Mancunian Way / from the archive / issue 1

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The Mancunian Way (A57M) is a 3232ft 6in long elevated section of motorway, which passes through the southern fringes of central Manchester to form an important link in a network of roads circumnavigating the urban core. The purpose of the city's 'Highway in the Sky' was to separate commercial traffic from congested local streets by providing an obstacle free high-speed route connecting Manchester Docks and the industrial hinterland of Trafford Park to heavy engineering industries in East Manchester. The Mancunian Way was also to form the fulcrum of a regional highway system, linking together several important arterial routes, orbital systems and motorway projects proposed in the 1962 South East Lancashire North East Cheshire Highway Plan. Opened by Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister who envisaged a prosperous Britain shaped by technological innovation, the Mancunian Way provided an important symbol of hope for Manchester's post-war reconstruction, as a modern city preparing for the 'space-age'. Such was the jubilation that the Mancunian Way received a special award from the Concrete Society in 1968.

This optimism, however, quickly evaporated during the economic crisis of the 1970s. Within 15 years of opening, Manchester Docks had closed and much of the city's heavy engineering had disappeared after a decade of deindustrialisation and decline, effectively removing the primary purpose of the road. As for the secondary purpose, far from providing a smooth transfer from one arterial route to another, for many frustrated commuters, the Mancunian Way is nothing more a congested and polluted barrier between home and work. The 21st century reality, it would seem, is far removed from the Le Corbusian vision of a functional, efficient and superfast highway in the sky; a machine for living that has broken down. The story of the Mancunian Way raises a number of questions concerning the Modernist visions which informed the reconstruction of post-war British cities. But in a new era of austerity and accelerated neoliberalism, should we necessarily reject outright Modernism's Grand Narratives concerning the planning and redevelopment of the city?


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Certainly the Mancunian Way is a structure replete with ironic and paradoxical twists. The Modernist rationality that sought through strategic planning to rationalise and order Manchester's chaotic and unplanned Victorian landscape instead produced a vagary of new complexities and irrationalities. The construction of the motorway in the first place involved cutting a swathe through the city, sweeping away homes and neighbourhoods so comprehensively that little of their material existence remains today. Worryingly, the Mancunian Way was intended to connect to an inner-road within the city centre which would have swept away Portland and Princess Streets, The Village, Back Piccadilly and the Northern Quarter. Its 'spur to nowhere' – an access road left hanging, waiting for a connection to a never to be built inner-ring road via Princess Street - provides a lonely testament to Manchester's retrenchment from the 1945 Reconstruction Plan.

The structure itself is contradictory. Graceful arcs of white concrete may define the length of the Mancunian Way, but actually restrict high speed transit at 70mph. The motorway has no junction numbers. The original crash barriers were not designed for high impact. The access ramps are unfathomably short, giving drivers just precious seconds to negotiate joining the motorway at rush hour, an often-perilous lurch into the throng, leading to inevitable screeches, tyre tracks, crystals of broken glass, and red shards of brake light covers. The website Pathetic Motorways describes the Mancunian Way as Britain's lowest grade motorway. But perhaps the ultimate irony is that despite the scientific rationality informing the planning and construction of the Mancunian Way, this tensile pre-stressed concrete structure straddles the Chorlton fault line. As a consequence, the Mancunian Way is subject to a stringent maintenance routine by a City Council team who hawkishly monitor the minutiae of the concrete surfaces for stress fractures.

The Mancunian Way is also an uncomfortable neighbour. A greasy mix of oil and water gathers on the surface during heavy rain, crashing over the side in huge waves to soak passersby underneath. Grit, dirt, a million castaway cigarettes, battered coke cans, shattered plastic wheel covers, broken bottles, are amongst the plethora of lost objects which litter the adjacent landscape. This unhealthy mix of traffic noise, light and fumes forges a challenging environment for nearby residents.

The attempt to separate people from traffic may have opened up new possibilities for movement and mobility across the city, but the Mancunian Way simultaneously closed down pedestrian movement and access, effectively forming a mile-long concrete wall between the city centre and communities to the south. Crossing either under or over the A57(M) can be a stressful experience. The once gleaming tiled underpasses are now neglected and poorly managed spaces: there is no signage, lighting is poor, and there are limited lines of sight and an absence of security. Graffiti is everywhere, some good, but mostly bad. Grass verges are unkempt. Mini-tornadoes of litter and leaves sweep across crumbling pathways. Hand rails are rusted and often rest on the floor. Whereas underpasses were supposed to provide green and safe pedestrian access to the city centre, for many local residents they are treated with suspicion and fear, particularly after-dark. Instead many opt to take their chances leaping over the railings to negotiate crossing dual-carriageways rather than venturing underground.

Perversely the Mancunian Way also provokes a sentimental and even strange sense of civic pride. Without necessarily romanticising the structure, there is something of the poetic in the Mancunian Way, which occasionally surfaces in popular culture, in the music of Joy Division or the joyous 1970s nostalgia that was *Life on Mars*. Indeed the Manchester Modernist Society took up Take That's invitation to walk *the Mancunian Way*, providing an atmospheric and poignant walking tour of the motorway, Manchester's mini-version of London Orbital perhaps. Travelling on the Mancunian Way affords an unusual perspective of the city, an almost cinematic driving experience, especially at night – captured effectively in the film *24 Hour Party People*. The Mancunian Way also provides a valuable space and inspiration for local artists – legitimate and otherwise. Perhaps the Mancunian Way is Manchester's own 'motion sculpture' – a site which privileges the car as a synthesis of body/machine – a concept graphically explored by JG Ballard in the novel *Crash*.

Importantly The Mancunian Way continues to swagger confidently against the grain of contemporary urban politics, its pre-stressed concrete continuing to resonate with the ideology of social democracy. Originally named Link Road 17/7 in Manchester's 1945 Reconstruction Plan, the Mancunian Way was to form a network of highways which would redefine Manchester's urban landscape, eradicating the social injustice of the chaotic industrial Victorian City. In its place, a functional and efficient city would arise, in which the social and economic barriers created by the friction of distance would be eradicated by a new found spatial mobility. Certainly this is how Le Corbusier envisaged the modern city. Le Corbusier remapped the city through mass redevelopment to address spatial injustice and social inequality, a vision which made rational sense in the early 20th century, when many ordinary people lived in terrible and squalid conditions on a scale beyond contemporary imagination.

Ironically, 21st century automobility symbolises a fundamental social divide – whereby a mobile class is positioned against those who are fixed and immobile, unable to take advantage of the affordances provided by car transport. One might wonder why Le Corbusier – a committed socialist – decided to embrace the motorcar, which became such a symbol of capitalist modernity, but what would one give today for even for a shade of strong ideological resistance to the retrenchment of the Welfare State. Perhaps this is the ultimate poetic reminder the Mancunian Way provides – a ghostly road to a lost utopia.

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