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Steve Millington

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Place: Manchester Central Library and Library Walk,
St Peter's Square

The library and the town hall extension complement each other, and in that complementation they've created this space, Library Walk. It's absolutely unique, almost an iconic space in Manchester. I enjoy walking through it: it's curved, while the rest of Manchester is almost like a grid pattern. The curve is an esteemed aspect of great architecture: you can see down it so there's a clear line of sight and that makes you feel comfortable, but because you can't quite see round the end it invites you in to discover what's on the other side. I've been quite intimately connected with the library and the Walk, right from an early age and more latterly because of the Walk's closure.

I was raised on the outskirts of Salford, but my family are from Hulme and Moss Side – they were all mad City supporters. My grandparents were still living in Moss Side, right next to the Man City ground, when I was young. And my dad used to work at a place called Rational House on Bridge Street for a small firm of accountants: for Mr Philips, a Polish émigré who came here having just been liberated from Auschwitz. He was quite a character – quite a scary man actually. So right from an early age I got into this kind of routine: we'd come into Manchester, go and see my dad at Rational House, then walk to Oxford Road either to get the train back to Irlam, or the bus to my gran's. Library Walk was the through route from my dad's office to Oxford Road. One of my first experiences of coming to Manchester was holding hands with my mum, walking through Library Walk. It absolutely cemented Manchester city centre in my geographical imagination as a place.

MANCHESTER CENTRAL LIBRARY AND LIBRARY WALK, ST PETER'S SQUARE





I've been a member of the library for years and years and still am. As a PhD student I'd come here and use the reading room. I have to be honest, the most intensive time I used it was when they opened the CD library! I really got into progressive jazz rock music, because you could go and borrow the stuff and try it out and if you didn't like it you didn't like it. I could probably align my love of Miles Davis to being able to experiment with the CDs from here.

Quite a few years ago I ended up helping out a playwright called Tony Bengé, who had been commissioned by Salford City Council to write a play to commemorate the 150th anniversary of a chartist meeting in Salford. He wanted someone to do some historical research to capture a sense of the time. So I spent a few weeks in the library, just going to through old copies of the Manchester Guardian, looking at what was going on in the city. It was really fascinating history. Manchester was a genuinely radical place.

I was part of an activist group which challenged the city council about their decision to close Library Walk. It tells you a lot about planning in this country that we had 30-40 people, most of which were well educated; we had access to legal expertise; we had access to activists who had intimate knowledge of rights of way law, and we had all this real evidence – all that was dismissed.

“ One of my first experiences of coming to Manchester was holding hands with my mum, walking through Library Walk.”

In a city where we've got issues around the privatisation of public space, the enclosure of public space, and the surveillance of public space, this really brings into question well

what is public space in this city? Are we becoming a privatised, securitised city for an elite? That's the danger.

I'm a human geographer – studying the relationships between people and places. I'm based at MMU so I'm pretty familiar with Oxford Road, having worked on there for such a long time. With another hat on, I do public engagement work with the Manchester Modernist society. A number of times now we've run walking tours of the Oxford Road corridor – the science modernism tour – the site of the first computer, graphene, all those kinds of associations. We also look at the positioning of higher education within the strategic planning of the city, which first emerged in the 1945 reconstruction plan. The idea was to close Oxford Road. As you went down Oxford Road from the city centre, when you got to where All Saints Park is there'd be this huge plaza with this kind of Stalin-type cultural mausoleum in the middle and the University buildings behind. They imagined the Brunswick estate adjoining being a kind of Left Bank of Manchester, where academics would mix with – and I'm quoting the plan here – 'continentals' and other kind of 'Bohemian types'. Obviously it doesn't function like that! So there was this whole vision of the place of higher education in the city, as being part of Manchester's reconstruction as a kind of modern progressive city in contradistinction to the squalor of the industrial city of the nineteenth century. That plan kind of evolved over the 60s following the Buchanan Report which advocated separation of people from traffic. The new vision was to create an elevated city: so the pedestrians on a first floor level and traffic on a ground floor level. ●