ideas and information; they appeared to provide a more scientific and neutral a medium than pictorial perspectives, and their meaning was less easy to distort or manipulate.³⁵

However, for more traditional occasions and contexts, conventional presentation techniques were employed. A display of images was hastily put together on the occasion of King George and Queen Elizabeth's visit to Coventry in February 1942 to show how the city was recovering from the blitz. Interestingly, neither diagrams, nor the photographic record of what

³¹ When the proposed new road between the station and the centre did not materialise, the almshouse - Ford's hospital - was reprieved and restored *in situ*. However, the strategy for demolishing, and reconstructing old buildings on new sites was to remain a characteristic feature of Coventry's idiosyncratic approach to conservation. See Gill, pp.62-5.

³² Architects' Journal, 24 April 1941, p.281.

³³ 'Coventry 1: Wartime', AJ, 24 April 1941, p.273-4 (Canley housing); '2: Post-War', p.280-81 (central area).

³⁴ The pamphlet in the City Record Office, Coventry, 'Plan for the New Coventry' is a re-print of the article. Several pages from this pamphlet, annotated by Gibson, are among his papers.

³⁵ P. Johnson-Marshall, Rebuilding Cities (Edinburgh, 1966), p.306, complained that 'rather rough sketches I drew on a wall in the office to illustrate some of the principles of the scheme to visitors...were used by the Ministry of Information in a pamphlet...Planners sometimes need to beware of the unexpected uses to which casual sketch studies may be put.'

had been accomplished in the way of new housing and temporary shops, nor sketch drawings seem to have been considered adequate for this audience. A photograph of the scene in St Mary's Hall shows a number of highly finished perspective drawings of the new buildings proposed for the centre.³⁶ It is possible that this method of presentation, which was customarily used to represent prestigious kinds of architecture, was deemed more suitable for the occasion. It had the further advantage of making the city's plan seem less alarming than it might otherwise have appeared.

These traditional pictorial techniques contrasted with those which were employed in May 1945 at a more extended, ambitious, and public exhibition, 'Coventry of the Future' held in the Drill Hall. Although the publication accompanying it contained a highly finished rendering of the new Broadgate, the exhibition was dominated by the new sorts of display technique which had featured in the exhibition organised by Johnson-Marshall five years before. Screens with maps, diagrams and photographs, arguing the case for planning, came from the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, and lectures, visits, slide and film shows were organised, featuring 'A City Reborn', the Ministry of Information's film about Coventry.³⁷ Much of the exhibition was taken up with models, and centred upon a large one showing the city architect's plan of the central area, paid for by a local newspaper proprietor. As in 1940, the emphasis was upon securing the attention and support of Coventry's citizens. The difference was that whereas the earlier exhibition was part of a larger campaign by professional architects to disseminate modern concepts of planning and design, the 'Coventry of the Future' exhibition of 1945 was part of a strategic bid by the City Council to build up a secure base of supporters. Public debates and essay competitions were organised in order to elicit active participation and debate, and to generate a consensus about the new plans in advance of the public enquiry. The distinction between publicity and propaganda was sometimes hard to draw. A memorandum from the City Council about publicity for the exhibition proposed drawing citizens' attention to it by making announcements on factory loudspeakers in the lunch-hour, using leaflets, hoardings, street banners, and loud-speaker vans, placing notices on electricity and gas bills, making announcements in church, and organising visits for particular interest groups, and for groups of local school-children.³⁸

³⁶ Gibson papers.

³⁷ See 'Coventry of the Future': Guide to the exhibition in the Drill Hall, Coventry (1945), CRO.

³⁸ See photograph album and file on the exhibition in CRO CCA/TC/27/1/6/1 containing a circular from the Council headed 'Exhibition Publicity'.

‘Civic decadence’ and civic renaissance

Laissez-faire commercial development was clearly anathema to Gibson. His painting of 1939, displayed at the ‘Coventry of the Future’ exhibition under the slogan ‘The Choice’, and later given the title of *Civic Decadence* indicates his impatience with a city which had allowed the shopkeeper to dominate the central area, and failed to impose any kind of architectural control over their shop-fronts or advertisements.³⁹ The charm of Broadgate as a classic market-place, a point at which ancient roads converged, was not something which Gibson was prepared to acknowledge. His painting and his description of this junction reveals his distaste for the jumble of materials and architectural styles, the vulgarity of Victorian developments and the insensitive scale of inter-war commercial premises. Among ‘the things to be avoided’ in future, Gibson listed in 1941 ‘varying heights, hideous lettering, extravagant squiggles, narrow pavements’.⁴⁰ His ideas for Coventry’s city centre were shaped by the wish to offset the visual chaos of the commercial centre with a set of dignified civic and cultural buildings. His attitude was hardened by the intransigence of local shopkeepers, and particularly that of a large department store, whose opposition to pedestrianisation represented the greatest single obstacle to reconfiguring the city’s central junction, insisting until 1955 that a major road be cut across the shopping precinct, something which if executed would have forced pedestrians into an under-pass.⁴¹ Gibson’s dismissive attitude to advertising and shop-fronts was formed during the inter-war period by the campaigns of bodies like the Design and Industries Association and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, which succeeded in curbing the worst excesses of advertising hoardings in town and country.⁴² Gibson’s first-hand experience of the exuberance of north American cities in 1931 perhaps helped to confirm his perception of commerce which it was necessary to hold in check.

We know that Lewis Mumford’s *The Culture of Cities*, published in the United States in 1938, and appearing in England in 1940, became a sort of bible in Gibson’s office.⁴³ Together with a robust indictment of modern capitalism, the book contains a condemnation of the unplanned city of commerce. ‘...Makeshift piled upon makeshift’, Mumford wrote in his chapter on ‘The Insensate industrial town’. Some of Mumford’s harshest words were directed

³⁹ See photograph album of exhibition, CRO CCA/TC/2/22. The painting was later given by Gibson to the Herbert Art Gallery.

⁴⁰ ABN, 21 March 1941, p.192.

⁴¹ The Owen and Owen store. For a concise overview of Coventry’s re-development, see ‘Coventry Rebuilds’, Architectural Design December 1958, pp. 473-503; W.G. Bryant, ‘The Reconstruction of Coventry’, in Taming Megalopolis ed. H.Wentworth Eldridge (New York 1967), pp.770-3.

⁴² See D. Matless, Landscape and Englishness (London, 1998), chapter 1.

at the nineteenth-century city as the emblem of opportunism and profiteering ‘...the Devil reserved for himself the privilege of building the cities’ he chided.⁴⁴ Mumford’s indictment seemed peculiarly apposite to the situation in which Gibson and his team found themselves during the 1940s. In an article for the municipal magazine embellished with the vignette of a sack of money, Gibson had suggested in 1940 that the nationalisation of land - and government aid for public building projects - could provide the mechanism for effective re-planning.⁴⁵ The 1944 Town and Country Planning Act, which allowed local councils to compulsorily purchase land in war-damaged areas provided that they produced a plan for re-development, and that they held wide-ranging public consultations, enabled Coventry to implement its plan, although the pace was painfully slow. It was against this background of consultation, of persuasion, of trying to create a consensus, and of putting pressure on government agencies for more generous allocations of money, materials and labour, that Gibson exhibited his ideas to Coventry’s citizens and refined his vision of the future city.

The sort of city which Gibson envisaged was one in which contained opportunities for the cultivation of mind, body and spirit. To offset the frantic tempo of modern city life, he suggested creating tranquil zones of well-spaced buildings. The re-built city would be laced with precincts and parks. The commercial heart of city would be dignified by an orderly pedestrianised shopping area, made pleasant with flowers, fountains and sculpture. **(pl. 5)** Re-aligned to run east-west, replacing the old north-south axis of Broadgate, the long ranges of buildings forming this shopping ‘precinct’ would frame distant views of the historic centre on the other side of the central square. Around the medieval guildhall and the neo-Tudor town hall (designed by Garrett and Simister in 1912-20), a new civic hall, art gallery, and university buildings were to be grouped in a parkland setting, balancing the activities of the commercial zone with the more measured rhythms of civic and academic life. Areas of housing, conceived as well-equipped neighbourhood units, each provided with school, health clinic, and shops along the model of the MARS plan for London, lie beyond.

In a lecture of 1940, Gibson had articulated a Corbusian functionalism as regards gearing the design and construction of housing to the needs of the user and the technological means available.⁴⁶ Le Corbusier’s vision of the contemporary city was later acknowledged by Johnson-Marshall to have been a significant influence on Gibson’s team. Significantly,

⁴³ P.Johnson-Marshall, *op.cit*, p.295 states that Gardner-Medwin sent a copy from London.

⁴⁴ Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London, 1940), p.148.

⁴⁵ D.Gibson ‘Post-War Civil Development’, *Camera Principis*, August 1940, p.2.

⁴⁶ D.Gibson, ‘Problems of building reconstruction’, 1940, pp.71-2. He was later to advocate flats as a way of making a more efficient use of land.

however, he admitted that in central Coventry, where space was not at a premium, there was no compelling argument for building high; vertical accents would be provided by the spires of Coventry's three great medieval churches, and not by the towers of a business quarter, as in Corbusier's *Plan Voisin*.⁴⁷ This pragmatic approach to the legacy of modern town-planning is registered in the anonymous water-colour perspective of Coventry illustrated in Resurgam, a booklet published by the Town and Country Planning Association towards the end of the war.⁴⁸ (pl. 6) Coventry was represented as the epitome of an indigenous regionalist modernism, in which the contours of local geography, of rapidly changing English weather systems, and church spires provided a picturesque softening of the image of the modernist city.

By means of this visual re-balancing of commerce, religious and public buildings it was hoped to reinstate some measure of civic decorum. Significantly, the opportunity was also taken to re-think some of the city's new buildings in terms of function as well as of form. For example, the museum and art gallery was envisaged by Gibson as a venue for artists' studios as well as for displaying collections of historic art.⁴⁹ For him, the cathedral gutted in the air-raid of 1940 represented an opportunity simultaneously to re-think the historic centre and to re-articulate in modern form the close links which had once existed between the religious buildings and the civic life and occupations of the city. Both Gibson and the wartime Bishop of Coventry, Neville Gorton, had actually favoured sweeping away the shell of the gutted cathedral in a symbolic gesture of renewal. 'You cannot have a ruin to represent the Church in your City' Gorton declared to a Coventry audience, and warned against the 'false sentimental affection' attaching to the ruins, something which he feared would compromise his dynamic vision of the future of the city.⁵⁰ Accordingly, only the surviving cathedral tower – which Gibson imagined as a fragment in the park-like historic zone - was to be preserved, and the area left by demolishing the ruins was envisaged as the place for an imaginative reformulation of a building appropriate to the needs of the modern city with its population of machine-tool makers, engineers, and technicians. The new cathedral building which was to replace the ruins was imagined as nurturing new creative traditions – a centre for music and drama, 'a school of wood-carving and stone-carving and mural painting' as well as a place for worship.⁵¹ In

⁴⁷ P.Johnson-Marshall, 'Coventry: Test-case of Planning', Listener 17 April 1958, p.654.

⁴⁸ Resurgam (Town and Country Planning Association, n.d., c.1945), p.64.

⁴⁹ D.Gibson, 'Reminiscences', 1972, CRO 623/1/3.

⁵⁰ See L.Campbell, Coventry Cathedral: art and architecture in post-war Britain (Oxford, 1996), p.43.

⁵¹ Of the cathedral scheme, whose architect was then intended to be Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, a journalist wrote: '...the building will be more than a public monument – a strong and united headquarters for everything that is alive and Christian in the heart of England'. It was also to comprise a Christian Service Centre, and to house 'a

other words, the cathedral, like the museum, was conceived in entirely new terms, as fundamentally anti-monumental, and as providing a vital counter-balance to the materialism and crass commercialism of the prosperous post-war city.

Gibson was to be absolutely instrumental in ensuring that the project to build a new cathedral was not hemmed in with stylistic constraints, for he - like the Bishop - regarded it as crucial that the cathedral should project a modern identity order to appeal to a young population.⁵² The cathedral scheme was eventually to yield a building which functioned in very much more conventional ways than Gibson or the Bishop imagined, designed by Basil Spence to retain - and to form an integral part of - its ruined predecessor, which Spence retained, together with the houses of the cathedral close; nevertheless Gibson remained a staunch supporter of the idea of building a new cathedral (as apposed to restoring the old one), as emblematic of the modernity of this city, and of its capacity constantly to renew itself.

Interestingly, both Gibson and Spence encouraged a revival of civic heraldry in the 1950s. As part of the restoration of the Cappers' Room in the ruins of the old cathedral, Spence's assistant David Rock designed an elaborate panelled ceiling using emblems derived from the themes and characters of the Coventry mystery plays. Although the ceiling was eventually executed to a much simpler design, the drawing suggests a concern to adorn the meeting place of an ancient guild in a way which both celebrated their medieval origins and provided rich opportunities for the exercise of craft skills.⁵³ After the restoration of the wooden ceiling of St Mary's Guildhall, damaged during the blitz, Gibson was the prime mover in the painting and gilding of the carved figures supporting the roof beams, which was done at his insistence and at his own expense, greatly to the annoyance of the city engineer and the archivist.⁵⁴ These projects provide an interesting counterpart to the public art programme which Gibson orchestrated elsewhere in the city.

City, ritual and symbol

school of wood-carving and stone-carving and mural painting where artists can praise God by making things of beauty for any church.' C.Wills, 'Tomorrow Comes to Coventry', News Chronicle, 10 June 1946. There is an obvious reference to the function of the medieval parish church as the focus for a display of the skills of local guild members; Coventry was famous during the middle ages for its stained glass.

⁵² Coventry's exceptionally young population also comprised a high proportion of people who had recently arrived in the city. See K.Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry (Coventry, 1972).

⁵³ Drawing of cappers' room ceiling, Spence archive, Royal Commission on the ancient and historic monuments of Scotland SBS154/6.

⁵⁴ Gibson papers.

In The Culture of Cities, Lewis Mumford provided a chilling description of the experience of the modern city-dweller, bombarded with newsprint and images of all kinds, their senses dulled and their responses blunted by a torrent of information, advertising and news. In what he called the 'Paper Dream City', citizens had come increasingly to rely on reported events rather than their own experience of events; they had lost contact with the materiality and immediacy of their surroundings, both natural and man-made. The surrogate quality of their daily experience also affected their relationships with others and their imaginative life, for they took refuge from their environment in a fantasy world of bad Hollywood films. Strangers to one other and indifferent to the significance of their environment, they lived urban life in a waking dream.⁵⁵

Mumford's analysis may well have helped to shape Gibson's belief that it was necessary to invent a new civic ritual and a set of images and symbols by means of which the inhabitants of a re-built city might begin to re-ground themselves in their place and their time. Ritual and imagery were devised in the lengthy and frustrating inter-regnum between the passing of the legislation which enabled Coventry's development plan to be implemented, and the beginning of construction. Gibson left detailed accounts of the commissioning of the ambitious programme of public art which he regarded as vital in the creation of a city of character.⁵⁶ They comprised a levelling stone and a ceremonial standard topped by the city's arms to stand at the head of the shopping precinct; carved inscriptions, the Godiva clock, a mosaic of the Coventry Martyrs, and sculpted figure groups on Broadgate House; and a pair of spectacular carved panels beside the water feature in the precinct. The 'levelling stone' was a butterfly-shaped piece of slate intended to serve as marker of the centre of the redevelopment area, and as a bench-mark for surveying and establishing levels. The stone itself was carved by Trevor Tennant, a sculptor who had got to know Gibson while working in the war-time camouflage unit in Leamington Spa; at the centre is a phoenix rising from the flames, holding in its beak a plan for the new precinct; there were three cups for the legs of a theodolite, and a bronze plate marking the height above sea-level, serving as a datum bench-mark from which to establish the levels of the surrounding buildings. (pl. 7) The elaborate ceremony which was devised for the dedication of this stone, set on the axis of the new shopping precinct, was staged (in preference to a firework display) to mark the first anniversary of VE Day in 1946, and also to

⁵⁵ Mumford, The Culture of Cities, pp.255-9

⁵⁶ 'In designing the new Coventry, I always hoped that it would be an interesting City for those who lived there, but also for visitors. ...in other cities which I enjoyed on visits, it was the beautiful buildings, and fountains and sculptures, and general atmosphere which divided the nice from the ordinary. So I tried to make Coventry a nice place, from the very start.' 'Broadgate Bridge clock tower and Lady Godiva's hourly ride', Gibson papers.

inaugurate the reconstruction period. Gibson's account reveals another motive: the ceremony was designed to 'spike the guns of the opposition', forcing the hand of the City Council to expedite the start of building.⁵⁷ The ceremonial acts devised for the occasion are telling: a copper casket containing contemporary records and plans for the city was sealed and placed in a cavity, the stone was bedded in place, tamped with a gavel, and ceremonially proved level.⁵⁸ The chief parts in this little civic drama were taken by the Lord Mayor, the city councillors and aldermen, with the Bishop of Coventry and the daughter of the actress Ellen Terry, who someone discovered had been born in a house very near the site, invited at the eleventh hour to participate. Gibson and his rival the engineer Ernest Ford played supporting roles. Gibson, posing for a carefully staged photograph with theodolite and plumbline, now assumed with panache the mantle of architect-planner for, just at this time, Ford retired and the two jobs were combined.⁵⁹ **(pl. 8)**

In 1948 the foundation stone was laid of Broadgate House, the head building of the Upper Precinct, and a single column was put into place, using scarce materials which a member of the architect's department was obliged to acquire on the black market.⁶⁰ A stone placed on the north face of the column was carved with an inscription recording the role of Princess Elizabeth in that ceremony; on the south side, the young Coventry letter-carver and sculptor John Skelton, carved emblems of the city's weaving industries - scissors, a teazle, a cap and a loom.⁶¹ **(pl. 9)** At the base of the same column, another emblem refers to a system of belief which had a simultaneously private and a public dimension. Gibson asked Skelton to carve there the symbol of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhnaton, who had become something of a cult figure after archaeological excavations resumed at Tel-al-Amana in the inter-war period.⁶² During the 1920s, Tel-al-Amana came to be viewed in terms of a lost utopia, an ideal city dedicated to the worship of the sun. It was described and depicted in terms of a prototype of

⁵⁷ 'The Story of the "Levelling Stone" in the Precinct at Coventry, as told by Sir Donald Gibson who was the first city architect, and later also the Town planner for Coventry Corporation', 8 Sept. 1977, Gibson papers.

⁵⁸ The file on the Levelling Stone in CRO lists the contents of the casket and gives details of the ceremony. The stone was re-positioned in 1956, and the phoenix and the inscriptions were re-carved by Tennant in 1970. CCB/1/6/13.

⁵⁹ I am grateful to Ray Bullen of the City Development Directorate, Coventry, for kindly locating photographs of the ceremony and its regalia.

⁶⁰ According to Brian Bunch in his contribution to the memorial tribute to Donald Gibson held at the RIBA on 2 April 1992.

⁶¹ Jim Brown of the Architect's department carved the inscription recording the visit of Princess Elizabeth. John Skelton carved spring flowers and the initials of her parents to record their visit in 1951. It was planned to represent further industries on other columns of Broadgate House, but these were never carried out. (Public Art files, Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry.)

⁶² Akhnaton was variously said to be the first town planner, the first individual, and the first monotheist. I am most grateful to Rob Gill for providing me with references to the cult of Akhenaton.

the garden city, with extensive housing quarters and broad, well-planted avenues.⁶³ The pharaonic preoccupation with city-building came to seem especially important after the Second World War, although the focus of interest now shifted from the citizens' interest in nature and in hygienic housing to other aspects of the city, notably its regular plan and zoning. In a contribution to the CIAM congress in 1952, Sigfried Giedion described Akhnaton - who had abandoned the capital of Thebes and the old gods to found his new city - as a 'revolutionary' planner, and the inventor of the grid-iron system.⁶⁴ Gibson too was fascinated by this youthful figure, variously said to be the first town planner, the first individual, the first monotheist and the first pacifist. Significantly, one of the books from which he derived his information described the two large enclosures with luxuriant shrubs and artificial lakes, fringed by colonnades as 'the "Precinct of Aton", a sort of sacred pleasure-garden' within the city.⁶⁵ This image may have been as important for the genesis of Coventry's precinct as Abercrombie's concept of an academic precinct in Boombury. Gibson was also intrigued by the figure of Tut Joseph, the sculptor who worked for Akhnaton, and who incised upon the buildings of the city a device showing the sun with projecting rays, the longest holding the symbol of eternity.⁶⁶ Broadgate House's emblem, in scale and position something like a traditional mason's mark, was that found on the boundary steles in Akhnaton's city. **(pl. 10)** According to Gibson, his intention was 'to signify a belief in the more spiritual values of human advance, and of civic design. ...the sign on the Broadgate column was used on many of the important buildings [of Tel-al-Amana] and its meaning of a relationship between heaven and earth, shown by the solar disc and the outstretched arms with the hand leading down to earth holding a symbol of eternity, makes a worthy target, and is intended as an act of dedication of all those concerned in City building, in the service of the City's people.' The existence of a personal mythology featuring both the legendary figure of the town-planner,

⁶³ See D.Montserrat, Akhenaten: history, fantasy and ancient Egypt (London, 2000) for a succinct and entertaining account of the myth of Akhenaten and its changing significance in the twentieth century.

⁶⁴ S.Giedion, 'Historical Background to the core', The Heart of the City: towards the humanisation of urban life ed. J.Tyrwhitt, J.L.Sert, E.N.Rogers (8th congress of CIAM. London, 1952), p.19, and S. Giedion, Architecture, you and me (Cambridge MA, 1958), p.132.

⁶⁵ A.Wiegall, The life and times of Akhnaton, Pharaoh of Egypt (London, 1922), p.181.

See 'Broadgate symbol has big significance', Coventry Evening Telegraph 27 July 1948, in which Gibson cites Wiegall's book.

He wrote in 1977: 'I am not a deeply religious person, but like most people I often wonder about the universe, and its creation, and order...Frank Moyle... the Rector of our Church...sometimes talked about the Prophets...the one who most appealed to me was the Town Planner Amen Hotep III of Egypt - Akhnaton...He was not only a good Town Planner, but also appointed Tut Joseph as his chief sculptor, to decorate the buildings in his new city...this is why, at the bottom of the corner column of Broadgate House, you will see the sign of Amen Hotep III as my personal recognition of the background of my own beliefs...' 'Broadgate Bridge clock Tower and Lady Godiva's hourly ride', Gibson papers.

and the sun's rays, is intriguing.⁶⁷ Sunlight – which was of such central importance in discourses of health and science, and in determining the optimum layout of modern buildings like schools – was here invested with a different, profoundly symbolic and spiritual significance.⁶⁸

John Skelton incised upon the face of another column of the building the initials of all of the architects in the department, registering the fact that this represented the achievement not of an individual but of a team. The contributions of Fred Pooley, Wilf Burns, Brian Bunch, Jim Brown and others are commemorated in this way. On the columns of the Co-op Building in Corporation Street, Skelton carved symbols representing *Co-operative industrial, transport, wheelwright, painting and coal services; The spirit of reconstruction* and *Co-operative nurseries, flowers, seeds and farms*.⁶⁹ Other sculptural commissions went to Trevor Tennant, who carved four figural groups representing *The People of Coventry*, positioned above the bridge which spanned the road bisecting the precinct.⁷⁰ Tennant's carved wooden figures of *Godiva and Peeping Tom* for a clock on Broadgate House was a more light-hearted design, a *jeu d'esprit* whose earthy Anglo-Saxon humour subtly lampooned the pompous bronze sculpture of *Lady Godiva* by William Reid Dick, which had been commissioned by a local businessman without Gibson's involvement and placed on the central island in Broadgate.

Walter Ritchie, a young sculptor trained at Coventry School of Art and briefly apprenticed to Eric Gill, was asked to design a water feature incorporating sculpture for the precinct. He produced two carved panels to flank a pool under the footbridge spanning the Upper Precinct, which took as their theme the conflict between material and spiritual values. Ritchie's panels, which took him four years to create, represented the difficult subjects of *Man's struggle to control the world outside himself* and *Man's Struggle to control the world inside himself*.⁷¹

⁶⁷ The emblem of the sun with the longest ray terminating in a hand also features in Gibson's autobiographical pictogram, together with a heliodon.

⁶⁸ Gibson worked at Ely measuring sunlight levels in relation to the design of school classroom. In 'The Third Dimension in Town-planning', p.105 he discusses the importance of considering over-shadowing when planning tall buildings, and recommended the use of a heliodon to measure light levels, as he apparently did in the Coventry department. See A.Saint, Towards a Social Architecture: the role of school building in Post-War England (London, 1987) for a discussion of studies on the subject by Gibson and by the school building teams at Hertfordshire and Nottingham.

⁶⁹ *Planning and working; The Family; Creative maturity; Youth and vitality*. Information from Public Art files, HAG.

⁷⁰ Information from Public Art files, Herbert Art Gallery, Coventry.

⁷¹ The commission began in March 1954 with a request for a design for a water cascade. The design for the first panel was approved in November. The design for the second panel was approved in 1955 and the completed panels were installed in the Precinct in 1959. They were removed in the 1990s when the bridge was demolished and placed on the exterior of the Herbert Art Gallery. (Public Art files, HAG). Gibson later observed: 'They are very interesting carvings, but I think we asked too much of him at the time'. 'Broadgate House – the Stone Carvings on the South of the Bridge', Gibson papers.

(pl. 11) Gibson's decision to commission Ritchie rather than the older and more experienced Tennant suggests his concern to nurture a revival of art-making in Coventry. Significantly, the majority of the works of art which he commissioned for the precinct were pieces of architectural sculpture, carried out in traditional media.⁷² Anti-monumentalist as I would suggest that Gibson was, these are nevertheless remarkably monumental pieces, providing the incidents and landmarks which Gibson stipulated as being necessary to transform one's perception of a city as interesting and memorable rather than monotonous.⁷³

Mumford had some harsh things to say about monuments and the kinds of art associated with them.⁷⁴ He believed that the monumental tradition had become so utterly contaminated by totalitarianism during the 1930s that it lost much of its civic significance; in its aftermath, he felt that it was almost inconceivable to continue along the same lines. He felt that mural painting and architectural sculpture had also had their day, and suggested that it might actually be preferable to separate architecture firmly from the other arts. The sculptures made by Ossip Zadkine and Naum Gabo for the Lijnbaan, the new pedestrian precinct of Rotterdam, was conceived in terms of a striking counterpoint to the buildings of the new commercial centre around them. The character of the work produced for Coventry was different, both because of its strong artisan tradition and the character of the Upper Precinct, which Mumford on a visit in 1962 shrewdly described as a modern equivalent of a medieval Midland market square.⁷⁵ (pl. 12) Were these pieces of carving a way of conferring a sense of place and of local identity to the newly reconfigured spaces of Coventry? I would argue that there was a deliberate intention to give the inhabitants of the 'Paper Dream City' by these means a permanent and enduring series of emblems. Inscriptions in stone, ceremonial acts, and images carved by local artists, were to compensate for what had been damaged and lost, but also for the negative aspects of the ephemeral modern city, for the surrogate nature of contemporary city experience and its vicarious sensations. Blue Hornton stone, green Westmorland slate, creamy Doulton and Portland stone, red Warwickshire brick, mosaic, carved wood, bright paintwork and gold leaf would confront city dwellers with colour, tactility and materiality. What we have, perhaps, is an attempt to embody the historical and material reality of a Renaissance city. Of course, there is a paradox here, for Gibson, with his interest in new materials and technologies, certainly did not believe in building for eternity;

⁷² Dick Hosking, who taught at Coventry School of Art, designed the mosaic of the Coventry Martyrs in Broadgate House which was executed *in situ* by the Swiss mosaicist Antoniotti.

⁷³ Gibson, 'The Third dimension in town planning', p.99,103.

⁷⁴ Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, pp. 433-41.

⁷⁵ Mumford, 'Lady Godiva's town', *New Yorker*, 10 March, 1962.

nevertheless, there is an evident desire that future generations might in this way be able to understand what the values and aspirations of a mid-twentieth century urban civilisation consisted of.

How the inhabitants of Coventry understood and responded to their new environment and the works of art commissioned for it has been the subject of a research project undertaken by Hubbard, Faire and Lilley.⁷⁶ They concluded that, ironically, the commissions may actually have helped to divide and provoke some of the citizens rather than to unify them. The small scale of the survey conducted places their conclusions in some doubt. Perhaps more seriously, they failed to acknowledge the underlying reasons why Gibson should have felt it necessary to embark upon this project of civic improvement. The fact that Coventry had an extraordinarily high proportion of incomers, both from other parts of the country and from overseas, attracted to the city by well-paid jobs in the engineering and construction industries, helps to explain the importance which the architect attached to devising a new civic iconography. It is moreover significant that there remained sufficient public awareness and interest in the project in 1958 for the Mayor to suggest that the citizens of Coventry should consider commissioning a modern-day version of Turner's painting Dido Building Carthage as a way of commemorating the wholesale transformation of their environment during that decade.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ See P.Hubbard, L. Faire and K.Lilley, 'Memorials to modernity?', pp.147-69; P.Hubbard, L.Faire and K.Lilley, 'Contesting the modern city: reconstruction and everyday life in post-war Coventry', Planning Perspectives vol.18, issue 4 (2003), pp.377-97.

⁷⁷ Mayoress Pearl Hyde, speech reported in Birmingham Gazette, 7 March 1958.

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