Tracing Urban Manchester: Palimpsests of Post-war Planning

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ABSTRACT

In Britain, during the post-war period, many urban design professionals were architect-planners. A considerable proportion of these were employed by local authorities. A drive by the state to use legislation to control and influence the shape of development created a very specific set of circumstances. Central government policy was filtered and interpreted by local government councillors and their officers and each town or city approached this in a different way. The legislation and the training enabled a very particular mode of urban design that was characterised by ambitious three-dimensional visions. Such ambition was also underpinned by non-statutory guidance that reflected the zeitgeist for vertical separation in urban settings, such as Sir Colin Buchanan's *Traffic in Towns*.

In this paper I will look at the city of Manchester. Manchester's *1945 Plan*, directed by City Engineer and Surveyor, Rowland Nicholas, was one of the most comprehensive in Britain, yet it faltered due to a lack of capital and lack of material resources. In the 1960s, Manchester's first Chief Planner, John Millar, revisited the urban design of the entire central area with a team of talented young planners, recruited from the region. Their work was arguably greater in its scope and definition than that produced in 1945 and shaped the city for the next 50 years. Though only partially realised, the framework for development established in the mid 1960s and approved in 1968, set the tone for almost all the changes to follow.

Here, I will explore how central government legislation was interpreted spatially by Manchester's planners using drawings and models and how these visions continued to inform development well into the twenty-first century. In so doing, I will present an inverted archaeology of the city that traces the patterns established on paper and the long-term physical residue of these gestures.

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In post-war Britain, urban design and planning were so closely linked that certain functions were indiscernible. Indeed, in British architectural literature the term 'urban design' was framed as 'new' in 1965 and the processes of urban design warranted an 'investigation' in 1966.[1] Typically, the act of town planning was known as 'civic design'. This paper uses the city of Manchester to explore the links between planning and urban design and the local responses to national legislation intended to control the built environment. Manchester's *1945 Plan* was one of the most comprehensive in Britain, yet its implementation faltered due to a lack of capital and material resources. In the 1960s the urban design of the entire central area was revisited. Though only partially realised, the framework established in the mid 1960s set the tone for many changes to follow.

Ideas about the development of cities often run for decades. Here, I will show how policy decisions, declared in Whitehall, were interpreted by officers of local government and how architects then reacted to policy and plan. In so doing, I highlight the particular circumstances of a nationalised state with burgeoning legislation designed to control development. The post-war period provided the policies, but it was the training of architect-planners that gave shape to statutory guidance. Three-dimensional visions of cities were commonplace by the 1960s and, alongside certain powers vested in local authorities, planners influenced their shape. Of course, existing topography, natural features and historic infrastructure were negotiated and the typical western European city contained many layers of earlier development. Rivers, canals, railways, and roads all left their own trace, and Manchester was no different.

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[1] Shankland, G., 'New role of urban design', *RIBA Journal*, February 1965, pp.69-74; Levin, P.H., 'An investigation into the urban design process' *Town Planning Review*, April 1966, pp.5-20.

Manchester is a case study here. Whilst much of the detail is specific, the post-war setting was similar for other UK cities – regional capitals of larger metropolitan areas, with strong traditions of local governance.[2] These traditions met with the regional ministries of central government, creating tiers and hierarchies, within which types of political interplay had their own physical impact.[3] For the most part, the renewal cities were post-industrial and their modernisation was complicated and lengthy. Their complex narratives, which were bound with a period of rapid progressive change in political, cultural, social and economic contexts, have much to reveal about the state and its influence on urban form.

It is a commonly held misconception that, after the Second World War, Britain launched into reconstruction as a response to damage sustained during the blitz. In fact, many towns and cities identified the need for significant regeneration and planning before the outbreak of war - Manchester's *1945 Plan* was 'the intellectual ancestor of much planning work within the city for well over two decades'.[4] Many cities did not sustain bomb damage, but took the opportunity to plan[5] – as phrased by the RIBA, 'September 1939 marked the beginning of a breathing space … our towns stopped expanding.'[6] The powers granted to local authorities by acts of Parliament gathered pace through the 1930s and increased after 1945 through new national policies.

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Manchester's post-war planning can be described in two epochs: the first from the early 1940s to the early 1960s and the second from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. Rowland Nicholas, the principal author of the *1945 Plan*, was appointed as City Surveyor in June 1940.[7] He retired in 1963, whereupon the first Chief Planning Officer, John Millar, was announced as head of the newly formed planning department.[8] As such, Nicholas and Millar each oversaw their own period of intense planning work. Nicholas' work was captured in the substantial *1945 Plan* and Millar's proposals were published as a series of reports in the 1960s, culminating in the *Manchester City Centre Map 1967*.[9]

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Designing the modern city was a complex task. One that became evident during the development of the *1945 Plan*. The eighteen chapters of the *Plan* covered everything from history, population demographics, transportation, to health, education, industry and pollution. It was composed of texts and supporting photographs, maps, diagrams, tables and perspective illustrations. The central city loomed large in the colour plates of the *Plan*. A seemingly definitively zoned city centre, with a new ring road, train station, bus stations, market, law courts, town hall and civic spaces was presented as a double-page fold-out.

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[2] Such as Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle and Glasgow.

[3] Regional ministries were established during the conflicts of the twentieth century to ensure continued governance and supplies in the event of a catastrophic attack on central government in Whitehall. They survived in peace time, but were not always allied to decisions made in London.

[4] Kitchen, T. (1996) 'The future of development plans: Reflections on Manchester's experiences 1945-1995' in *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, July 1996, pp.331-353.

[5] As an exercise in either slum clearance or civic development.

[6] RIBA (1943) *Rebuilding Britain* (London: Lund Humphries) p.10.

[7] 'Manchester's New Surveyor', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 June 1940, p.3.

[8] 'Three officials to replace surveyor', Guardian, 22 June 1963, p.12.

[9] Nicholas, R. J. (1945) *City of Manchester Plan 1945* (Norwich: Jarrold & Sons Ltd.); Millar, J.S. (1967) *Manchester City Centre Map 1967* (Manchester: City and County Borough of Manchester).

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It was accompanied by architects' perspectives that showed existing and new buildings in the same illustration. Stylistically, the plans and architectural visions were guided by beaux-arts and neo-classicism - roads were imagined as boulevards; axial and symmetrical planning was used to bring order to the medieval street pattern. The 'Civic' and 'Historic' quarters identified in the plan around the Town Hall and Cathedral respectively reappeared in Millar's later work.

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The manner of the detailed planning for the *Education Centre*, and the new *Civic Centre* was distinctly traditional. The designs prepared by G. Noel-Hill and Hubert Worthington for these 'centres of culture, education and medicine' were characterised by wide tree lined boulevards and large institutional buildings including a new civic hall.[10]

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The *1945 Plan*, had one foot in the past and another firmly forward. The surveys and planning ideals were advanced, but their material visualisations were stuck in inter-war aesthetics.

The main tenets for physical reordering, based on transportation, were set out in the 1930s. As with its precedents, the main feature of the central area in the *1945 Plan* was a 'city circle road' – the ring road was a ubiquitous device with which to tackle central area congestion. Three new bus stations and a vast railway station would flank the circle road. Inside the circle many smaller streets were to be car free.

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Despite claims that the *Plan* was 'no attempt to revolutionise the face of the city', the idea of wholesale change was endorsed by Nicholas' opinion of the city's architecture: 'the city's buildings, with few exceptions, are undistinguished.'[11] Not many existing buildings were viewed as important enough for preservation - even Waterhouse's fine neo-Gothic Town Hall (1868-78) was to be replaced by a building drawn to resemble Ragnar Östberg's Stockholm City Hall.

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Other historic buildings were also shown to be retained in the three-dimensional drawing of 'Manchester 2045 AD'.[12] The zoning and transport planning of the centre challenged the idea of the *Plan* as a framework that was 'sufficiently elastic to permit quite considerable alterations'.[13]

The infrastructural capacity of the new city was hindered by its existing form. The difficulty of crossing the city remained a major issue in 1945. Two chapters of the *Plan* were dedicated to 'Highways' and 'Transport'.

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[10] Nicholas (1945) p.101. Noel-Hill is credited with the layout of the Cultural Centre and Worthington with the Infirmary and University elements of the combined proposals. Noel-Hill was the incumbent City Architect of Manchester and Hubert Worthington was the son of eminent Victorian architect, Thomas Worthington, theirs was a leading practice in the city for over 100 years. Hubert trained with Sir Edwin Lutyens.

[11] Nicholas (1945) Plate 79.

[12] The Cathedral, Ryland's Library (Basil Champneys, 1900), Sunlight House (Joseph Sunlight 1932), Police Station (G. Noel Hill, 1937) Town Hall Extension and Library (E. Vincent Harris, 1930-38), and the Royal Exchange (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1867-74; extended Bradshaw Gass & Hope, 1914-31)

[13] Nicholas (1945) p.1.

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Nineteen radial routes were identified as priority carriageways, fifteen of them in Manchester and the others partially routed through adjacent boroughs. These would be linked by ring roads, at intervals, radiating from the centre. As well as the City Circle, the 'Inner', 'Intermediate' and 'Outer' rings were proposed as a total system for the city region.[14] Highways planning prevailed as one of the primary organising devices for the city and the region in the following decades. Despite its comprehensive approach, wide publication and public exhibition, the *1945 Plan* was little more than the fanciful, if bold, application of a total vision for the city. The *Plan* itself had no statutory status, this was accomplished by other means, namely the 'Development Plan', a system instituted in the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. Manchester's Development Plan, based on the *1945 Plan*, was submitted to the Secretary of State in 1951. Its scope was scant in comparison to the *1945 Plan* and consisted only of a Town Map, a Programme Map and a Written Statement. One indication of the primacy of highway planning was evidenced in that eleven of the forty pages of the Written Statement showed a table scheduling new road construction up to 1971.[15] It took 10 years, until 1961, for Manchester's Development Plan to be approved. It was the last of the UK's major cities to receive such. However, Britain in 1961 was a very different place to that of the 1940s and the central government approval came with the caveat that the design of the entire city centre should be revisited - one of the catalysts for the appointment of John Millar.

Despite Rowland Nicholas disagreeing with 'splitting the department up', on his retirement, in 1963, the department was restructured and John Millar became the first City Planning Officer.[16] Millar's appointment in 1961 as Assistant City Planning Officer, the most senior planning post in the previous structure, also coincided with the start of the 1960s property boom. When Millar arrived in 1961 there were less than a dozen staff allocated to any aspect of planning or urban design.[17] Millar built a team of capable architect-planners by recruiting bright graduates.[18]

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Between 1963 and 1968, the fledgling department dealt, in detail, with an area substantially larger than that of the *1945 Plan*, yet their work remained largely hidden in a series of internal reports. The reports testify to the extents of the urban design within the planning and informed the shape of the city into the twenty-first century.

Urban design in Britain in this period was refocussing on the renewal of city centres as advocated by the Society for the Promotion of Urban Renewal (SPUR) and influenced by ideas from North America alongside the total visions embodied in the British New Town movement. 'Townscape' was prominent amongst unifying ideals for city centres, as was the separation of transport and pedestrians.

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[14] Nicholas (1945) p.58. The railways were also still viewed as essential to the city in 1945. The idea of an underground was mooted in the plan as was the expansion of the airport.

[15] Nicholas, R. & Dingle, P.B. (1951) *Manchester Development Plan. Written Statement* (Manchester: City and County Borough of Manchester)

[16] In conversation with John Millar. Wilmslow, 18 September 2013.

[17] Turner, G. (1967) *The North Country* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode) p.69. Turner's recollected and cited versions of his interview with Millar is interspersed with opinion and fact. It is hard to discern which is the opinion of the author and which is that of the interviewee.

[18] Per. Comms. Robert Maund, former Deputy City Planning Officer. 29 January 2014.

Gordon Cullen's book, *The Concise Townscape* (1961), captured the transnational rejection of commercial development as Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs' works did in the US.[19] Cullen's was an experiential approach based on his own first hand observations of the 'serial vision' of various historic centres. Colin Buchanan's *Traffic in Towns* (1963) was similarly a warning against the destruction of the social life of cities, but aimed to address rising car ownership through planning and synthesised many prevalent ideas in urban design such as aerial roads, multi-storey transport interchanges and pedestrianisation.[20] Though seemingly contrasting, many local authorities managed to combine serial visions with aerial automotive desires in the visualisation of their urban plans – Manchester amongst them.

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Between 1963 and 1967 Millar's department revisited the inner-city proposals. They produced a series of reports for 6 newly designated Comprehensive Development Areas (CDA). Like many of his contemporaries, Millar directed three-dimensional visions that were interconnected at a city scale

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Extended aerial pedestrian landscapes were forfended by circulatory roads, variously surface level and sunken. CDA guidelines were intended as frameworks for developers and architects but their authority was publicly reinforced by a 'permanent' exhibition that included a huge scale model of the entire city centre.[21]

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Rather than leaping from broad-brush to detailed design, the various reports, briefs, models and development guidelines produced in the 1960s addressed a sequence of scales. The comprehensive planning proposals were attached to the generally held principle that wholesale redevelopment was necessary and that schemes should be of sufficient scale to be integrated with one another and with the city as a whole. This sentiment was so widely accepted, that in the Manchester Corporation Act (1965) the Corporation obtained powers to force compulsory purchase orders (CPO) on obstructive parties who held minority interests that impeded CDA development.[22] With defined CDAs and extended CPO powers, a confident and able department prepared a central area plan more ambitious than that produced in 1945.

In legislative terms, the planning work was stuck between the development plan system of 1947 and the advice of the newly formed Planning Advisory Group (PAG) for sub-regional, structure and local plans. Ultimately, Millar was sanctioned to proceed in a manner that was fit for the local situation. This in-between position, negotiated by Millar, in some way accounts for both the form of development proposed and the level of definition in the proposals for central Manchester. The PAG endorsed the separation of traffic and pedestrians and the creation of 'environmental areas'. Their planning bulletin on town centre renewal called for a non-statutory 'Town Centre Map' that incorporated more detailed proposals than the preceding Development Plan technique allowed. Millar was clear about the relationships between planning, land use and transportation.

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[19] Cullen, G. (1961) *The Concise Townscape* (London: Architectural Press) p.9; Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City* (Cambs. MASS: MIT press); Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (New York: Random House)

[20] Buchanan, C. (1963) *Traffic in Towns: A study of the long-term problems of traffic in urban areas* (London: HMSO)

[21] 'Permanent display of the changing Manchester', *The Guardian*, 20 September 1965, p.5.

[22] Millar, J.S. (1967) *Manchester City Centre Map 1967* (Manchester: City and County Borough of Manchester) p.75.

He worked closely with the City Engineer, to produce parallel reports on car parking and the revised route of the ring-road.[23]

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The Ministry was of the opinion that Manchester seemed 'to be doing the best that [was] possible to reconcile the requirements of current legislation with new style thinking'.[24] Millar navigated the legislative situation in the best interests of the city. His skills in so doing were laid out in the publication of the *City Centre Map 1967*.

The *City Centre Map* presented Millar's comprehensive vision for Manchester. It was intended to 'form the basis for further consultation with those interested in the planning of the Central Area.'[25] At this point, all of the advisory schemes for the 6 CDAs were approved in principle by the City Council and the need for 'public and private interests' to be 'working together as a team' was seen as vital to realising the objectives of the plan.[26]

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The five central CDAs related to the ring-road and to one another, the sixth CDA was Manchester Education Precinct (MEP) and slightly autonomous – it was being designed by Wilson & Womersley under the jurisdiction of a joint committee.

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The *Market Street Area* included land that would become the Arndale Centre and was predicated on the pedestrianisation of Market Street itself. The creation of a 'really fine shopping centre' was viewed as a necessary provision to 'induce people into making special expeditions to the regional centre'.[27]

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Scheduled to adjoin the Market Street Area was *The Cathedral Area* - presented as the historic quarter of the city and one of the few instances where concessions were made to heritage. According to the planners, the successful completion of the ring-road would create a 'precinct to contain the Cathedral and Chetham's Hospital'.[28]

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The proposals acknowledged that 'the best [architectural] work of the Victorian era [was] coming to be appreciated' and that Civic Amenities Act 1967 offered the powers to protect 'areas of distinctive scale and character'.[29] Albert Square and its connection to Deansgate and John Rylands Library was one such case, it was captured in proposals for *The Civic Area*.

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[23] Hayes, J., City Engineer (1968) *Manchester City Centre Road* (Manchester: City of Manchester Corporation); Manchester Corporation (1967) *Joint report on car parking in central Manchester* (Manchester: City of Manchester)

[24] National Archives: HLG 144/86.

[25] Millar (1967) p.1.

[26] Millar (1967) p.1.

[27] Millar (1967) p.56-59.

[28] Millar (1967) p.61.

[29] Millar (1967) p.42.

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Of all the CDAs, *The Civic Area* had closest links to the *1945 Plan.* A ceremonial axis, or processional route, was designed to connect the Town Hall to the Crown Court and the associated new buildings were intended for 'local government' occupancy.[30] The release of land for speculative commercial uses led to the development of Brazennose House and the 'processional' vehicular boulevard was modified to become a pedestrian space 'precinctual in character' and of a more 'intimate human scale'.[31] The opportunities for framing vistas and for 'continuously changing views' were illustrated in architect's perspectives prepared during the consultation period.[32] In reality, much of the design for the Civic Area was well anticipated by 1967.

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Models for both the Crown Square development and a Magistrate's Court [FIG.27] were presented in the *City Centre Map*. Most of this area was developed in line with the approved 1961 Plan and few additional powers were necessary to secure land. The composition of streets and small squares in conjunction with comprehensive renewal 'simultaneously displayed elements of the brutal and the redemptive', a common contradiction in the *Boom Cities*.[33]

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This dual approach was exemplified in the proposals for *Mosley Street* as a cultural and entertainment centre. The Advisory Planning Scheme for the CDA covered thirty-five acres and promoted an upper level pedestrian system, an extension to the City Art Gallery and a new Opera House. The area around Piccadilly was bombed at Christmas 1940 and was home to Victorian warehouses generally regarded as obsolete. At the western end of the area there was a cluster of existing cinemas and bars. Mosley Street itself was already developing without the intervention of the planners. In 1961, Building Design Partnership prepared a developer's masterplan for the south-western portion at Lower Mosley Street. Touted as Manchester's 'West End', 'pedestrians would be separated from traffic on platforms raised above street level, and there would be a new public square, a mall, courts and arcades' with 'a new bus station, air terminal, hotel, offices, restaurants and entertainment centres.'[34] The scheme was to be 'financed privately but with support … from Manchester Corporation.' This type of speculation was typical of the manner in which developers engaged and influenced the urban design agenda. By 1967 a host of new commercial developments had already been built or were approved. Several schemes in the *Mosley Street Area* made concessions to the pending masterplan but the overall project faltered and the connected and comprehensive vision was never realised. Adjacent was the last of the central area CDAs, *Central Station.*

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Central Station was still operational when the *City Centre Map* was published. However, its planned closure was public knowledge and the opportunity for the Department to pre-emptively plan for its future contrasted to the other CDAs, where private developers led the conversation. Millar's team based their ideas on Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens and saw it as a great opportunity to make a public space provision as yet unrealised in Manchester.[35] The laissez-faire nature of the mercantile city and

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[30] Millar (1967) p.63.

[31] Millar (1967) p.64.

[32] Millar (1967) p.64.

[33] Saumarez Smith, O., (2019) Boom Cities, Architect Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p.8.

[34] 'Big Development Plan for Manchester', *The Guardian*, 13 April 1961, p.22.

[35] Millar, J.S. (1967) p.69.

the legacy of public space as a host for popular protest meant that the city centre had always been devoid of parks and gardens.[36] Eventually, a huge scheme designed by Cruickshank & Seward (C&S) was given outline planning approval in 1974.

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The principal features of this plan were the retention of at least some part of Central Station, the demolition of the railway warehouses, the construction of a new tower and the creation of public gardens. The scheme was dramatically halted amidst the post-colonial Crown Agents affair of the 1970s.

Like the *1945 Plan*, much contained within the *City Centre Map* was not realised. The complexity of site ownership was obstructive to 'comprehensive treatment of a complete area' and the CDA processes tended to be lengthy.[37] The lack of sites owned by the Corporation restricted the pace at which they could bring them to market. Even with judicious application of the endowed statutory powers, progress was perceived as slow.[38] However, the shape given to the city by the work of the 1960s planners prevailed and is recognisable in the C21 centre. The *1945 Plan* was effectively a zoning exercise predicated on the existing street pattern, mixed with a beaux-arts approach. That of the 1960s planners, whilst still idealistic, was local and specific and took account of the existing city and its merits. They acknowledged the complexities of integrated approaches to circulation, transportation, recreation and commerce and the appreciation of Victorian built heritage was raised.

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Both plans were contingent upon a central area ring-road. A public enquiry halted the most intense section of proposed multi-level carriageways in 1973. This, combined with general economic malaise and the huge changes to local governance brought about by the creation of Greater Manchester in April 1974, meant that development slowed and planning activity shifted from something recognisable as urban design to regional economic planning

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Nonetheless, the eventual upturn in development after the IRA bombing of the city in 1996, adopted and adapted the patterns laid out through the 1960s, much as those plans traced those of their predecessors.

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[36] In St. Peter's Fields 'on 16 August 1819 a peaceful rally of 60,000 pro-democracy reformers, men, women and children, was attacked by armed cavalry resulting in 15 deaths and over 600 injuries'. The event came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre and had significant effect with regard the ability to gather in public and the lack of provision of public space as a means of preventing such.

[37] Turner (1967) p.71.

[38] Waterhouse, R. 'Eternity ring', *The Guardian*, 17 September 1974, p.16.