Porous cities: Coventry through 10 Holes

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The bombing [of Coventry], in fact, became an opportunity... It is important to realise that the bombing was the catalyst that avowed the spur for change. It was that spirit that changed [the city’s] central area into the 1940, 1950, 1960s

Terence Gregory, City Architect and Planning Officer of Coventry

This photo essay is inspired by a workshop organised on holes held at the University of Warwick in May 2017. The workshop, which hosted artists and academics, meant to explore and investigate holes as sites of unexpected encounters, disruption, despair, anxiety and memory, but also as places of hope and potential. As a spinoff from the workshop, both of us were fortunate to take some of the meeting’s ideas to the streets of the British city of Coventry, the city in which both of us currently live and work. On the afternoon of Monday, 21 August 2017, we met two inspiring local artists, Laurence Price and Cathy Wade, for a walk through the city’s centre. The objective, although not as planned as the term perhaps suggests, was to reacquaint ourselves with Coventry through the prism of holes.

We both grew up and were born in a city. Aya comes from a megacity in the Middle East with a huge ring road. Noisy, dusty, layered, victorious and defeated; her home city is always the subject of love-hate relationship. Something she finds in common with Coventry. Throughout the past three and a half years, she has been trying to make the city her home by walking it rather than by taking the bus. She has made the few everyday routes familiar by treading them repeatedly. Along the way, she has walked holes in her shoes, jeans and socks. She calls them happy holes; holes that come-into-being in movement, in rubbing off the pavement of cities.

Marijn grew up in a large port city. He remembers how, through its porous body, smells of the sea and stinks of airborne pollution accompanied large 40-foot stacked containers travelling from arrival to departure on every minute of the day. He recalls how infrastructures of land and sea brought together people of different colours and tongues in unpredictable encounters on streets designed for transit. Bodies entered and left the city’s hollow arteries in a bustling tempo of politics, economics, friendship and, on occasion, love. Every city has different holes to discover, listen to and walk through. It took Marijn many zigzagging walks to adjust and appreciate Coventry’s riddled body. Now, after having trod the city’s streets, sometimes quickly, then slowly, over its archetypal flyovers, through corridors and tunnels, he has learned to make it a home, if only temporary.
To walk, as part of this practice-based art project, was a chance for both of us to de-familiarise accustomed and ritualised routes, and, ironically, to discover anew Coventry’s multi-layered porousness. Afterwards, we replicated the walks separately. We tweaked the starting points, the rhythm and pace, and we walked on different days and with different people. Sharing our walk again was our way of threading a narrative weaved around a perpetual getting-to-know Coventry. Coventry, is a place with a particular history of material and immaterial holes, which we sought and will, as long as we are here, continue to explore. The photos were collected on separate strolls with the intent of recording some of these holes. In other words, this is a story of a hollowed city narrated through the prism of ten holes.

Our walking begins with a loop around the city’s heart, one that is marked by several attempts to find a viewing point, an opening if you like. In fact, none formally exists, as the concrete encirclement, which holds the city’s bearing, the ring road, makes it seem difficult to enter. Coventry is on (or in, or under, or around) a ring road, but, fortunately, there are many cracks and crevices through which we can crawl.
In Britain, we are more accustomed to hearing that ‘this was Coventry,’ or that we have passed through the city (on our way to a real destination), than to appreciate that ‘this is Coventry’. The city is not considered a station of interest, let alone a place of arrival. Rather, it appears in popular imaginations as existing purely transitionary and instrumentally. Coventry is sometimes thought akin to be a non-place (think of the overused phrase ‘to send someone to Coventry’), a deep hole, a lingering post-war bomb crater to be stepped over, or, worse still, an obstacle to be avoided and driven around. Once inside, however, when the harsh concrete curtains have been lifted and the many little secrets start to unravel themselves, it becomes difficult to imagine a city as layered, ambiguous and complex as this one. Inside, when we took the time, we found many windows scattered around the city. Some are perfect picturesque frames, holes in walls that are horizontally cut by concrete dashes, or swirls. Others, seem more accidental; punches through walls that have been erected to enclose patches of the past, hidden away from view. Through either, we stand still in a vacant urban plot or a small fenced park to watch the world speed by.
One Peephole

We are still looking for an entry, however. A perfect picture to catch Coventry. We have become used to seeing cities from above, to take pleasure in ‘seeing the whole’\(^2\). This is perhaps because, now, we increasingly arrive to them by plane. Even if we drive, sail, walk or ride into them, cities extend their urbanism up in the air, to make sure we do not lack opportunities of panoramic views. In Coventry, we searched and ‘failed’ to find that signatory birds-eye-view point from which to take in the city as a whole. Instead, just a step outside the railway station, we start peeping through holes; cracks and fissures that allow us to look at the city from a distance, rather than overlook it from above. After all, Coventry’s fallen is not Icarus, who fell from above, but the voyeuristic legend of Peeping Tom, who, according to local tale, was struck blind as punishment for spying from his window on the city’s fair Lady Godiva.
Deep Hole

Motorway travel is thus doubly remarkable: it avoids, for functional reasons, all the principal places to which it takes us; and it makes comments on them.

Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. 3

Ring Road 40, 'let’s go round again' 4. The current rail station was built outside of the ring road, whereas the bus station was located ‘as far from the railway station as possible’ 5. Between them lies the ring road. When the station was newly built in 1962, you would ‘come out and have the ring road right in front of you’ 6. Today, this is no longer the case. After the recent Friargate developments, the space between the rail station and the city centre has been smoothed over, in a way that makes the ring road’s once overwhelming presence now spectral. Freed from ‘the concrete collar of the ring road’ 7, the body of the concrete serpent broken, it seemed that its heart was within reach. We tried to enter. However, the further we walked, looking for a way in, the more the ring road engulfed and covered us.
Gaping Holes

A point has been made of convenience for motorists. It will be possible... to enter a car park from one side of the city centre and to continue through... to another. There should rarely be need to pull out of a park and go in search of another

Coventry Evening Telegraph, 1950

Carparks. No one anymore seems to write or care about these crucial and once celebrated but, of course, uniquely hollow buildings. Cities are filled with ‘gapng holes: parking lots and cavernous garages at virtually every corner, creating an aura of unfulfilled expectations’.

Coventry has 24 public car parks, all of them equally anonymous. They are, as in other cities, oftentimes embarrassingly concealed from the public eye or, even worse, considered as potential sites of danger and violence. Safety and security are, under the 2004 ‘Safer Parking Scheme’, qualities designed into these car houses creating ‘affective environments which generate feelings and atmospheres of safety and security’. Car parks are holes we always search for but never want to stay in for very long. Let’s walk on.
A Backdoor

The planned [post-war] redevelopment of Coventry was predicated on particular understandings of the time required for different activities

Philip Hubbard and Keith Lilley

Market Way was among the earliest pedestrianised shopping streets in Britain. It characterised the arrival of a modern city, a true ‘retail revolution’, with spatial-temporal zones segregating the pace of undisturbed consumers from increasingly fast machines. This new, layered urban utopia was designed for the locally manufactured cars that occupied the city’s surrounding asphalted snake. They, when at rest in their overseeing parking lots, were made responsible for feeding the luring department stores with consumers down below. From the parking lots, we could gaze on our weekly selves, spending Saturdays grocery shopping for the rest of the week.

With the conversion of the motorcar from a vehicle of pleasure to a tool of consumption, Coventry morphed into a punctured auto-architecture cemented in layers of afterthought flyovers, secreted tunnels and grand warehouse doors. Only the temporality of the air remained unscathed from the car-power underneath, but soon spikes in this space would also here prevent the alternative movement of pigeons and other birds to interfere.
Coventry is a concrete sheet that folds and enfolds. It is a city that is, or feels, perpetually under construction, always a work in progress. Urban projects promise a future: bright, solid, concrete and light. A future built of the very durable promising material of the city. Time, however, passes through our cities and our bodies. The texture of the city varies, the concrete becomes vulnerable, almost too fragile to tread. The smooth asphalt wrinkles, and breaks. And life, life moves through and through, boring holes along the way. ‘In the wormhole the worm creates an infrastructure to hold itself in the world: the hole fits the worm, but only as it moves’¹³. We live, we move, and like worms, we wear the fixed ground away. Our city smooths itself so that we can glide. Pot holes are filled, walls are whitewashed, and plan after plan promises us great(er) views and quick(er) trips. As we slide, glide, walk, struggle and breathe we perforate the city, and peep through the holes again for glimpses into our histories.
Bare Holes

For those returning from the war, the city centre became strangely unfamiliar. One man felt like he was in a new town with new people: “It was like beginning again really.”

A city is a geologically layered construct and it is only through momentary and spontaneous crevices that we get to see a distant glimpse of the irrevocable spent yesterdays. Bombed, erased and built on ground on top of ground on top of ground on top of ground and more ground. It becomes easy to forget that the city ‘is made of geology or on geology.’ It is ‘a thing that makes geology’ and we are its cement, dust and bricks. We tend to forget, as memories build-up and years accumulate, that which lies underneath, hidden in part by our new fragile glass high-rises. Fortunately, there are naked holes through which to remember who we were once and where we will return.
Layered Holes

To mediate the transition of the multiple levels in Coventry, there is a water fall located close to the city’s hidden Priory. Behind the water fall, we gaze at another world through the Waterwindow. This window of visibility belongs to a 1990s Urban Generation Scheme – the Phoenix Initiative – located next to the recently excavated ruins. The waterfall marks time by etching its passing on the copper panels. For a city that is located in the heart of the very flat Midlands, Coventry is surprisingly layered. Our walk was a very hilly one even though Coventry is a proper city, a hungry concrete being, which is flat and which flattens. Nevertheless, we walked up and down, we climbed all the time, never rising above the city while underneath us were man-made small hills, derelict fountains, earth domes, buried rivers, and water windows that told us to climb no more.
Whirl Holes

Concrete spirals take cars in, on and off Coventry's ring road, and for a long time, walkers would swirl beneath the ground in tunnels, or over ground on pedestrian flyovers. These concrete roller coasters are strong enough to swirl you above and below the motorways. Already before the onset of post-war urban planning, ground floating skywalks were the subject of futuristic visions that promised to liberate the activity of walking from the gravitas of the ground, bringing us closer to light and air. Coventry rebuilt itself with sky bridges for cars and pedestrians, yet it never seemed allowed to dream high enough to free itself from the shackles of the ground. Spiral over spiral, continue, even when post-war concrete curves have become fashionable no more. The path to the future leads over a glass bridge that takes you from medieval city walls and greens (located underneath), over the city's lost art deco Apollo Theatre and infamous Poster Place (located no more), to an architecture always under construction (location unknown). Underneath and above the bridge are pasts, presents, futures, holes, memories and yet another slip road. Let's keep on walking, up and down we go.
ENDNOTES


3 Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (Verso), p. 97.

4 BBC, Let’s Go Round Again, Ring Road 40: BBC Coventry & Warwickshire https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff47X8uXLzM [accessed 19 December 2017].


11 Phil Hubbard and Keith Lilley, p. 282.


14 LR, born 1930 in Phil Hubbard and Keith Lilley, p. 284.


16 Ibid.


19 Alan Van Wijgerden, ATHENA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJYAb6WJD0o [accessed 11 September 2017].