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## **Paradise 2.0: John Madin is Haunting Birmingham**

Catherine Oliver & Liam Bates

John Madin is haunting Birmingham. It started in 1974. And it should have ended in 2016 when they tore down his library. But Birmingham can't shake off Madin's ghost. No matter what they build on his remains, Madin's brutalist haunting reminds Birmingham what it should have been, what it could still be.

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At the heart of Birmingham used to sit a building. Designed by born and bred Brummie and brutalist architect, John Madin, the Central Library was a concrete masterpiece, albeit one that not everyone could see the beauty of. Far from towering above the city, the library was squat and imposing, in stark contrast to the grand Victorian buildings flanking it.<sup>1</sup> The building was designed as an 'inverted ziggurat.'<sup>2</sup> Ziggurat: to protrude, to build high, a temple; the inverted ziggurat: inconspicuous, grounded, a sanctuary.

Birmingham is a city built on a modernist ethic. The new, new, old city.<sup>3</sup> "Forward" is the motto. The library sat in the inverted ziggurat, a sea of calm, and underneath its floors was *Paradise Forum*, lined with shops and cafes. This was John Madin's centrepiece in a city that he transformed with his sensitive architecture<sup>4</sup> and determinedly brutalist design. *Paradise* signalled the metamorphosis of Birmingham in the mid-twentieth century from an industrial heartland to a post-industrial trailblazer.

*Paradise* has existed in this area since the sixteenth century, when it was a piece of grazing land, and the name was picked up again by post-war planners in the twentieth-century.<sup>5</sup> *Paradise Circus* was the road system and *Paradise Forum* the later shopping precinct below the library. In *Paradise Lost*,<sup>6</sup> John Madin features as a fallen angel wandering the maze of Spaghetti Junction. Brutalism suited Birmingham in the 1970s, as the city 'embraced utopian visions of modernist urban planning'<sup>7</sup> and cleaned up its city centre. The modernist imagineers circled around John Madin's *Paradise*, built a city around it, and moved the centre of the city to worship the ziggurat.

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Long before local council motivations were led by cynicism or desperation, the spectre of a hopeful future, which would benefit all, hung over Birmingham.

Madin walked around the city, his city, and saw the ghostly forms of an optimistic architecture take shape. He saw a structure that would work with and for, not against, the landscape and the people who called it home.

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Central to Madin’s vision was a brutalist ethic, not reducible simply to style. The brutalist “anti-beauty” demanded progressive ideals of welfare provisioning in the post-war era, but it also has a powerful politics, an ‘uncompromising logic’ that is in direct contention with present-day neoliberal ideals.<sup>8</sup> The ziggurat wasn’t just a symbol of a progressive logic squat above the city, it was a practically designed home to the city’s knowledge.

Today, Birmingham is a palimpsest of competing modes, which represent different points of global/local connection, different points of historical time ... made actively by its distinctive communities who grow, make and remake themselves very quickly.<sup>9</sup> Where the ziggurat used to stand on Paradise, now there is PriceWaterhouseCoopers headquarters, outposts of London chain restaurants, and shimmering office blocks and skyscrapers.

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The contemporary unmaking of Paradise was, in some ways, written into the concrete slabs as they were being poured in 1970s Birmingham, as the city was hit by post-industrial decline, and the council aimed to restructure the city centre to attract office-based private sector investments. Birmingham ‘swallowed the entrepreneurial pill’<sup>10,11</sup> The nowhereness, the ubiquity, of Paradise’s architecture today “seems to have been part of the plan, a reaction against Madin’s grandstanding.”<sup>12</sup>

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Almost fifty years ago, Madin watched the old new Paradise opening. Today, four men in suits and one woman pose for a press release photo for the new development. They are arranged to appear as a group, but each of them is alone. Say, *Where Commerce Meets Culture!* The photographer clicks his button. Five smiles, replicated in SD card pixels, replicated in office facades, replicated in glass barfronts, replicated then replicated, refracted, distorted, degraded. The reality looks much like the earlier artist’s mock-up, superimposed on the cityscape, important-seeming people milling about,

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smoking, a distant, amalgamated investor’s imagination projected 360 view.  
The ghost of John Madin wanders through a hall of mirrors.

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The PR campaign surrounding the regeneration of Paradise - the tearing down of the brutalist vision of Birmingham - was marketed as “where history meets tomorrow,” a site for a “new generation of visitors, residents, thinkers and doers.”<sup>13</sup> The vision for the city centres on the demolition of the ziggurat, its inverted layers ripped through by a bright yellow excavator. This anti-beauty ethic has to be torn down, sanitised, replaced with the shiny and new. With it went the ideals of a united city with grounded principles, sold off to the highest bidder.

The 1970s in Birmingham saw competing ideals for its post-industrial future jostle for space. While the practicality of brutalist building in architecture prevailed, “the uniform sobriety of concrete turns out to conceal a subtle gamut of textures and colours, beautiful in themselves and a permanent record of how the building was made.”<sup>14</sup> This solidity of form, its reliability, conceals the radical ethics held within. Rather than reflecting the city and its wealth back out, like Paradise 2.0, the ziggurat held still above the city. No spectre flickered on those walls. But their “geometrical solidity and rough surfaces charismatically radiate across space.”<sup>15</sup>

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The futuristic vision of the 1960s and 1970s postwar reconstruction imbued Birmingham with a “can do” attitude, and a “legacy of space-age optimism.”<sup>16</sup> In the past decade, there has been a renewed appreciation for long since disregarded brutalist buildings of yesteryear. Nowhere was this more prescient than in the campaign to save Birmingham’s ziggurat library. History might be in the making in Paradise 2.0, but not simply through creative, ordinary, tragic destruction.<sup>17</sup> History in this city requires spectacular obliteration.

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The campaigners who tried to save the ziggurat became, ultimately, its palliative care team. A 12-year fight for survival culminated in grim resignation in the face of overwhelming neglect. The Friends of Birmingham Central Library issued their death notice to the local press. The slab of Progress slid thunderingly into place. A wake in Chamberlain square finally laid this part of the story to rest. Nobody expects to have to bury their own library. Food and drink were shared and fond words were spoken of a friend gone too soon. From a certain angle, a melancholy scene, presaging the city’s new faceless corporate era. From another, these were people gathered tight around the brutal light of hope for something better. John Madin’s ziggurat is dead. Long live the ziggurat.

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Paradise 2.0 sits on top of a very different vision of Birmingham. Its developers, in conjunction with the city council, saw an opportunity not just to capitalise on this heart of the city, but to reshape it altogether. To move *forward*. In the 1970s, the brutalist project in Birmingham slipped through and its spectre remains across the city today. Over the five decades since, that vision has been chipped away by successive “regeneration” efforts of obliteration.

What has been left behind is mayhem; a Dutch architect said Birmingham was “the most chaotic city [he’d] ever seen ... as though a child had upset a box of building bricks.”<sup>18</sup> What better way to bury John Madin’s ghost, and his vision for a greater and more beautiful Birmingham<sup>19</sup>? Madin believed that “buildings should have an appearance of ‘simplicity and sincerity’ ... he gives high importance to a building’s relationship with its natural surroundings, the linking of indoor and outside ... honestly expressing materials and careful detailing.”<sup>20</sup> The opposite, it seems, of the reflective nightmare that sits on the grave of the ziggurat.

In 2016, this iconic landmark and civic hub of Birmingham was torn down, despite widespread protest, and the ziggurat being just days short of becoming a listed building. In the space left by its demolition now stands a development that shares its name, but little else, home to the headquarters of HSBC and PricewaterhouseCoopers. With the demolition, a utopian vision of Birmingham was destroyed, but the spectre of brutalist idealism lives on in the city’s phantasmagoria.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://failedarchitecture.com/paradise-lost-birminghams-central-library-and-the-battle-over-brutalism/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://c20society.org.uk/lost-modern/birmingham-central-library>

<sup>3</sup> Maria Balshaw (2004) Into the New, New, Old City, in Liam Kennedy *Remaking Birmingham*. London: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/jan/19/john-madin>

<sup>5</sup> David Rowan (2022) *Paradise: 1974-2016*. Manchester: The Modernist, pp.70

<sup>6</sup> Andy Howlett (2020) Paradise Lost, History in the Unmaking [film] <http://paradiselostfilm.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> Liam Kennedy (2004), *Remaking Birmingham*. London: Routledge

<sup>8</sup> Oli Mould (2017), Brutalism redux: Relational monumentality and the urban politics of brutalist architecture, *Antipode* 49(3), pp. 701-720.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Balshaw (2004) Into the New, New, Old City, in Liam Kennedy *Remaking Birmingham*. London: Routledge, pp. 147

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Ward (2003) The limits to contemporary urban redevelopment ‘Doing’ entrepreneurial urbanism in Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester, *City* 7(2), pp. 199-211

<sup>11</sup> Richard Hatcher (2016) The neoliberalisation of the city: the transformation of city centres and city councils. *Socialist Resistance*. <http://feedreader.com/observe/socialistresistance.org/7367%2Fthe-neoliberalisation-of-the-city-the-transformation-of-city-centres-and-city-councils%3F+itemId=2394845806?from=56982183>

<sup>12</sup> Rowan, p.70

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.paradisebirmingham.co.uk/about/vision/>

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<sup>14</sup> Barnabas Calder (2016) *Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism*. London: William Heinemann, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Edensor (2021) *Stone: Stories of Urban Materiality*. London: Palgrave. p. 243-244.

<sup>16</sup> John Grindrod (2013) *Concretopia: A Journey around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain*. Brecon: Old Street Publishing, p. 184

<sup>17</sup> Zygmunt Bauman (2008) *The Art of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>18</sup> Teun Koolhaas in Lynsey Hanley (2021) *The Second City*, *Tribune*,  
<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/03/the-second-city>

<sup>19</sup> John Madin (1940) *The Future of Birmingham*, written when Madin was aged 16, in Alan Clawley(2011) *John Madin*, London: RIBA, p.vii

<sup>20</sup> Alan Crawley (2011) *John Madin*. London: RIBA, p. vii.