

30 AUG 2015

Superlative Newcastle



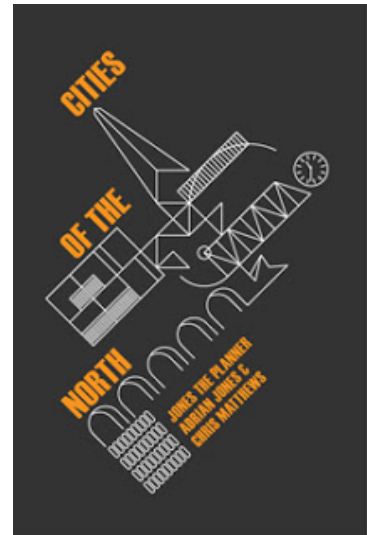
The industrial spirit, not the financial – Parson's Polygon

Superlative Newcastle – that's what Ian Nairn called it and he was right. No English city evinces the anticipation and excitement of arrival quite like Newcastle upon Tyne. The view of the river, those spectacular bridges and the old town clinging to a 30 metre gorge is literally staggering. I suspect that the East Coast drivers and signalmen proudly halt your train on the bridge, ostensibly waiting for a platform, but really just to show off this wonderful panorama, worth Richard Branson's ransom fares. Newcastle is the most dramatic of the big northern cities with all this topography and engineering bravado, but it is also a city of restrained, masculine elegance. It has a confidence and pride rooted in exceptionalism, its character, like its accent, so very different from commercial Leeds or Manchester, or maritime Liverpool or Hull. Looking more like Edinburgh or Glasgow, it has a strong whiff of the Baltic too; as Nairn says 'Lubeck seems nearer than London'. What makes Newcastle so special, apart from the topography, is its bold and often extremely successful town planning over two centuries. This was often ruthless towards Newcastle's very evident long history, the results of which can be spectacular, but are sometimes crass and cruel.

ABOUT

A series exploring architecture, urban design and planning issues in Britain's towns and cities. Primarily written by the town planner/urban designer Adrian Jones and presented by [Chris Matthews](#), a local historian and graphic designer. You can also find us on [twitter](#) and [flickr](#).

THE NEW BOOK



Cities of the North takes an irreverent and often amusing look at the changing townscape, special character, architecture and planning of the great Northern English cities. Lavishly illustrated, it is a companion to *Towns in Britain* published by Five Leaves in 2014 and it builds on the popular Jones the Planner blog. It explores the process and politics of development and 'regeneration' which is reshaping Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds, Bradford, Hull and Newcastle amongst others, always focusing on the intrinsic character of place.

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THE FIRST BOOK

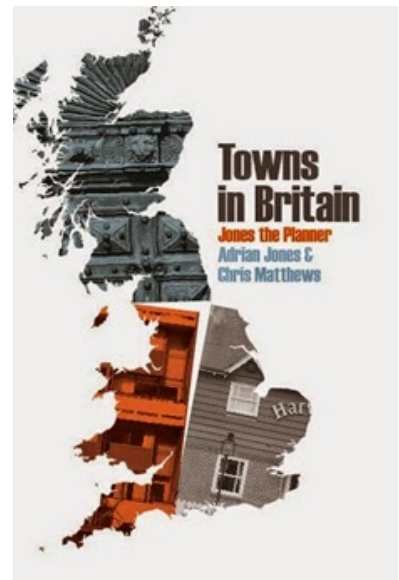


Can't beat it – the bridges



A different view – The New Tyne Bridge

Newcastle had two great eras of town planning. The first was in the 1820s to the 1840s, when Grainger Town was laid out, one of the most urbane estate developments in England, inspired by Edinburgh's New Town and Nash's London. At roughly the same time Stephenson's stunning High Level Bridge, with its double decks for rail and road, crashed into the old town, splintering the Castle in a thrilling expression of raw engineering power – the complete opposite of Grainger Town's sophistication and carefully planned vistas. The Edwardian high water mark of commercial prosperity had a big impact on architecture if less so on the city's form. In the 1920s the New Tyne Bridge, prototype of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, had an impact as dramatic as the High Level bridge. Then in the 1960s the American style City Boss T. Dan Smith, the sort of leader Osborne wants to impose on our cities today, attempted to transform Newcastle into the 'Brasilia of the North', a plan now almost universally reviled but with some interesting outcomes. 'Regeneration' has largely been focused on the Quayside where, icon-wise, Newcastle is upstaged by Gateshead. Wilkinson Eyre's 'Blinking Eye' is the seventh glorious bridge linking Newcastle to its lesser cousin in only 800 metres.



This lavishly illustrated book takes an irreverent, sometimes angry and amusing journey exploring our towns and cities, from Hackney and its hipsters to Rab C. Nesbitt's Govan, from the screaming incoherence of Cardiff Bay to the alleged idyll of Hertfordshire's garden cities. Written for the informed general reader, *Towns in Britain* looks at what is happening to our cities today, and is essential reading for those interested in urban design, architecture, and town and transport planning.

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Chimney pots and Crown Steeple off Mosley Street



The Roman coal miner

That Newcastle should now have to share equal billing with Gateshead is fairly silly, but local rivalries are deep seated. The Tyneside conurbation extends to the Coast, including North and South Shields and resorts like Whitley Bay. The short lived Tyne and Wear Metropolitan County also included Sunderland on the Wear. Antipathy between the two cities goes much deeper than football, but in architectural and townscape terms Newcastle is in a league of its own. Indeed Naim thought it one of the finest cities of Europe.



Welcome

Burton upon Trent
 Lincoln - a success story
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A mixed reception: the refurbished porte-cochère



The station: still has a powerful grip on the city



Tony Blair

Newcastle Station certainly provides as fine an arrival as you could wish. The three great curving train sheds are reminiscent of York but more restrained, the severe classical detailing beautifully complements the engineering chutzpa. Designed in 1847 by Dobson, the architect of Grainger Town, there is more than a hint of German neo-classical, possibly derived via the superb Belsay Hall in Northumberland on which he worked. The portico and Station Hotel were added later, basically to Dobson's designs. Recent refurbishment has generally been handled well, but the glazing in of the portico, whilst attempting to respect the integrity of the openings, ends up looking a tad crude, and is unnecessary given the spaciousness of the platform concourse. The copper cubes for Caffè Nero et al however shame more standard designs. Outside Central Station there is an initial sense of disappointment, not so much the buildings, which are mostly fine and dignified, but in the lack of an arrival 'square', the street although being nicely paved is dominated by milling taxis and traffic. The space bleeds away

towards Pugin's Cathedral and Farrell's Millennium turkey, the 'Life Centre' around an arid, lifeless, 'Times Square'.



High Level and Swing Bridge

Nairn advised always to begin your exploration at the Quayside but we couldn't resist the temptation to walk the High Level Bridge first. Down Westgate, alongside the powerful viaducts leading towards the mutilated Castle, note Sleeperz hotel, like the one in Cardiff on a difficult narrow site next to the railway and again turning this to intelligent advantage, proving that budget hotels don't have to be crap. Unfortunately this is a chain of just two hotels against Travelodge's five hundred or so, for example. Stephenson's bridge is 40 metres above the water on massive piers with cast iron boxes between. The road deck is suspended from the railway above by wrought iron hangers creating a cat's cradle of ironwork that has a sensational impact. The views along the gorge are sensational too, and much more could be made of this bridge as an attraction if the narrow roadway were closed to traffic – there are three other road crossings nearby. Initially the Gateshead bank looks encouraging, quite left bank in fact with interesting uses in the viaduct arches and some good stone buildings. But this good impression quickly dissipates into wasteland and roaring roads, ironically feeding the New Tyne Bridge. This bridge structure with its great parabolic arch and monumental piers is intensely dramatic and the views from it are amazing too. You look right down on the roofs of the very fine, restored, C17th timber houses of Sandhill, and on the classical Guildhall and Queen Street. The Side, an extraordinary street, careers down the hill under the railway viaducts towards Quayside. It is all fantastic but unfortunately Cale Cross House, a 1970s office tower, muscles in on the scene. What could have been a bold C20th addition to the ensemble is ignorantly bulky and terminally bland.



55 Degrees North



Mosley St



Underneath Victoria's throne

RMJM's 1961 block, now '55 Degrees North', spanning the roundabout between New Tyne Bridge and the Central Motorway, is much more impressive. Like the bridges, it crashes into the cityscape, terminating dignified, patrician, commercial Mosley Street in a dramatic but satisfying way. The clean modernist silhouette has however been traduced by tat chucked into the void under the slab to jazz up the groundscape as part of its 'regeneration'.



Milburn House: Austin Donohue's office

Mosley Street leads back from the roundabout towards the Cathedral and Central Station, with a very fine collection of mostly classical commercial buildings but including some well judged modernist redevelopments. Dean Street provides a short route down to the Quayside under the dramatic railway arches and in the shadow of New Tyne Bridge. It is lined with fascinating buildings, most strikingly Cathedral Buildings of 1901 in a free Jacobean style and the slightly later Milburn House in free Baroque style, both by Oliver, Leeson and Wood.



Northern Europe



The Sandhill ensemble

The Sandhill ensemble continues west beyond the High Level Bridge, here called The Close, with the low level Swing Bridge added for extra excitement. The famous chares (stairs) ascend the cliff, as Nairn says producing ‘a kind of topographical ecstasy as you go up and down perpetually seeing the same object in a different way’. Piled up above is the classical Moot Hall and gigantic warehouses. Heseltine’s UDC provided a new riverside promenade and some cheap and nasty offices, like Riverview. Arup’s Copthorne Hotel is a strange beast – a well articulated façade to the promenade but completely blank towards The Close. How could that ever have been acceptable?



You couldn't make it up



Glasgow?

The excitement of the Quayside and bridges is palpable. Right below the New Tyne Bridge and the perfect foil to its gigantism is a brilliant set piece of townscape; an axial view along King Street of the C18th All Saint's Church up the ravine, seen above one of the 'chares'. The beautifully proportioned sandstone buildings look almost miniature, all fenestration and incredibly narrow elevations to Quayside. However this classic Quayside townscape quickly gives way to much larger scale regeneration. The Law Courts of 1990, faced in red sandstone, are imposing to the river but jarringly horizontal, aloof and isolated. The rear elevations in brick look very authoritarian. Most of the other UDC sponsored developments seem awkward and uncomfortable in this location, neither industrial quayside ethic nor vivacious fun, but rather pompous and overscaled. Even Piers Gough's striking U plan St Ann's Court offices could do with a bit of his trademark wit. This new Quayside doesn't seem dressed right for a traditional Newcastle night out, although Panter Hudspith's Pitcher and Piano pavilion, opposite the Millennium Bridge, does rise to the occasion and Malmaison, in a converted Hennebique reinforced concrete CWS warehouse of 1900, is very stylish. Behind these Quayside buildings is a monumental po-mo car park, indicative of a fundamentally wrong approach to regeneration. It gets worse up the hill on City Road with utterly depressing budget hotels and student flats, although back towards the centre you find the very humane asymmetrical brick Salvation Army men's hostel by Ryder and Yates, 1975, respecting both its older neighbours and its former clients, as sadly it is now empty.



Regeneration tat



Baltic framed by the Millennium Bridge and those bloody flats

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the Quayside urban renaissance is the poor relationship of the new buildings to the water, and the dull paving and landscaping of the promenade compromised by traffic and at times frankly bleak. A design competition for new public realm here would be an awfully good idea. Wilkinson Eyre's Gateshead Millennium Bridge for pedestrians and cyclists is one of the few truly worthwhile souvenirs of that great non-event. Echoing the form of the Tyne Bridge, its tilting mechanism is unique. Seeing the 'Blinking Eye' opening against the sunset is a truly great experience. The new bridge links Quayside to the Baltic Contemporary Arts Centre, another ballsy, imaginative Millennium initiative of Newcastle's other half. What was once a Rank Flour Mill, only built in 1950 and in a bricky quasi Deco style has become massive gallery space. It makes a huge, positive and confident statement for Tyneside.



The public space between two major cultural attractions. Strewth.

The third element of Gateshead's design and arts led regeneration is the vast, amorphous, silvery Sage Music Centre, designed by Lord Foster, sitting high up on the bank. This strongly divides opinion, including mine. Gavin Stamp in Private Eye savaged it as 'a gigantic metal cliché which wrecks the scale and drama of the Tyne gorge looking like a giant slug or a big shiny condom. This big, bulbous steel sheath looms over everything, not least the Baltic Centre; its crude, tinselly form screams for attention and diminishes even the great high level bridges'. Which is a bit harsh. The Tyne gorge can take big scale and the Sage is after all one of the country's leading concert halls, so surely has some right to draw attention to itself. The gross Hilton Hotel spilling out over the riverbank between the High Level and Tyne bridges is far more of an affront to civilization. For me what is more disappointing than the Sage's external impact is the mall-like concourse and the poor quality of the overall roof at close quarters. The other big disappointment is the external spaces – well there aren't any, and pedestrians find their way up from the Millennium Bridge through a series of car parks. The Baltic too is degraded by a crush of Cardiff Bay style apartments which crowd in around the great mill, crudely aping its characteristics and diminishing its presence. These are matched in banality on the Newcastle bank.



Things to savour in Gateshead: the old Town Hall ...



... and the old Co-Op ...



... but what do you care?

The Gateshead icons certainly add to the critical mass of Newcastle's quayside, but do nothing for Gateshead town centre, up the hill and cut of by a no-man's-land of traffic and dereliction. The town centre was always going to play second fiddle to Newcastle's city centre and was fatally undermined by the vast Metrocentre megamall off the A1 bypass. Gateshead does however have a somewhat isolated clutch of dignified stone Victorian civic buildings. The present Civic Centre, designed in-house in 1978, lacks gravitas being deliberately cosy vernacular. There are some good commercial buildings in Jackson Street but High Street was pretty much zapped by Rodney Gordon and Owen Luder's Trinity Square shopping centre, with its celebrated 'Get Carter' car park, the ultimate Brutalist chic.



The pits



Tesco Town

This in turn was flattened to enable the construction of an execrable mega-Tesco with piled-high student flats, designed by 3D Reed. It was pipped at the post for the 2014 Carbuncle Cup by a similar Tescotown in Woolwich. Oh come on! That is clearly Metropolitan chauvinism: this is worse even than Woolwich, towering over High Street, with tacky camouflage cladding occasionally breaking out into desperate attempts at jollity. But the worst thing of all is the gormlessly crude 'pavilions', like Godzilla's spawn, rearing up over the Tyne skyline with cheap wrap-over roofs, no doubt 'inspired' by the enveloping skin of the Sage. Strangely there are hardly any windows taking advantage of what must be genuinely 'stunning views'. The only element of the whole abortion showing any sense of design is the escape stair towers of the student barracks on West Street. As Owen Luder commented 'the first principle of demolition should be to put up something better than was there before. Whatever you think of the car park, this project is much worse.' Thoughtfully a plaque records the Get Carter heritage. You can escape back to Newcastle via the Metro Interchange. This is a lesson in 70s introversion, recently duffed up with lots of art works which you are enjoined not to climb on.



Subtlety and restraint



Grainger Town

The great thing about Grainger Town is its subtlety and restraint. This was speculative development but is a wonderful example of town planning, not creating a new town but superimposing new streets which continue and link together the structures of the old town. Nairn says 'because it is so unobtrusive it comes over the visitor gradually, then with a feeling of tremendous homogeneity; this is not an architecture of a few set pieces, but the spirit of a whole city.' Grainger Street is the formal axis, leading from Central Station to the grand Monument (to Lord Grey, instrumental in the 1832 Reform Act which paved the way for civic liberties subsequently stripped away by Westminster's paranoid centralisers of recent decades). Grey Street forms a continuation of steep Dean Street, and leads gently uphill and in an elliptical curve to the Monument, providing a wonderful sequence of vistas. Nairn compares it to Nash's Regent Street 'with the added dimension of better workmanship, one of the great planned streets of Britain Half way up the Grey Memorial comes into view, and then at the same time the projecting portico of the Theatre Royal. This is a stroke of genius, for the end of the view is now not one object but a composite made up of a constantly changing balance of tensions; point and counterpoint, speared space and netted space'. However the local buff sandstone, now all cleaned, can look pallid, and it may have been better to heed Nairn's strictures against removing the characterful soot. The view of the street southwards from the Monument is utterly wonderful, if in your mind you can screen out the pitiful dross of Trinity Square which now terminates the vista. Deck chairs are lined up in front of the Monument for Geordies to enjoy the prospect, or more likely the (hopefully temporary) idiot big screen that has been erected here.



The Northern Enlightenment

Dobson, whose name is usually twinned with the speculative developer Grainger, was apparently not the main architect, just the most accomplished. The Theatre Royal wasn't designed by him, nor the Central Exchange Buildings at the apex of the two main streets, subsequently remodeled in the 1900s as the Central Arcade in riotous Burmantofts faience, just like the Leeds arcades. What a contrast with Dobson's superbly austere Grainger Market.



Grey Street



Emerson Chambers: a break from the classical

By the 1990s Grainger Town was in serious decline, but the renovation of the area to a masterplan drawn up by EDAW in 1996 has been a remarkable achievement of the enterprise of City Council and English Heritage, not least in getting funding out of jobsworth quangos. Today the area looks well cared for, if not as lively as it deserves to be, with many of Grey Street's handsome buildings now chain restaurants and bars. The public realm improvements, designed by Gillespies, are particularly good, using high quality materials complementing the

stone of the buildings.



Weimar Co-op



What's left of Eldon Square - dispiriting

The earliest part of Grainger Town, Eldon Square, was lost to a 1970s shopping centre which stole its name. Fragments of the buildings survive, as do the gardens of the square. The design of the shopping centre was rather more carefully considered than most of that era, possibly because Wilfred Burns, T. Dan Smith's Planning Officer, was instrumental in influencing Chapman Taylor's design. The bulk of the shops is in part disguised behind retained façades and the height reflects the surrounding buildings. Monumental blank brick façades to the square were rather more impressive than the apologetic glassy additions. Burn's successors have been less careful with the various extensions and accretions of the centre which are stereotypically uncouth, brash and crude. The prospect of Eldon Square from Percy Street is of unbelievable urban excrescence, your very worst nightmare about what is happening to our cities come true. There could not be a more telling contrast with Grainger Town; what a city of contrasts Newcastle is. On Newgate Street, almost lost behind all this tat, is the great Art Deco Co-operative department store, built in 1931 and inspired by Weimar store design. Once the pride of Newcastle it is now being converted into a budget hotel. Up Gallowgate is the interesting former General Electric Co. building of 1933 with metal cast figure reliefs that were also used in Battersea Power Station.



Glasgow again?



St James' Park – a little bit Pompidou

Nearby at St James is another startling Newcastle contrast. Leazes Terrace, really a rectangle and in part facing Leazes Park, was built in 1829 for Grainger. It is the grandest development of its period, built in fine ashlar stone with great Corinthian columns and pediments. In Nairn's day almost derelict, it is now handsomely restored by Newcastle University. The amazing bit is that the terrace faces directly onto St James' Park, Newcastle United's massive stadium, originally built in 1973 but with great mast-hung tiers added more recently. The relationship could not be more daring and the result is great townscape theatre. On the other side of the vast stadium, across Barrack Road, great cliffs of student flats in screaming Trespa make an altogether less satisfactory contrast and a dismal urban experience.



A design ethic



Effort

So important is St James's Park to Geordies that it has its own Metro station. How civilized is that? That Newcastle has a real Metro is fairly amazing and speaks volumes about the city's former confidence and ambition. It also underscores quite how desperately poor public transport is in the other Northern Powerhouse cities, where Manchester pretends its trams are a metro and Leeds can't even get a tram. The Tyne and Wear Metro is essentially five suburban rail lines linked together with two underground lines across the city centre. One of these breaks out to bridge the Tyne before diving back under Gateshead. The system was designed as an entity and has a distinctive design ethic and identity. The underground stations are expansive and have a strong 1970s vibe, all platform heels and big hair. The yellow and black trains are fast, efficient and fun, especially if you get to sit in the front seats next to the driver's cab and so get the driver's view. The only downside of the Metro experience is being told not to take photographs for 'security reasons'.



You can sit next to the driver!

The Metro was designed as an integrated system with interchanges for local buses, but deregulation means that the privatised bus companies now compete, resulting in far too many buses swirling around the city centre. Meanwhile the Metro system is relatively under-used, with trains at much lower frequency than on the London Underground. It would surely be sensible to make better use of the investment in the Metro's underground lines and stations by building more suburban extensions. At the same time the buses which clog the centre should be regulated.



Whitley Bay, awesome coastline but where is everyone?

The aboveground stations built along the older rail lines are quite basic but there are some fantastic survivals of grand railway architecture, like Tynemouth and Whitley Bay, great cathedrals of glass canopies designed for the holiday crowds which are now just a memory. Whitley Bay, like so many seaside resorts, is a sad place. The sands, rocks and sea look fine and with the curve of the bay to the lighthouse it still looks like a faded version of one of those fifties British Railways posters. But even in August the place is almost deserted; we couldn't even find an ice cream. Where has everybody gone?



Scandinavian dreams



The integrated bird box



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A few stops along the Metro from St James is Byker, one of the most unusual and impressive housing developments of the last half century. Built in the 1970s it was, extraordinarily, commissioned by a Conservative Council in those last swan-song days before Thatcherite deconstructionism. The architect Ralph Erskine, who practised in Sweden, was appointed because of the way he involved communities in the design process and this is a seminal feature of Byker. The estate is most famous for the 'Byker Wall', which shields the estate from the noise and pollution of the unnecessary, sunken Shields Road expressway. The Wall is really striking, the entrance from the Metro being under an eight storey brick section in a sort of abstract, almost Aztec pattern. Once through the Wall the south facing elevations are largely white rendered, hung with wooden balconies in primary colours and what look like blue tin roofs with abstract pinnacles. But most of the estate is low rise, laid out in a very informal way, not with conventional streets but actually surprisingly legible as the terraces work with the levels of the site which falls away towards the Tyne. There are generous open spaces acting very much like urban squares. The terraces again have lots of timber, often in red, green and blue, sometimes black and white. The terraces' metal roofs and porches look almost ramshackle and rural, especially with the ample and mature landscaping. It recalls Alvar Aalto and indeed the Scandinavian roots of the design are very evident. The estate feels comfortably scruffy and adaptable, almost hippy and definitely not in an architectural straight jacket. It reminded us of the best parts of the more recent and acclaimed Västra Hammen development in Malmö. Although scruffy it is not run down, and indeed major repairs are currently underway. Byker is a tour de force and a success story, but it was never completed because of ideological politics, more's the pity.



A Miesian Metro station – Jesmond



The quality of Jesmond



Could be North London

*Jesmond Dene**Metropolitan suburbia*

Jesmond has the most stylish of the Metro stations, a black Miesian box set in gardens and serving this highly desirable suburb right next to the city centre. Jesmond is not as picturesque as Clifton, as leafy as Edgbaston or as gentrified as Didsbury. It is an unassuming and highly liveable places with villas and terraces from the early C19th through high Victoriana, exceptionally good fin de siècle terraces and mansion blocks of the thirties to modern infill. It does do spectacular too: along Jesmond Road past a striking concrete classical bus garage and Dobson's solemn cemetery gates you find the Armstrong Bridge promenade high up above Jesmond Dene, the extensive woodland and parkland following the Ouseburn valley. What is striking is that Jesmond has quietly retained its attractive residential qualities right through the post war years. It is not full of students like Headingley, nor has it suffered the sad decline and neglect of Manningham; it just works as a good place to live. However, despite its proximity the city centre it is cut off by maniacal urban motorways.

*This is a bit of a problem isn't it?*



Crikey!



I'm lost!



MEA House

The Central Motorway running from the New Tyne Bridge to Jedburgh Road at Town Moor, and spewing out equally devastating spurs to other major roads, was a centrepiece of T. Dan Smith's vision for reshaping the city centre. It is still an excitingly futuristic drive and the sculptural high level walkways, all part of the imagined multi-level city centre, are interesting. But they don't compensate much for the inconvenience, dislocation, loss of legibility and the great damage done to the inherited fabric of the city. It could be argued that the way the motorway slams into the C17th Holy Jesus Hospital is only a more recent reinterpretation of a great Newcastle tradition, like the railway scything through the Castle, but the results are dismal. And the attempt at a multi level city doesn't really work. Try following the walkways from the new City Library and Laing Art Gallery, outside which Heatherwick's 'blue carpet' artwork is looking very frayed and threadbare, to the recently listed MEA House. You

negotiate steps and spirals and walk nervously through an abandoned walkway shopping arcade, abandoned that is by everyone except junkies. Surprisingly the walkways are used by quite a few cyclists; despite their drawbacks they are no doubt safer than the traffic dominated alternative. MEA House was designed by Ryder and Yates and completed in 1974. It gives a tantalising glimpse of what was envisioned in those heady days. The structure spans the road and links directly to the upper level walkway system. Low and horizontal it is a powerfully expressed building. Adjacent terraces are reflected in the glass walls. Northumbria University stretches north of MEA House, a collection of buildings with not much coherence as a campus. A cable-stay pedestrian bridge across the Central Motorway links to the recent glass and steel clad City Campus East.



Impressive brutalism – The King's Road Centre



Campus townscape



The Old Library

Newcastle University's campus on the west side of the centre, towards Town Moor and Leazes

Park, is also enfolded within the tentacles of the urban motorway. Towards the city centre it faces Percy Street and the horror show of Eldon Square's extensions. Like Northumbria, the campus lacks coherence but apparently a masterplan by the ubiquitous Terry Farrell will provide 'a new southern aspect facing and welcoming the town', although this is not yet apparent. Basil Spence's physics block (the Herschel Building), which Nairn thought the best modern building in Newcastle, is immured somewhere in furious building works. The plan is to open up vistas of the late C19th exuberant Jubilee Tower leading to the Quad of the Armstrong Building. The King George V1 Building of 1938 is anything but exuberant but rather fine in its pomposity. Of the many post war buildings, what stood out for us was the Kings Road Centre of 1960, described by the Pevsner City Guide as 'strong shapes in exposed aggregates, granite, bronze mesh, assertively interesting among historicist neighbours'. The brick clad Claremont Tower and Daysh Building by Sheppard Robson, 1968, have impressive scale and sharp, clean lines.



Municipal Dreams



River God Tyne

Between the two university campuses sits the Civic Centre. This was designed by the City Architect, G.W.Kenyon, in 1958 and opened a decade later. Clearly influenced by pre-war examples such as Hilversum and Swansea amongst others, it is not original but extremely satisfying. The buildings are arranged around a quad, low on three sides with a slab block to the north. What is particularly lovely is that the block towards Barras Bridge is raised above low brick vaults and so open to both the quad the entrance gardens. The circular Council Chamber thrusting into the gardens is also raised above a ground level forest of columns. The campanile has an open crown, like the Cathedral. Metalwork and artwork are carefully integrated into the whole ensemble, and the use of brick, stone facing and concrete is very successful. We could not see the interiors but, glimpsed through the windows, the civic spaces look extremely handsome. The lavish artworks by Victor Pasmore and others we owe particularly to T. Dan Smith's personal visions of the city and of art. Today the City Council is one of the hardest hit by Osborne's cuts and will struggle just to survive financially. The Civic Centre reminds us of the sort of civic vision and initiative that cities like Newcastle used to have.



The spirit of Nairn

In 1967, Nairn revisited Newcastle and was less than impressed by the Civic Centre - 'the City Hall, now complete, is not heartening at all; literal nullity without virtues or vices' he said. For once the great man was wrong. But he was not wrong in his admiration and affection for Newcastle. In 'Words in Place' Gillian Darley and David McKie note that on his death certificate Nairn's place of birth is recorded as Newcastle. He was actually born in Bedford, but his heart was in Newcastle.



Imagine not being dependent on the City of London

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Thanks to Nick Sanders for his company and insights.

Although written over 50 years ago, Ian Nairn's essay on Newcastle, republished in 'Nairn's Towns' by Notting Hill Editions, 2013, gives superb insights and analysis of the town. An afterword by Owen Hatherley reflects on subsequent developments.

Owen Hatherley's chapter on Tyneside in 'A guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain', Verso, 2010 is also a must-read.

The Pevsner Architectural Guide to Newcastle and Gateshead by Grace McCombie, Yale, 2009 is invaluable. The revised Buildings of England for Northumberland, Yale, 2001, provides additional detail.

3 comments:

Nick Gray said...

Splendid stuff.

BTW...that awful po-mo car park on the quayside accounts for most of Sandgate - what ought to be a landmark street as the scene of local folk song "the Keel Row" – famously the marching tune of the household cavalry et al

13 September 2015 at 07:07

Steven M said...

A fair and honest assessment, it's always good to hear an outsiders view. I'm incredibly proud of my home town but let's not pretend that we don't face major issues. Like other northern cities we've never really recovered from the death of heavy industry and in it's place it seems to have been decided that the 'party city' angle was the best way to go...madness.

There's currently a couple of interesting studies in town planning taking shape in the city at the moment - notably the stephenson quarter, science city and the lower ouseburn valley. It will be interesting to see the eventual results (if they ever come to fruition) unfortunately at the moment none of them are looking too promising. Science City is essentially a blank slate on the old Newcastle Breweries site. I know not everyone is a fan, but I think it's the perfect place for a couple of reasonably tall, well designed buildings. At the minute St James's dominates the skyline but it looks a bit daft as it is on high ground anyway so it sticks out like a sore thumb.

In recent years T Dan Smith seems to have become the local bogeyman, a symbol for destruction and philistinism. The truth is far more complicated. Of course he made some massive mistakes, the loss of Eldon Square and the surrounding streets and the Royal Arcade being particularly heartbreaking. Yet even in these cases there was a couple of mitigating factors, Smith intended the Arcade to be rebuilt alongside Swan House and he only approved the demolition of Eldon Square on the proviso that Jacobsen would be the architect of it's replacement. Unfortunately for various reasons neither of these happened. For all that we sneer at the post war era much of what was achieved then was far more ambitious and successful than anything achieved in the new millennium with the possible exception of the Millenium Bridge and (maybe!!) The Sage and Baltic. Tescotown in Gateshead encapsulates everything that is ugly, arrogant and brainless about modern day architecture. But then when you get Tesco to build your town centre what can you possibly expect!

The Grainger Town project is often held up as an of regeneration, but I'm not entirely convinced. At it's best it saved some wonderful buildings and Grainger Town remains one of our greatest provincial city centre quarters. At it's worst however it was an exercise in facadism and it almost completely ignored Clayton.Street and the lower end of Grainger Steet. Some truly crazy things have been allowed to happen such as the decision to approve the demolition and rebuilding behind the Grainger Street facade of Bainbridges by TJ bloody Hughes! Did you get the chance to check out the Bigg Market or the upper reaches of Pilgrim Street? Two streets with some wonderful buildings but currently massively wasted spaces in need of some investment and fresh thinking.

23 October 2015 at 16:15

Steven M said...

Whitley Bay is an interesting one as it's stock has fallen as nearby Tynemouth's has risen. They made the massive mistake of trying to replace family day trippers with booze tourism, but this collapsed when the stag and hen dos decided to go elsewhere and this is evident in the number of closed pubs and hotels. There is still much to recommend about the place, although it all has a run down feel these days. The train

station is wonderful, it has the "Blackpool Tower" of the North East in the, now sadly empty, Spanish City dome. There is also a dozen art deco/modernist houses which as far as I know are the only examples in the North East and probably the best post war high rise on Tyneside-Ryder and Yates' Beacon House.

24 October 2015 at 03:21

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