

## **Birmingham's Built Environment in the Twentieth Century: commentary and bibliography**

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## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTORY ESSAY</b>	1
<b>Birmingham's built environment from medieval to Victorian times</b>	1
<b>The development of Birmingham's built environment in the twentieth century</b>	2
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	
<b>1. General histories</b>	7
Growth of the city: medieval and early modern	7
Growth of the city: nineteenth and twentieth centuries	8
<b>2. Housing</b>	9
General	9
Georgian housing	9
Victorian housing	9
Working-class and slum housing	10
Municipal (or social) housing	10
Private-sector housing (see also 'Suburbs')	11
Philanthropic housing: Bournville	11
<b>3. Planning</b>	12
Planning pre-c. 1939	12
Post-war redevelopment (especially city centre)	13
Urban clearance and renewal (from 1970s)	14
Urban regeneration (from mid-1980s into the 2000s)	14
Birmingham Heartlands Development Corporation	16
Economic development: especially built environment implications	17
Planning, culture and society	18
Other planning-related issues	18
Alternative (unofficial) visions for the city	20
Different views of social and professional groups	21
Other Local Planning Authority documentation (including that prepared by consultants)	21
<b>4. Infrastructure</b>	22
Parks, gardens and recreation	22
Transport	23
Water supply and sewerage	24
Others	25
<b>5. Industry</b>	25
Industry before c. 1840	25
Industry 1840-1945	26
Industry in the post-war period	26
The Jewellery and Gun Quarters	27

<b>6. Architecture</b>	27
Archaeological evidence	27
Churches and other religious buildings	28
Secular buildings	29
<b>7. The Urban Landscape</b>	30
Townscape	30
Conservation and heritage	31
Education: the universities and schools	33
Suburbs	33
<b>8. Local History Photographic Publications (a small sample)</b>	34
<b>9. Local History Sources</b>	34
<b>10. Other sources of relevant information</b>	35

## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

### **Birmingham's built environment from medieval to Victorian times**

Birmingham was a comparatively small market town until the seventeenth century. It therefore has neither copious written records nor spectacular early buildings to attract historians. Such interest as historians have shown has been concerned with the economic development of the town. Holt's essay, *The early history of the town of Birmingham, 1166-1600*, is the best academic study of the early town. Skipp's *A history of Greater Birmingham down to 1830* is for a more general readership and includes the villages that were absorbed by the growing industrial city. Skipp also published an excellent book on *Medieval Yardley* based on the researches of a university extra-mural class. Medieval church studies from greater Birmingham loom large in the early volumes of the *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*,<sup>2</sup> as do analyses of the few remaining timber-framed buildings. The *Transactions* also contain a study of early Edgbaston, by Chatwin, which was later republished as a book. Archaeology adds to the story with excavation reports on Weoley Castle and Birmingham's moated manor house.

Researchers interested in the growing early-modern industrial town have the considerable advantage of a detailed survey of 1553. Hopkins's book, *Birmingham, the first manufacturing town in the world, 1760-1840*, is the most recent academic treatment of this period but, again, is entirely economic and social in its emphasis. It says almost nothing explicitly on the environmental history of the town (although much is implicit). One of the most important new areas of development in the eighteenth century was the Colmore estate to the north of the early core of the town. This was to form the basis of both the office quarter of the developing Victorian town centre and the manufacturing district of the Jewellery Quarter. Its development is one of the case studies in Chalklin's *The provincial towns of Georgian England*. There are a number of important studies of Birmingham's Georgian houses in the *TBAS* and a book, by Hill and Dent, *Memorials of Old Square*, which re-populates the Georgian houses around the square.

From about 1770, Birmingham's developing industrial base meant that its population expanded rapidly. Earlier growth had infilled every garden and courtyard in the older part of the town and so, increasingly, new building took place on the urban fringe. Purpose-built working-class housing in Birmingham took on distinctive regional characteristics: specifically the back-to-back courtyard of dwellings. There has been much academic interest in analysing this housing and its consequent slum living conditions over the past thirty years. This work considers both the specifics of Birmingham, and compares it with other industrial cities. As conditions in the town centre deteriorated to the considerable detriment of the health of inhabitants, those who could afford to do so left for the suburbs. The carefully-planned development of their Edgbaston estate by the Gough-Calthorpe family and their agents gave Birmingham one of the most distinctive Victorian middle-class suburbs. Cannadine's study of *Lords and landlords: the aristocracy and the towns, 1774-1967*, uses Edgbaston as a principal example.

The developing built environment of the Victorian city (and much else besides) is splendidly summarized in Skipp's *The making of Victorian Birmingham*. There are surprisingly few overviews of the physical development of Birmingham. Cherry's

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<sup>2</sup> Later the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society.

*Birmingham: a study in geography, history and planning* is the most recent 'academic' study, but his strength is in twentieth-century planning history. Upton's *A history of Birmingham* concentrates just on the city and has a wealth of topographical information for all periods, including the nineteenth century. However, there are numerous thematic books which use Birmingham and other cities as case studies. These include Kellett's book on *The impact of railways on Victorian cities*, for example, as well as Briggs' seminal *Victorian cities*, which is more concerned with government than environment. The end of the nineteenth century was marked by a number of major histories which provide contemporary commentary on recent growth and development. Langford's *Modern Birmingham and its institutions* dates from the 1870s; whilst Dent's *Old and new Birmingham: a history of the town and its people* was published in 1880 and republished with a new title in 1894. The first two volumes of the modern *History of Birmingham*, by Gill and Briggs respectively, continue this tradition, but contain far less topographical information.

There is little published on Birmingham's industrial areas, (as against its industries) other than the jewellery district, and a few studies of early mills. The British Association handbooks of 1886 and 1913 provide summary information but it is the innovative handbook of 1950 which puts this in broader geographical context. There are excellent period studies by Johnson and Wise on industry, as well as good surveys of the spatial growth of the city in early modern, industrial and modern times.

### **The development of Birmingham's built environment in the twentieth century**

Conventionally, the development of Birmingham throughout the twentieth century may be described as expansion (to about the Second World War), redevelopment (to about 1975) and retrenchment (to the end of the century). This is covered in many sources, the best of which are Development Department, City of Birmingham: *Developing Birmingham 1889-1989*, for a general readership, and Cherry, *Birmingham: a study in geography, history and planning*, for a more academic overview.

It is certainly true that the area administered by the City Council expanded vastly during the century as the industrial population grew and required housing. Farmland was converted to housing estates, both of speculative semi-detached suburbia and municipal housing. Traces of this process can still be seen today in terms of surviving estate (field) boundaries, trees and hedgerows, place names, and a few pre-urban farmhouses. Birmingham was among the country's leaders in municipal housebuilding in this period (Manzoni, *The production of fifty thousand municipal houses*). Infrastructure to support these urban functions was also developed, although much depended upon late-Victorian origins: drainage and sewerage, gas and electricity, water supply from the Elan Valley in Wales, and the expansion of the network of public parks and open spaces.

From the middle of the century outward growth slowed, with the exception of the acquisition of the Royal Borough of Sutton Coldfield in the 1960s. The poor condition of much nineteenth-century building stock, both residential and commercial, had already been recognised; and bomb damage provided some impetus for slum clearance and comprehensive redevelopment schemes in much of the city's middle ring districts. Much, although not all, of the new municipal housing was provided as system-built blocks of flats, some 400 in all. Industrial redevelopment proposed the sweeping-away of established districts such as the Jewellery Quarter and their replacement with 'flatted factories' and factory units. Inner and middle ring roads were planned,

together with much new infrastructure including the country's first 'grade separated interchange' outside the capital, at Perry Barr. Significant private redevelopment also occurred with, for example, the Bull Ring, advertised as Europe's first major covered shopping centre. The National Exhibition Centre, partly owned by the City, was constructed at the edge of the city next to the airport.

The general national economic downturn had a significant impact on the city's built form, resulting from the general reduction in traditional heavy industry (City Council, *The Birmingham Economy Review and Prospectus*). This led to the under- or dis-use of many industrial buildings, and their decay and demolition. Municipal development programmes virtually ceased. Where funding was available, though, Birmingham produced some innovative housing rehabilitation programmes, such as the 'envelope' scheme.

From the late 1980s a new economic and political enterprise culture led to a series of 'flagship' schemes, including the National Indoor Arena, the International Convention Centre and Symphony Hall, and Brindleyplace. These, and promotions such as bids for international games and festivals, and for the Millennium development, put Birmingham and its urban environment in the international eye. The redeveloped Bullring and iconic Selfridges building – also appearing on a Post Office stamp – has still further raised the city's profile. A wide range of public and private developments and environmental improvements has also occurred, along with a rising consciousness of conservation and of urban design. Some schemes have had a protracted gestation, however, as the economy, planning fashions, and public involvement have changed: for example the Bullring redevelopment, first proposed in 1987, only began on site in 1999. The Eastside regeneration seems likely to have an equally protracted gestation period.

This traditional story, simply viewing the changes to buildings, spaces and infrastructure, is only a partial view. Two other aspects deserve consideration, and are included (to a limited extent) in this bibliography.

First is the fact that one needs to explore the motivations behind changes to the built fabric itself. These include structural, economic and even personal factors. Structurally, one cannot ignore the growing importance of the town planning system throughout this period; and the continual production of Acts, Circulars and – most recently – national and regional Planning Policy Guidance Notes. The economy, and awareness of its cyclical fluctuations, determines the funding available for development and redevelopment. The importance of the changing planning system and economy is shown in the case of retail development by Larkham and Westlake, 'Retail change and retail planning'. Personal factors and such things as party political allegiance may determine priorities, and indeed whether proposals are put forward at all.

Secondly there is the experience of those involved in the processes of the production of the built environment. Public participation in planning is a product of only the last 30 or so years. It is difficult to chart the experiences of those affected by developments earlier in the century, although some oral history records attempt this. Otherwise, much recorded public response has been critical of process and result (Heywood and Naz, *Clearance: the View from the Street*). The socio-economic impacts of some, at least, of the major projects have been problematic (Loftman and Nevin, 'Prestige urban regeneration projects'). And, of course, the views of the public are generally not those of the professionals (Hubbard, 'Attitudes to redevelopment').

## Key themes for the selection

This realisation of the range of issues affecting the study of the built form leads to some key themes for the selection of bibliographic items. Inevitably, too, a list of sources dealing with the built environment will overlap with other sections in this bibliography: political, economic and social histories, industrial development, etc. For example, housing renewal needs to be considered along with the changing socio-economic profile of population, and arguably we should also consider some of the experiences of those managing the process or living in those houses (Heywood and Naz, *Clearance: the View from the Street*); industrial change has to be considered along with the wider economic and structural changes (for example as set out in the major ESRC study conducted by Spencer *et al.*, *Crisis in the Industrial Heartland*).

This list therefore contains much more than descriptions of individual buildings and urban landscapes: in fact, these form a minority. More commonly, consideration of the built environment – particularly its development and management, as opposed to descriptions of its form – requires broad consideration of issues such as the local planning system, politics, economic development, policy development and implementation – for example as with the example of Birmingham Heartlands and the East Birmingham urban renewal through the mechanism of the Heartlands Urban Development Corporation.

This broad view of the built environment is in line with the development of the academic study of this subject – urban morphology. Earlier studies were largely descriptive ‘snapshots’ (Stedman, ‘The townscape of Birmingham in 1956’, which should be compared with ‘Making sense of Birmingham’s townscapes’ by Whitehand, published four decades later). More recently it is the process of the production of the built environment that is explored – including the identification of the agents responsible for change, exploration of their motivations, the legal, administrative and socio-economic context within which they operate (for example Barrett, ‘Townscape change and local planning management’).

The bibliography is organised thematically and chronologically, so we have general and specialist texts, texts dealing with issues across the city, those dealing with particular locations. Chronologically, we have identified significant shifts in types of thinking, and the associated policies and activities, between different periods. For example, Birmingham was an important focus for early planning: Bournville, the activities of Chamberlain and Nettlefold amongst others (leading to the broad influence of Birmingham’s experience in the national development of planning thought) and the very early adoption of the Town Planning Schemes in the Harborne/Weoley Castle area. The significant personal initiative of one individual in proposing a complete redesign of much of the city centre should not be overlooked, particularly as it indirectly resulted in the still-incomplete ‘civic quarter’ (Haywood, *The Development of Birmingham: an Essay*). More recently, there have been significant shifts in the local authority policy, with a greater emphasis upon urban design by the local planning authority (again, in commissioning of the *Birmingham Urban Design Strategy* the city is a national innovator) and upon greater environmental sustainability by the Environmental Services Department.

The bibliography also reflects the broad interests of scholars – particularly geographers – in documenting the changing form of the city: industrialisation, suburban sprawl, redevelopments, de-industrialisation, regeneration, heritage and conservation. In addition, there are accounts of particular institutional interventions which have changed perceptions or even policies, or have spurred particular publications. Examples include the visits of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (resulting in, for example, Gerrard and Slater’s edited collection *Managing a Conurbation*), the celebration of city status, and the Highbury urban design

initiative.

### **Editorial method**

In common with many other towns and cities, the built environment of Birmingham during the twentieth century has been recorded in a fragmentary and episodic fashion. Birmingham appears as a passing example in much literature on many issues, such as the development of architectural styles (the favourable comments on a few houses in H. Muthesius' *The English House*, 1904, for example), high rise housing, urban renewal, and so on; yet these can scarcely merit inclusion in a bibliography such as this.

Likewise, the experience of Birmingham has been heavily used in national and international comparative studies. A few examples of this literature are given in order that Birmingham can be seen in a wider context (Loftman and Nevin, 'Going for growth'; Webman, *Reviving the Industrial City*).

Instead, we concentrate on books, chapters and papers (rather than electronic material and ephemerae) where the principal focus is on Birmingham; for example Sutcliffe's contribution on the early-twentieth century resistance to high-rise flats in his edited collection *Multi-Storey Living*. Infrastructure, from the inner ring road to the provision of public parks, is included. Where the infrastructure or the ecology (from the Elan Valley aqueduct and River Tame catchment area) is remote or larger but still has an impact on the built environment, these studies have also been included. Items that focus on the built environment through another aspect, such as the works of Birmingham architects or the agents and agencies of urban change, may be included here.

A substantial number of items are drawn from the relevant Departments of Birmingham City Council. Some were published and quite widely available in the City; others had much more limited circulation, but all are available in the Central Reference Library's local collection. Such documents are of increasing importance in the post-war period with the rise of the formal town planning system. Their scope is broad: from statutory plans to newer themes such as conservation and urban design.

We include a number of higher degree theses – particularly products of the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham – especially where such material is not otherwise generally available. These theses are available in the Heslop Room of the University Library.

Lastly, we include a small sample of a fast-growing literature: the local history studies, particularly photographic, that focus on specific areas or aspects within the City.

We have generally not included manuscript material – including the range of photographic and cartographic material in the Central Reference Library's Local Studies Collection – or newspaper reports and related commentary, although both can form important sources of information on the changing built environment (see Sutcliffe, in *Multi-Storey Living*, for an example of its use). Promotional literature from developers also exists, from the 1960s Bull Ring to the late-1990s Arena Central proposal. Short notes on individual buildings can be found, for example in the *Architects' Journal*; but we have restricted ourselves to more substantial commentaries. Lastly, for specific development proposals, the planning files of the local authority are detailed and invaluable (again see, for example, Barrett, 'Townscape change and local planning management', for the use of this type of material).



Note that, for consistency, City Council publications are listed under “City Council”, although some give individual Departments or merely “City of Birmingham”.

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## 2. Housing

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### 3. Planning

#### Planning pre-c. 1939

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## **5. Industry**

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- Obatomi, F. (1981) *The home in its setting: case studies of the design of residential environments in the city of Birmingham*, unpublished PhD thesis, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham.
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### **8. Local History Photographic Publications (a small sample)**

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### 10. Other sources of relevant information

A range of national and local organisations can provide further detailed information on this topic. There is a range of local Residents' Associations, addresses of which can be obtained from the City Council. Some wider-scale voluntary amenity societies exist, including the Birmingham Civic Society, which can be contacted via the Civic Trust. National voluntary societies which have a statutory consultative role in the planning system, and often operate through local groups, include the Ancient Monuments Society, the Victorian Society, the Thirties Society, and the Twentieth Century Society. Some of these organisations publish specialist journals and other well-researched items, such as the Victorian Society's 'walking guides'.