

Article

## Revisioning and Rebuilding Britain’s War-Damaged Cities

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### Abstract

This article presents an overview of Second World War bomb damage to British towns and cities and a systematic evaluation of the relationship between damage, revisioning, replanning, and actual reconstruction in a sample of cities—Bath, Birmingham, and Hull. Two were severely affected by aerial bombing as port/industrial targets, and the third for propaganda purposes as a historical city. Two had extensive plans produced by eminent consultants (both involving Patrick Abercrombie) but the city managers of the third did not support “big plans.” Birmingham, without a specific plan, rebuilt extensively and relatively quickly. Hull’s plan was disliked locally and virtually vanished. Bath was repaired rather than rebuilt. These contrasting experiences have shaped the contemporary city via subsequent generations of replanning (not all of which was implemented) and, in Birmingham’s case, the demolition of major reconstruction investments after relatively short lifespans. The article demonstrates the difficulty of conceptualising a generic approach to post-catastrophe reconstruction and the problems of such large-scale change over a short period for the longer-term effective functioning of the city.

### Keywords

Bath; Birmingham; Hull; post-war replanning; rebuilding; reconstruction; UK; wartime bomb damage

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

During the Second World War, a large number of towns and cities in the combatant states suffered substantial damage, although the nature and extent of the damage varied considerably, due to the nature of both the weapons and the settlements themselves. Clapson (2019) sets these air raids and their damage in the wider context of 20th-century aerial warfare. In Britain, the damage was caused by aerial weapons and the cities affected ranged from London, the capital city, to major industrial cities and smaller historical towns. The municipal administrations of damaged cities began replanning very quickly, even as the bombs continued to fall, although some had recognised the need to replan congested centuries-old city cores and slum

industrial-era housing even before the war—Coventry employing a radical new city architect and Birmingham with slum clearance plans, for example (Campbell, 2006; Manzioni, 1955). There was a great deal of continuity in pre-war, wartime, and post-war replanning (for example, in Belgium, see Uyttenhove, 1990); the real shock, or novelty, was in its scale and speed.

However, the replanning processes and actual reconstruction varied significantly from place to place in Europe (Diefendorf, 1990; Düwel & Gutschow, 2013) and, seven decades later, even the most successful and uncontentious examples of reconstruction are being re-evaluated and, in many cases, redeveloped. Connecting to wider discussions around the need for careful research that explores the shifting trajectories and peculiarities of post-war urban change in Europe

and elsewhere (Couperus, 2015), this article explores the processes and products of reconstruction, and their short- and long-term implications. It draws on extensive archival work in British national and municipal archives, set in a wider context through reference to European examples. The varied processes and products are examined through a comparison of cities differing in size, function, nature of damage, and attitude to replanning. The examples used are Bath (a historical city), Birmingham (an industrial city), and Hull (a port city). Archival research is used to complement contemporary plans and more recent research on the individual cities (Jones, 1998; Lambert, 2000; Larkham, 2016) and comparisons (Flinn, 2019; Hasegawa, 1992). Most of this literature focuses narrowly on local planning processes (including some of the personalities involved), while the comparative studies extend to themes such as economy and practicality. This article brings the reconstruction story up to date and adds nuance to the general argument that post-war cities were reconfigured solely to reflect the desires of eminent planner–architects acting in the experimental spirit of a sweepingly modernist vanguard. It also explores some of the long-term implications and fates of “reconstruction-era” structures. This is an area only recently receiving systematic research, such as in the work of Harada et al. (2022) on Tokyo.

## 2. The Nature of the Damage

Incendiary and high explosive bombs cause different forms of damage, and it is possible for incendiaries to cause fires that burn the combustible parts of buildings (such as timber roofs) but leave stone or brick standing and, potentially, restorable. Britain did not suffer the more intense and more destructive ground warfare experienced on mainland Europe, nor the intensity of raids which caused the firestorms of Dresden and Hamburg (Diefendorf, 1993; Hewitt, 1983; Overy, 2013); nevertheless, the damage was significant, often substantial, and usually widespread. German technology could, for example, accurately direct bombers to target cities, but the pattern of the bombing was often dispersed, leading Birmingham to feel that the whole city and its population were targeted rather than the valid military targets of arms production factories (“German bombing news story,” 1940). The impact of blast damage was more widespread but less severe, taking tiles off roofs and, for example, shattering much of the Georgian glass of Bath. Although war damage cartography, certainly in Europe, provided valuable data to inform the rebuilding process, some histories have substantially downplayed the extent and impact of war damage (Willis, 2015). Yet this evidence not only captured the diverse states of ruination, but it also helped to project “desired states of urban clearance” (Elżanowski & Enss, 2022, p. 611), thereby feeding the need to plan for efficient, modern post-war cities.

Mapping evidence exists for all UK bomb-damaged cities, the best being contemporary mapping on large-

scale Ordnance Survey sheets, identifying the precise location and severity of the damage. These sheets were updated for successive raids. Those for London are of exceptional quality and completeness and have been re-published in atlas form (Ward, 2015). But the nature of the damage was a military secret during—and even long after—the war and many such maps have not survived in public archives. Aerial photography in the early post-war years is more common and is beginning to be re-evaluated (Passmore et al., 2016), identifying cleared sites but not the wider but smaller-scale damage caused by the blast. Perhaps the most common records are compiled by local historians, although the accuracy is very variable: Bomb locations are often mapped but the spread and nature of the damage are more rarely plotted.

## 3. The Nature of the Plans and Visions for the Future

Most war-damaged city administrations across Europe moved quickly to develop plans to rebuild the damage, some working even while the conflict continued. This was particularly true in Britain from 1942 as the impact of aerial warfare lessened. It became evident that redevelopment was also needed to improve aspects of the outworn and outdated urban fabric unsuitable for modern traffic conditions and shifting social and economic conditions (Burns, 1962). Official guidance from the relevant minister, Lord Reith, repeated to several cities, was to “plan boldly” (Reith, 1941). The few pre-war plans were updated and often widened in scale given both the damage and the more supportive official and public response to planning. Many little-damaged or even undamaged towns, such as Warwick, embraced the opportunity to replan and rebuild, apparently fearing being left behind in the post-war repositioning of urban economies: To some extent, this was a product of place promotion (Larkham & Lilley, 2003). A small number of cities did not create reconstruction plans, for a variety of local reasons.

These early “advisory reconstruction plans” ranged from short, small booklets to large-format colour-printed books, and many were supported by exhibitions visited by thousands: In the case of the exhibition for Exeter’s plan, perhaps one-third of the city’s population visited in its first two weeks (“Exeter Plan exhibition report,” 1946). Yet this was hardly a form of participation in which public views altered the plan proposals; instead, it was a top-down communication of intentions (Larkham & Lilley, 2012). However, most of these plans were illustrated, with maps, plans, and renderings of potential new buildings. There was an evident effort to convey the proposals to the wider public; this represented something of an “experimental interlude” (Couperus, 2015, p. 516), and the earlier plans were often radical, large in scale, and likely to last decades.

Both “official” and “unofficial” plans emerged. Many were drawn up by consultants, often with little local knowledge and for large fees. The appointment of

consultants was often mediated by the Town Planning Institute, and a small number of individuals won many contracts. A majority of plans, however, were produced by local authority staff. Regardless of authorship, plans had to be approved by the ministry (Ministry of Works and Buildings, 1940–1943; Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 1943–1951; Ministry of Housing and Local Government from 1951). Staff of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning’s Planning Technique section, a wartime innovation, were extremely critical of many plans—including those produced by its own former staff (such as Thomas Sharp) or other eminent planners (such as Patrick Abercrombie; see Hasegawa, 2013b; Larkham, 2011).

A realisation that existing legislation was insufficient for the scale of the reconstruction task led to new Town and Country Planning Acts in 1944 and 1947. The latter introduced the “Development Plan,” to replace the former advisory plans. These new plans were more formulaic, more targeted at professional rather than public readerships, and led to problems in communicating planning ideas. Plans became less radical and were later criticised for being too inflexible to cope with unexpectedly dynamic post-war social, economic, and demographic changes (Hasegawa, 1999).

#### 4. The Nature of the Rebuilding

Once a plan was proposed and eventually approved both locally and by the ministry, a battle for implementation ensued. Few projects began promptly. Birmingham’s inner ring road, for example, was designed in 1943 and received parliamentary approval in 1946, but construction did not begin until 1957. Funding and materials dominated early implementation, and both were in short supply. The hopeful dreams of the plans often met the stark realities of everyday experience and the messiness of implementation (Flinn, 2019). Britain was particularly badly affected by the need to pay for the costs of war: Construction materials in particular were in short supply and were rationed until the middle 1950s. Structural steel was rationed by a cabinet-level committee (see, for example, “Blitz Reconstruction Programme: Steel Allocations,” 1952). With the need to generate substantial overseas income, steel was sold abroad (for example for buildings in Sydney), delaying reconstruction of UK bomb-damaged cities (Butler-Bowdon, 2009, p. 283). It was not until mid-1948 that a senior ministry official could report that “We now have authority to inform the local authorities concerned that the government is prepared to allow some start to be made on the rebuilding of blitzed cities in 1949” (“Reconstruction Committee: Reports,” 1949).

While housing was a key priority in all official plans, to replace bomb damage, deal with slum clearance, and catch up on half a decade of no building maintenance and severely restricted new construction, other elements were common—in some cases seeming to dom-

inate the plans. Housing was often dealt with by relocation away from the city centre, in some instances to new satellite towns, and in “neighbourhood units” with their own services and, ideally, nearby employment. But the bomb-damaged city centres were subject to radical redevelopment visions, involving large-scale new infrastructure (usually high-speed ring roads), shopping, entertainment, office districts, and “civic centres” (large municipal offices). While the new buildings depicted in reconstruction plans and models were usually uninspiring boxes—because the focus was on planning rather than architecture—this gave a misleading impression that the “new” was to be plain, boxy, and modern. Indeed, as fashions and architectural education had changed in the inter-war period, that was often the case. At the time, although the loss of the familiar and “old” was often lamented, the radical modern did provoke some surprisingly positive public responses, as with Coventry’s 1941 exhibition (Larkham, 2014, pp. 139–141).

But, as circumstances changed during the lifespan of a plan, inevitably the plan also changed. New concerns began to dominate new plans, including rising populations, the dominance of the individual motor vehicle, and a move of goods delivery from rail to more and larger trucks, to suit the needs of an expanding array of public and private interests involved with shaping post-war urban centres.

#### 5. The Examples of Bath, Birmingham, and Hull

The small number of Bath raids, part of the 1942 Baedeker raids on historic towns, “had destroyed 329 houses and rendered unfit for human habitation at least another 1,000...15,638 [had] suffered damage...serious damage was in scattered pockets rather than being general and widespread” (Rothnie, 1992, p. 68). Birmingham had numerous scattered raids, and bombs fell widely across its dispersed suburbia. The major raid on 9 April 1941, as a typical example of more focused effort, involved 235 aircraft dropping 280 tons of high explosive and 40,000 incendiaries. “Within a short time the centre of Birmingham was suffering severely, with huge fires burning in the Bull Ring, the High Street, New Street and Dale End” (Ray, 1996 p. 225). In Hull, 114,738 houses were reported damaged, “nearly half” of the principal retail trading establishments were destroyed, and industry had “suffered severely” (Lutyens & Abercrombie, 1945, pp. 17–18). The severity is marked by the number of properties which had not been repaired by the end of the war: 407 shops, 415 commercial buildings, and 315 factories/warehouses (“Post-war Building Programme,” 1945). For a relatively small city, this was a high proportion of damage. Table 1 shows the damage, but also the patchy recording of data.

Of these three cities, Birmingham is distinctly different and thus worthy of examination. The country’s second-largest city, which was also second-equal in terms of bomb damage, did not produce a

**Table 1.** Wartime damage details.

City	High explosive dropped, September 1940–May 1941 <sup>1</sup>	War damage (acres) <sup>2</sup>	Declaratory order applied (acres) <sup>2</sup>	Declaratory order granted (acres) <sup>2</sup>	Number of houses destroyed <sup>3</sup>
Bath	400 bombs	?	Applications abandoned 1946 <sup>4</sup>	?	1,214 <sup>5</sup>
Birmingham	1,852 tons	?	?	?	5,065 <sup>6</sup>
Hull	593 tons	136	300	246	4,184

Notes: <sup>1</sup> “Air defence of Great Britain” (1949), Appendix IV, although this focuses on “major raids,” hence the vague figure for Bath. <sup>2</sup> Principally from National Archives files (air raids/civil defence and reconstruction), especially “Conference of local authorities on reconstruction problems” (1947) and “City centres: Government sponsoring 1949” (1948–1950); a “Declaratory Order” identified areas of damage. <sup>3</sup> “Reconstruction Committee” (1943–1944) unless otherwise specified; “Houses” was taken to mean most types of dwelling, including accommodation above commercial premises. <sup>4</sup> “Population forecasts: Regional progress reports” (1951–1952). <sup>5</sup> 2,256 “seriously damaged or destroyed,” according to Abercrombie et al. (1945, Table 3); 12,125 destroyed according to the city surveyor and engineer discussing the 1946 Birmingham Housing Survey (Birmingham City Council Public Works Committee, 1947). ? Indicates lack of data in relevant National Archives files.

comprehensive city-wide reconstruction plan. This was very unusual. Instead, planning was the responsibility of its city surveyor and engineer, Herbert Manzoni, appointed in 1936. He was not in favour of large-scale plans which, he felt, were “often obsolete by the time they were put into effect” (Sutcliffe & Smith, 1974, p. 448) and the city had pre-war plans for slum clearance and road improvements (Manzoni, 1955). Post-war reconstruction to create a fully-functioning “motor city” occurred, but in a piecemeal fashion (Gunn, 2018). There were plans, but nothing comprehensive until the city belatedly responded to the legal requirement in the 1947 Act to prepare a city-wide Development Plan. It is this requirement that rendered all previous advisory reconstruction plans outdated at a stroke, and so perhaps Manzoni’s reluctance and/or foresight was merited. Probably the most accessible publication on the city’s reconstruction aspirations was a compilation of newspaper articles by the Chairman of the city’s Public Works Committee (Price, 1959).

A major focus of reconstruction was on a series of residential areas around the city core that had been severely affected by aerial bombing and were therefore studied by the ministry in early 1941 (“Bombed Areas: Replanning,” 1941–1943). An initial plan for one area was presented to the Public Works Committee in May 1943 and later refined as five redevelopment areas, locally known as “new towns” (Manzoni, 1943; Figure 1). The city moved swiftly to use new planning powers to purchase large parts of these areas: “Other cities had not been so well prepared as we were, and this is why we were the only ones to acquire such large areas at this time” (Manzoni, 1968, p. 2). The ministry was later critical of these proposals but felt that they were too well established for amendments to be required (“Duddeston and Nechells Redevelopment Proposals: Technical Report,” 1949). Much of the new housing was delivered as tower blocks often using the designs of spec-

ulative developers, but there were significant tensions between speed and quality of construction (Lewis, 2022).

The bomb-damaged city core generated radical visions but no plan. In early 1943, a senior member of Manzoni’s department gave a lecture illustrating:

Suggested buildings of the future in Birmingham...with roadways built on the sides of huge shopping premises, level with the first floor, and complete with bridges across the road, while footways tunnelled at the side of the buildings underneath the first floor. (“Report on lecture by F. Greenwood,” 1943)

Many schemes had prolonged gestation periods and many, including one involving Walter Gropius, remained unbuilt. What was actually built was a series of individual developments, led by speculative developers such as Land Securities and Ravenscroft, sometimes of street-block size and often designed by local architects, such as John Madin. By the mid-1960s there was dissatisfaction with progress, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* (“City-centre development news story,” 1965) noting that “there is no apparent pattern in the redevelopment at the heart of the city” although there were “gleaming new buildings and roads” (Sutcliffe & Smith, 1974, p. 479). The “jealousy and disagreement between the city engineer and the city architect” (Ross, City Estates officer, interviewed in Sutcliffe, 1967–1969) certainly led to problems of implementation. Ultimately, later criticisms centred on how many urban dwellers’ experiences of the new city were subordinated to the desires of overbearing transport systems, and a redeveloped centre built around cultures of leisure, consumption, and work (Gunn, 2018).

Hull, a major port city, was badly bombed and city officials moved swiftly to commission a plan from one of the country’s most eminent architects, Sir Edwin Lutyens. He was elderly and ill—dying on 1 January 1944—and shared the commission with Patrick Abercrombie. The plan was



**Figure 1.** The five “new towns,” otherwise known as reconstruction areas. Source: Versions of this graphic, originally drawn by Manzoni’s department, were reproduced in many publications; this is from Price (1959, p. 3).

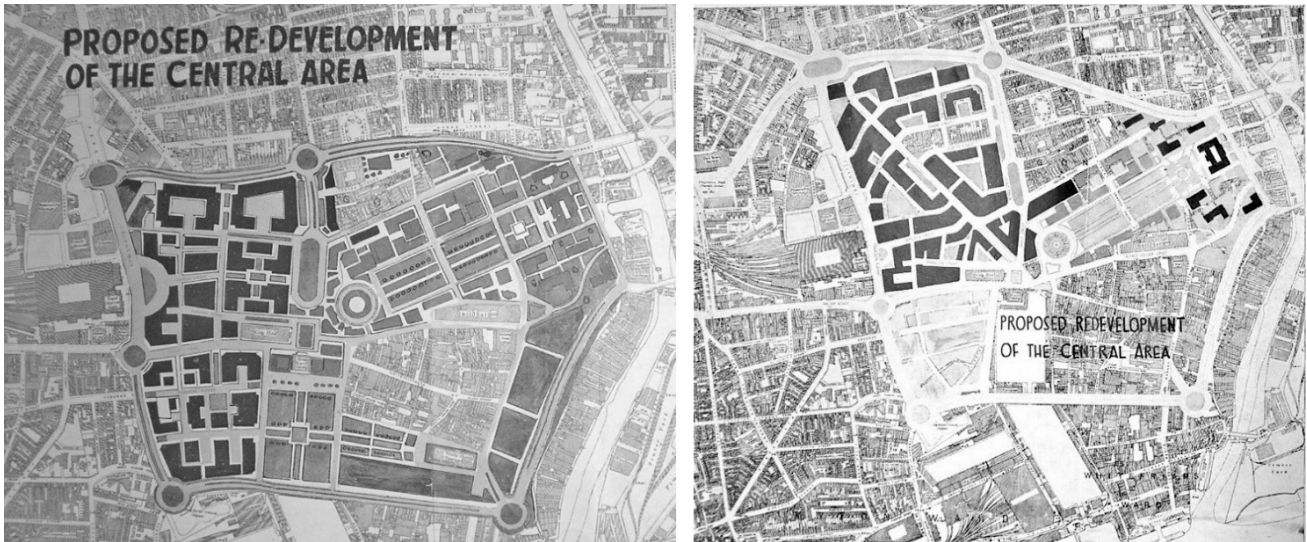
innovative and understandably focused much attention on improving the city core, although this held major implications for the rail lines serving the docks. There were also proposals for “community planning” and suburban extensions (decentralisation, not further sprawl) and for a Humber bridge. The plan, completed after Lutyens’s death, was published as a well-illustrated large-format book, with a local exhibition opened by the minister (“Professor Abercrombie’s plan,” 1946). Abercrombie considered that this was “probably the best report he had been connected with” (Dix, 1981, p. 1222), and he contributed most to it, given Lutyens’s illness.

Inevitably, the city-centre plan involved a ring road, with two new river crossings, and a segregated land-use subdivision into four “centres”: for shopping, theatre, cultural uses, and a large civic centre for the city administration. Queens Gardens would be extended to form a major public open space on the alignment of an infilled dock and medieval moat. Another major axis would connect the railway station to the new city core, as in the plan for Plymouth. An imposing *beaux-arts* city layout,

albeit with modernist buildings, would result. However, the “radical and challenging” proposal (Jones, 1998, p. 313) was to relocate the shopping centre and give it the form of a traffic-free precinct, although not in the same form seen in Coventry’s emerging proposals nor the decked structures proposed for Bristol and Hastings.

The City Council “expressed its approval and acceptance” of the draft proposals in April 1943 (“Hull Plan news report,” 1943). However, the subsequent response from local politicians, landowners, and retail operators, with vested interests in the pre-war retail area, was very strongly negative and alternative plans were circulated (Figure 2). The ministry’s response was also negative, to the point where a civil servant noted that:

Generally, it seems to me a tragedy both for Hull, Sir Patrick Abercrombie and planning generally that he ever went near the place, and the sooner Hull gets away from his wilder ideas and faces up to the practical job of replanning...in a sound, decent, ordinary way the better. (Gatliff, 1946)



**Figure 2.** Competing visions of central Hull: From the City Council (left) and Chamber of Trade (right). Source: Kingston Upon Hull Chamber of Trade (n.d.).

Although the ministry was generally dismissive of plans produced by people outside its own staff, this was an unusually vituperative comment (cf. Hasegawa, 2013b; Larkham, 2011). Faced with this opposition, and the intractable railway problems, the plan sank virtually without a trace, and indeed the city archives have retained few records of this expensive commission. Unfortunately, despite the “strong, coherent and intelligible” nature of the plan (Jones, 1998, p. 314), the city-centre proposals tarnished its wider ideas, including resolving the road/rail conflicts and a satellite town to better manage population growth.

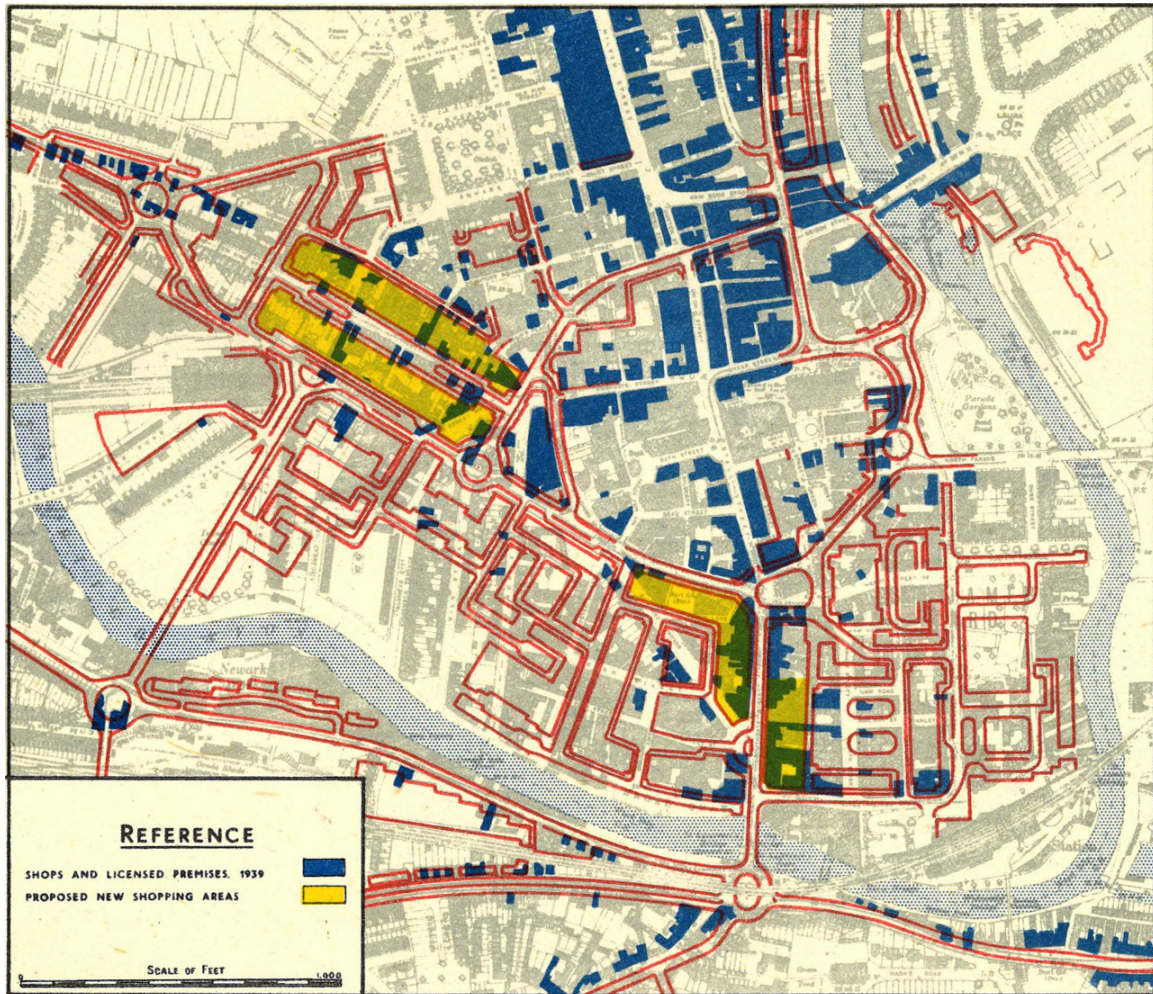
Of these three examples, perhaps the most successful, but nevertheless controversial, plan was that produced for Bath. Abercrombie was again the chosen external consultant, at a fee of between 500 and 750 guineas (“Proposed redevelopment of war damaged areas,” 1944–1955). Indeed, he had a significant personal influence over the replanning of post-war Britain, both through his own direct involvement in city-level plans, and several regional plans commissioned by the ministry. He was often supported by various ministers and on the recommended list often supplied by the Royal Institute of British Architects when asked for suggestions by local authorities. As professor at the Universities of Liverpool and then London, he also shaped the views of many others involved in contemporary planning. For the Bath plan, he was supported by H. A. Mealand (Town Planning Officer for the Bath and District Joint Planning Committee) and J. Owens (Bath City Engineer). But Abercrombie had already been involved with the 1930 Bristol and Bath Regional Planning Scheme and was a consultant to the Bath and District Joint Planning Committee, so he was familiar with the area and the personalities (Abercrombie, 2017, Part VII, p. 22; Lambert, 2000, pp. 174–178).

The setting and architecture of Georgian Bath were already seen as iconic (Green, 1904), and the found-

ing of the national Georgian Group in 1937 gave further support to this. Much of the serious bomb damage had coincidentally avoided the Georgian areas, and the major planned improvements were therefore focused on the later, and partially industrialised, riverside areas (Figure 3). Damage in some of these areas facilitated the demolition of other properties in slum areas with which the council had been trying to deal for years (Lambert, 2000, p. 183). But the proposals here were for radical and large-scale change. The plan’s phrase was that “most of the other properties are old and obsolescent. Our plans propose redevelopment on new lines and the elimination of all existing streets” (Abercrombie et al., 1945, p. 57).

Not only was this a radical change to physical form, but land-use separation and precincts were proposed. A tightly drawn ring road ran approximately on the alignment of the vanished walls. Some key historic buildings would be isolated for display, a controversial approach later termed “disencumbering” (Ladd, 2014), which treats these as museum artefacts rather than elements of urban landscapes—although the plan states that this was not the case (Abercrombie et al., 1945, p. 54). A surprisingly modern proposal was to create a new civic building immediately behind the Royal Crescent, incorporating and converting one of the houses that had been bomb-damaged and 15 others, and facing onto a new proposed east–west road across the city. Indeed, the location of many new buildings in relation to street alignments was distinctly modern rather than Georgian. But there were still traces of *beaux-arts* alignments, as with the concert hall and health centre. In addition to the expected focus on the damaged Georgian centre, the plan also had extensive coverage of residential neighbourhoods, industry and employment, open spaces, and communications.

The Bath plan was also published as a large-format book, with an edition of 3,000 copies at a cost of £3,000



**Figure 3.** Redevelopment proposals focusing on the worn-out and bombed areas south of the city core. Source: Abercrombie et al. (1945, following p. 62).

agreed upon by the council in October 1944. The plan was launched with an exhibition opened by the minister. It was also “introduced to the inhabitants by coloured magic lantern slides shown in every ward in the city” (“Bath Plan news report,” 1944, p. 337).

The City Council approved the plan, with the exception of the conversion of the Royal Crescent, in late 1945 (“Bath Plan approval news report,” 1945). The plan met a generally favourable reception, being reviewed widely and positively in national newspapers and in professional journals. The Bath Preservation Trust supported the plan, although the Bath Group of Architects criticised the plan’s traffic-focused, over-symmetrical and monumental character, and emphasised the contribution of less-significant Georgian buildings, in a series of articles in the *Bath Daily Chronicle* (Lambert, 2000, p. 187).

## 6. Conceptualising Post-Catastrophe Change

Models of post-disaster reconstruction highlight an “emergency response” stage. This is worth mentioning although it is, by definition, not part of the planned response. In the UK, one such response was the rapid

clearance of the rubble, although in some instances this involved the over-enthusiastic demolition of structures (especially churches and public buildings) that might otherwise have been stabilised and saved. A second response, immediately following the peace, was construction of temporary emergency housing, often as pre-fabricated bungalows, located on any available open space. Birmingham had about 6,000 such “prefabs,” often built by aircraft companies looking for work following the loss of wartime contracts. Despite short design lives, many persisted for decades; some have been reclad, and a few survive in original condition, having themselves achieved “listed” status (i.e., placed by the relevant minister on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest). Those that remain have “fossilised” a temporary emergency response: a point recognised in the Bath plan, which says that such structures “have no place in a long term planning scheme” (Abercrombie et al., 1945, p. 81).

More significant is the planned response, the main stage of most disaster response models, and, understandably, the focus of most professional and public attention. This is the response to the “opportunity”

provided by destruction to engage with novelty and radical ideas (Couperus, 2015). Concepts, designs, and technologies certainly emerged across a range of scales and actors, though these were not widely implemented for reasons of cost, other practical concerns, or the inertia imposed by an existing urban morphological frame. But, as with all plans, the radical future turns out not to have been particularly radical or necessarily successful in the longer term. The sometimes surprisingly short lifespans of some buildings, or even major infrastructure investments (Larkham & Adams, 2019), demonstrate this; nevertheless, plans have to be made. Hence, both the reconstruction plan and the physical reconstruction require eventual re-evaluation.

However, in the UK, post-Second World War reconstruction started very slowly, accelerated massively in the 1960s such that it generated an anti-development, pro-conservation response (Aldous, 1975; for Bath, see Fergusson, 1973) and then stopped suddenly in 1973. The Arab-Israeli war in the Middle East and the consequent oil shortage spurred a further economic crisis, and most building projects were halted. When the economy allowed construction some years later, the socio-economic situation was so different that many stalled projects, including Birmingham's library, were never completed as originally planned. This artificial end to the "reconstruction era" has implications for conceptualising the final stages of reconstruction.

## 7. Evaluating Post-Catastrophe Changes Seven Decades Later

This evaluation would form a further stage in a disaster response model, although it is rarely explicitly recognised. All buildings and areas have a life span, in more recent years expressed as a design life. Yet this was rarely a consideration in the reconstruction plans, which understandably focused on the redevelopment itself over periods of 20, 30, or even 50 years. Even areas designed and constructed early in the reconstruction era have not all withstood these challenges with, for example, Birmingham's 1940s-designed inner ring road being viewed as a "concrete collar" restricting the growth of the city core by 1988 (Sparks, 1993) and partially demolished in the early 2000s, part of a wider reaction against the car culture embedded in the city's post-war urban form (Gunn, 2018).

The Government's expert advisory organisation Historic England (formerly known as English Heritage) has—from as early as the mid-1980s—been recommending some protection through listing, but more recent research has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders to better understand some of these issues. For example, the long saga of Birmingham's 1970s Central Library is now well known (Belcher et al., 2019; Larkham & Adams, 2016). The outspoken opposition of some senior city politicians and officials to any suggestion that the structure could be reused or conserved is noteworthy,

as is the campaign by the building's supporters, using both new and traditional media (Clawley, 2015). English Heritage's experts recommended listing on two occasions, but both ministers in office at the time refused to accept those recommendations. Although refurbishment of the 1970s library would have been costly, its replacement was probably three times as expensive. Civic ambitions for redevelopment outweighed both local and expert views.

Replication of destroyed buildings is very rare in the UK, in contrast to some European locations after both world wars. There are rare examples in Bath, Leamington Spa, and London, particularly where part of a uniform terrace was destroyed—but the influence of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings's criticisms of this approach dominated. Nevertheless, such replication was mentioned favourably in an influential book by Roy Worskett (1969, p. 180), then Bath's chief planner.

Birmingham's iconic Rotunda office block was Listed in 2000. Nevertheless, soon afterwards it underwent a major and radical refurbishment—albeit with the support of its original architect, James Roberts, and having received all appropriate consents. Its overall form and mass remain as original. However, all the cladding is new, and the balance between glazing and cladding panels is slightly changed, and its podium has been penetrated by a supporting pillar for the Bullring shopping centre of 2003, replacing the 1964 centre. The sinuous office block on Smallbrook Ringway has also been subject to redevelopment proposals involving recladding, two glazed additional storeys and a new central tower but, in November 2022, demolition was proposed (Spocchia, 2022). In this case, listing was considered but not recommended. This was the first-built section of Birmingham's inner ring road, starting in 1957, and the city was trying to secure an income stream from rental of the shops and offices on this narrow site. However, the ministry felt that these were inappropriate alongside an urban high-speed traffic route and the design of subsequent sections was changed. Official disapproval decades ago seems still to influence decisions today.

The surviving reminders of the bombing itself have provided a heritage, and potential problems. Most bombed buildings were cleared very quickly, although some remained—a combination of inaction and deliberate choices—and a few remain even today. For example, bombed churches or cleared sites of destroyed churches remain in quite a few cities, in the UK alone including London (12), Bristol (three), Birmingham, Coventry (two), Southampton, Plymouth, Liverpool, and so on. Some of these sites were deliberately retained with a memorial function. Others are landscaped gardens (a combination of public open space and memorial), especially in city centres with little other public open space. Some seem merely to be landscape features, particularly as historic centrepieces for new developments. Some have attracted new uses and users, for example St Luke's, Liverpool, with its community and art-related



uses. Others remain part of thriving and active churches, and Coventry Cathedral and St Martin le Grand, York, have also built profiles as centres for peace and reconciliation. Yet some seem hardly to be used or visited; and this category would include St Thomas, Birmingham, despite its re-invention and redesign as a Peace Garden in the late 1980s. The continued conservation of these structures, especially in the current economic climate, must be increasingly doubtful given their low use, and their structural integrity considering the length of time that has elapsed since their ruination (Larkham, 2019).

In several cities including Birmingham, bomb sites remain as surface car parks. In both Hull and Bath, bombed secular buildings that have survived to the present day as ruins have been listed, although the survival of structures (as opposed to sites) is rare. The ruin of a bombed cinema in Hull, long neglected and listed for its rarity as a surviving bomb site, is about to be converted into a civilian war memorial, with a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (Historic England, 2022a; Young, 2021). In Bath, a bomb-damaged but patched-up and now-listed municipal office building has retained its scars in a major rebuilding (Historic England, 2022b).

Research on stakeholders of these contested buildings suggests that particular individuals can be extraordinarily influential in decision-making processes and that the actual decisions made, with all due legal process, may not appear to be firmly based on evidence. For example, Berlin's Gedächtniskirche was retained largely as a result of public pressure, with one newspaper reporting over 47,000 letters debating the proposed ruin clearance (Brude-Firnau, 1983, p. 126). St Alban's Church, Wood Street, London, survived the war as a burned-out shell but a complex and not clearly logical series of decisions then left only the tower remaining, isolated on a tiny traffic island (Martire, 2018). More recently, the social media comments of some pro-redevelopment individuals about Birmingham's 1970s library seem to be emotive and less evidently evidence-based, while Tessa Jowell, when the minister responsible, made forthright comments to a local radio programme that give the impression that personal taste may have influenced decisions. Protesters are becoming very "smart" in mobilising support via different media, often from far afield (Larkham & Adams, 2016). Those making decisions need to learn lessons about how the processes of decision-making are communicated in the contemporary media arena: how the careful, professional evaluation of evidence arrives at a clear decision in a transparent manner.

## 8. Conclusions

The three British cities discussed in this article, comprising a broad range of types and sizes of cities, provide an important illustration of replanning and reconstruction approaches and activities. These were dominated by contemporary professional and political values: As with other cities, these were top-down, expert-driven pro-

cesses, scarcely consultative until proposals were ready for public presentation and "criticism" (a much-used word at the time). Much of this communication was a form of propaganda (Larkham, 2014, p. 144). Yet there was little evidence that public views changed plans. The British experience was little different to that of much of the rest of Europe (for occupied Germany, see Deeming, 2010; for other examples, see also Diefendorf, 1990). Novel factors across Europe included the necessarily large scale and speed of action and a much more technocentric approach to the use of data and technological solutions such as communications infrastructure. This demonstrated the influence of modernism, not just as an architectural and urban form but in the drive towards speed and efficiency of urban activities (certainly for vehicles but perhaps less so for pedestrians; Hubbard & Lilley, 2004).

These plans, even the "non-plan" of Birmingham, originated in the early war years, while bombs were still falling. However, Prime Minister Churchill was sceptical of such efforts, stating that "we must be very careful not to allow these remote post-war problems to absorb energy which is required, maybe for several years, for the prosecution of the war" ("Committee on reconstruction problems: Composition and functions," 1940–1943). Yet it is scarcely conceivable to think of the impact on public morale had not some such efforts been made, demonstrating positive responses to the catastrophe of damage on the "home front."

Even mapping the bomb damage was a political act (and contemporary use of technology makes this even more evident; van den Hoek, 2021). It was a form of propaganda: as much about recording loss as about reshaping and reimagining cities (Elżanowski & Enss, 2022). In Britain, knowledge of the extent of loss led to the process of identifying significant historic structures, a ministerial duty from 1947 (Delafons, 1997, Chapter 8). Likewise, even using images of destroyed homes and workplaces was discouraged by censors for reasons of morale and military secrecy (Pohlad, 2005, pp. 3–4). Knowledge, and its graphic representation via these maps and other images, was indeed power (Harley, 1988), in terms of the still opaque processes of selection and categorisation and their effects on reconstruction decision-making.

Inevitably, the examples discussed here add to the story of a more fragmented, non-linear interpretation of post-war urban change. There were significant difficulties relating to short-term action especially given shortages of material, funding, and people. The ideal of wartime reconstruction plans, all highly aspirational despite Churchill's reservations, met the harsh reality of post-war rationing (to 1954–1955) and shortages, political and technical obstacles as well as financial problems (Flinn, 2019; Hasegawa, 1992). Expectations of swift action generated by the energetic production of plans were dashed, not least by a new planning system requiring the recasting of all plans in a new approach as

“development plans.” Reaction to the first of these plans was negative:

As for the few town maps which have been prepared, what are we to make of them? It is a minor matter that the form in which they are required to be presented is repulsive. It is a worse fault that they are almost unintelligible. But it is far worse again, indeed it is deplorable, that they are in part meaningless—and deliberately so. (Sharp, 1951, pp. 429–430)

In fact, this change in how planning ideas were communicated to a wider audience has had a long-term adverse effect throughout much of the post-war period.

The intense local opposition to the Hull plan was dominated by vested interests in existing land ownership patterns and rhetoric against diverting resources to new road alignments instead of replacement buildings that received great prominence in local media. “These were precisely the short-term arguments which Abercrombie feared would dominate post-war reconstruction” (Jones, 1998, p. 312). An alternative plan was commissioned and, with the new focus on development plans, the Lutyens/Abercrombie plan vanished. Such vociferous and well-orchestrated opposition to reconstruction proposals was very unusual, although some opposition always arose when, as in almost all cases, reconstruction required the compulsory purchase of the property. The equivalent land reallocation process in Japanese reconstruction was perhaps simpler, though not without problems; but there was a very different national and civic culture (cf. Hasegawa, 2013a). It is not wholly accurate to say more widely, as Higgott (2007, p. 72) did of the County of London Plan, that “the assumption of the rightness of the power to carry out these proposals in the common good is never questioned.”

The perceived slowness of implementation, the changing focus of planning ideas and communications through development plans, and perhaps opposition such as in Hull led to a very distinct watering-down of the types of proposals seen in the early outline reconstruction plans, some of which had been a very radical response to the opportunity of destruction (Essex & Brayshay, 2008; Hasegawa, 1999). Nevertheless, many of the buildings that eventually lined the new street layouts were largely modern, a radical and unfamiliar departure. This is seen in the series of reconstruction-era plans for historic cities such as Durham, Exeter, and Chichester by Thomas Sharp, which established his reputation (he was president of the Town Planning Institute in 1945–1946) and became the new orthodoxy.

This study demonstrates that neither the size or nature of the damaged city nor the scale, nature, or extent of the damage itself had much influence on the nature, production, or implementation of replanning and reconstruction. Far more significant were factors relating to agents and agency active at the time, including the values and views of decision-makers and the processes

being used. The incomplete nature of Table 1 demonstrates the different degrees with which the three cities engaged with the standard formal bureaucratic procedures. Manzoni boasted of his high-level contacts and activities, including his exertion of influence on developing legislation such that Birmingham got what it wanted (i.e., the extension of reconstruction powers in the 1944 Town and Country Planning Act to include slum clearance; Manzoni, interviewed in Sutcliffe, 1967–1969, p. 4). Poor interpersonal or inter-departmental relationships at the city level, and between cities and the ministry staff more widely, were significant problems and causes of delay. In the longer term, even the nature of the plan and plan-making was of relatively little importance: The downfall of Birmingham’s reconstruction was not the lack of a “reconstruction plan” but the changing dominant paradigm of planning from the vehicular priority of the 1930s–1970s. However, the critical factor given less attention by many of the studies of individual cities and plans which dominate the urban and planning historiography of this period is the wider scale of wartime disaster, and thus the need to conceptualise disaster response and longer-term planning over a far wider physical area than any one city and its hinterland. In this respect, one of the major shortcomings of the UK’s post-Second World War reconstruction planning was its ad hoc nature, and the lack of any form of “national plan.”

The nature and extent of urban reconstruction, most of which was delivered in just a quarter-century, means that it now faces block obsolescence. The challenge for contemporary planning and urban management across much of Europe is to reassess the significance, quality, and condition of these buildings and areas. How much of this difficult and dissonant urban heritage can be re-used in the longer-term effective functioning of the future city?

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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