Contesting urban monuments: future directions for the controversial monumental landscapes of civic grandeur

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Abstract

Decision makers are being increasingly called on to confront controversial urban histories to create more inclusive, diverse monumental landscapes. Although many prominent and officially 'authorised' public monuments radiate troublesome heritage, the monumental landscape is also richly complex, and demands an evaluation of the shifting relationship between design intention and public reception, as social, political and local contexts alter the heritage-making process. Based on documentary research, secondary analysis of qualitative interviews and an evaluation of media discourse associated with two examples of monumentality in Birmingham, UK, this paper argues that examining these forces is a necessary and urgent step for actors involved in creating sustainable urban environments. This paper concludes by considering how urban actors might effectively deal with those competing historical and political narratives and generate more contextualised and community-oriented responses to the shaping of the heritage landscape during times of economic uncertainty.

Introduction

Debates around the causes and consequences of contesting, modifying, pulling down and 'cancelling' of monuments extend to different contexts and form current news and social media exchanges; and they encompass recent, high-profile public, political and even academic controversies surrounding monuments in the US, South Africa, Belgium, Australia, Canada, England, and elsewhere which, some argue, venerate key figures associated with imperialism, slavery and paternalism (Frank and Ristic 2020; Wilson et al. 2021). Impassioned acts represent attempts to wrest control from those powerful urban actors who seek to promote particular self-serving historical narratives through the protection and management of statues, buildings and other controversial monuments (MacDonald 2009). Most such monuments have come to be recognised, in one way or another, as 'heritage'. Hence these protests present a direct challenge to those supporters of what Smith calls 'Authorised Heritage Discourses' – those ideas and processes reflected in those structures which "privilege monumentality, innate artefact / site significance tied to time depth, scientific / aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building" (Smith 2006, 11).

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But monuments vary in form, function, size, and shape; they may also have varying degrees of persistence and adaptability and embody nuanced historical associations (Knudsen and Anderson 2019). While much recent discourse seems to favour absolute values, there are recent calls for more careful and nuanced examinations of shifting personal and societal tastes and fashions which affect people's emotional, political and social engagements with complex sites of memory, thereby shaping the values attached to them (González-Ruibal 2020). Likewise, broader political and economic forces can also affect discussions surrounding the deterioration, maintenance, reuse, removal and / or demolition of troublesome heritage (Allison 2018; Stephenson et al. 2021). Spatial location and the relationship with wider communities – both lay and professional – all influence the values conferred upon contested heritage objects. Examining these changing dynamics that influence heritage-making and 'collective place-making' (Edensor and Mundell 2021) is a vital endeavour for those involved with creating sustainable urban environments.

Clearly, some monumental forms are more capable of "attracting and repulsing audiences" (Knudsen and Anderson 2019, 240) than others, especially those that lie beyond the immediate focus on controversial statues, public statuary and architecturally significant and / or 'difficult' commemorative objects (MacDonald, 2009). And in the spirit of an enlivened study of monuments and their interpretation, both within and beyond the frames of race, colonialism, and imperialism, there is also a need to reflect on how monuments are contested, and how such monuments may enhance heritage knowledge, while providing a space to engage with marginalised experiences in support of decolonial and other urban justice agendas (Frank and Ristic, 2020). Yet this paper also helps to reveal how the management of controversial heritage landscapes might be enriched further by examining the way in which large-scale, expensive to maintain monumental structures with troublesome historical associations are increasingly subject to political and economic forces that influence debates around decay, retention, reuse, removal and / or demolition (Pendlebury et al. 2020).

In discussing two grand expressions of civic grandeur in Birmingham, UK, this paper argues that discussions about which elements of the urban monumental landscape are removed, repurposed and / or retained would also be enriched by thoughtful evaluation of these broader forces and actors involved with the shaping the heritage-making process. An emphasis on 'selling the historic city' in a post-industrial and austerity economy, a curtailment of public-sector activity, and a growing number of heritage actors capable of effectively mobilising different media, are all important considerations.

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Together, these and other factors raise pressing questions regarding the representativeness attached to heritage discussions, thus potentially hindering consolidated efforts to address broader social, economic and environmental heritage goals (Pendlebury et al. 2020).

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The human impulse to attack, modify or subvert civic statuary is not only confined to political acts, and censorship of controversial monuments by the faithful, from the from the early Christian church to twenty-first century Islamists, and the Reformation's destruction of medieval artworks all represent iconoclastic acts of control (Hughes 2021). Recent emotionally-charged debates, though, have largely focused on the political values attached to particular nineteenth-century statues, which tend to celebrate state and / or private involvement in slavery, repression, exploitation or colonial genocide, alongside other discriminatory practices (MacDonald, 2009; Frank and Ristic 2020). Statues commemorating Confederate officials and soldiers of the American Civil War are now regularly critiqued, attacked or removed from prominent public settings. Elsewhere, statues of indigenous peoples considered racist are also being 'retired', alongside those problematic urban structures associated with racial and / or sexist symbolism (Edensor and Mundell 2021; Wilson et al. 2021).

Inevitably, perhaps, a growing sense of unease permeates recent discussions around how best to manage and / or curate the fast-growing category of contested heritage, raising the question of who decides what to do with troublesome objects of the past that continue to radiate forms of oppression? In the UK, at least, and alongside the growing body of research that seeks to reappraise the legacies of colonialism and other (urban) injustices, large-scale audits of contested heritage from influential government and non-government bodies, including the National Trust and The Church of England, have been undertaken, while some wealthy private donors have withdrawn their support for controversial museum displays.[1] Some conservative voices have sought to suppress waves of 'new Puritanism' by adopting a more overt, policy-driven and aggressive interventionist approach that would 'retain and explain' rather than remove controversial heritage (Stephenson et al. 2021). Opprobrium is apparent on both sides of the debate, stoked in part by sometimes-vitriolic media exchanges involving experts, independent advisors, academics, government agencies and property owners as well as members of the public on how to address the unequal power relationships embedded in urban heritage landscapes (Frank and Ristic 2020; Stephenson et al. 2021).

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Given the strength of feeling, it is unsurprising that much recent discussion has tended to centre on charting the interplay between the authoritative narratives associated with a desire to protect disputed urban structures, and those counter-perspectives of protesters who seek to overtly or covertly challenge officially-sanctioned authorised heritage discourses (Edensor and Mundell 2021, 19). Obvious targets here relate to those authorised heritage forms that venerate and / or celebrate notable figures: for example, politicians, benefactors, reformers, industrial captains, landowners, military leaders, imperialists and monarchs are all commonly commemorated in statues, classical columns, inscribed stones, and other monumental forms (Darke 1991). Because of their impressiveness, often prominent locations, scale, clarity of form, and use of materials, public monuments can often convey a sense of eternity and authority, celebrating a past indelibly shaped by domination of 'other' people and places (MacDonald, 2009). Rather than historical relics, objects can exude a certain 'haunting' power; and later additions may be fortified and politically used to influence individuals' emotional, affective and cognitive responses in sometimes-negative ways, thereby influencing their ongoing and contested engagements with the urban fabric (Adams and Larkham 2019; Knudsen and Anderson 2019). Moreover, memorials from different eras can reflect varied identities and values, while communities create installations and other unsanctioned structures that explicitly question rarefied historical narratives, thereby cleaving open new ways to celebrate / debate place identity (Allison 2018; Stephenson et al. 2021).

Despite the assaults on some of the more overtly problematic statues associated with genocide, war, colonialism and other forms of discrimination, identifying potential offending structures and designing appropriate courses of action is not always a straightforward task. One obvious danger here is that certain urban features become scapegoats of sorts for myriad social and political ills, arbitrarily selected because they are viewed by influential voices as being badly out-of-step with latest orthodoxies in race, class, gender, sexual or political orientation. In this sense, collective acts of violence are deemed necessary to "exteriorise" troublesome objects (Girard 1977, 177). Here, physical, financial or rhetorical actions used by those wielding scapegoating power are justified to remove feelings of frustration, embarrassment, guilt or shame: once 'dispatched', their loss serves as a reminder of past mistakes and helps guide future action (Delafons 1997). But even those monuments which are intimately associated with memorialisation and / or commemoration and were originally officially authorised by the state or other powerful actors, have varying degrees of persistence and can carry multivalent meanings that shift over time, and extend beyond those specifically and intentionally commemorated by the monument itself (Allison 2018).

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Some structures that have *potentially* dissonant historical associations remain part of the everyday urban experience. Obvious and practical concerns surrounding demolition, repurposing and / or removal become important, particularly given the size, scale and nature of some potentially contentious urban forms. Even 'everyday', overlooked, ignored or decaying structures may become freighted with a curious power of absence (González-Ruibal 2021); and unlike the political values embedded in traditional civic statuary, the scale and design of these objects can invite varied human interactions and uses, thus allowing new values to emerge in response to changing circumstances and demographic / community needs (Knudsen and Kølvraa 2021). In the UK, for example, there is a rich and unevenly distributed kaleidoscopic collection of monumentalia: community centres, clubhouses, murals, swimming baths, playing fields, libraries, hospitals, recreation grounds, museums, meeting rooms, places of worship, and housing projects, may take on a familiar and reassuringly unremarkable quality (Darke 1991). Certain buildings and structures may become 'unintentional monuments' as their practical and / or commemorative value shifts. These may be adapted, protected and branded as heritage, and / or altered over time, while other structures may 'slip' into decay and dereliction, either because of the conscious or unconscious actions of those actors who have a particular attachment to these sites (Knudsen and Kølvraa 2021).

In exploring the social and economic challenges associated with the faded civic grandeur of nineteenth-century swimming pools, Collins (2020) acknowledges that, while these 'ruined' spaces continue to reinforce historically-rooted ideas of class, gender, ethnic, bodily and cultural differences, they remain 'indeterminate sites' where hegemonic forms of power can be aesthetically, politically or socially reworked through people's performances and interactions, rather than through direct forms of conflict (González-Ruibal 2021). Likewise, creative reuse of certain 'ordinary' if troublesome civic structures may not only avoid the "wasted embodied energy and embedded memory" (Heathcote 2020, 12) of demolition, it can stimulate important feelings of attachment that are generally lacking from today's deracinated urban experience, thus providing a much-needed counterpoint to the aesthetic poverty of contemporary, homogenised commercial and civic architecture (Hopkins 2017).

Of course, digital infrastructural networks that are shaped by and reflect individuals' connections with the physical realm offer potentially powerful ways to reveal city dwellers' diverse embodied urban experiences, that could influence the future management of contested heritage objects (Edensor and Mundell 2021). Yet online exchanges can also foment insidious forms of homophily, stifling the potential for cooperation between different publics (Fürstenau et al. 2021). Finding ways

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to integrate the plurality of voices into consensus-building decisions around the retention, removal or repurposing of contentious heritage remains problematic, especially in urban contexts increasingly shaped by transnational connections (Hughes 2021). While some (potentially) contentious urban forms retain a certain latent incendiary quality with potential to be thrust into the hotly-contested arena of current public debate, vituperative exchanges made via different media and across both sides of recent 'culture wars' tend to avoid careful examination of those wider forces, actors and possibilities involved with the shaping of the built environment (Larkham and Conzen 2014). Hence the need for work that examines the views of other government agencies, pro-development lobbyists, quasi-independent protection agencies, and other specialists, operating between spatial scales, involved with authorised heritage decision-making (Smith 2006), especially at a time of pared-back public sector approaches to heritage management (Pendlebury et al. 2020).

Charting these dynamics, alongside the plurality of voices as people engage with different monumental forms, would add further layers to the wider debates around the preservation / removal or understanding / interpretation of different heritage forms; a necessary step, as some see it, towards the creation of democratically-informed models of dealing with troublesome heritage assets, in the face of funding cuts and entrepreneurial forms of governance (Allison 2018).
As the following cases demonstrate, work that exposes the increasingly diverse forces and interests involved with these decisions is a necessary endeavour for those involved with assessing the potential for creating more just, diverse, inclusive and sustainable cities. Specifically, this paper draws on multiple sources to reveal some of the shifting mechanisms used to balance the competing needs of those involved with heritage-making in Birmingham, UK, a city shaped by the legacies of 'top-down' city planning, insensitive slum clearance operations, de-industrialisation, and recent rebranding, all of which has created rich cartographies of multiple mixed-race identities and diverse populations (Chan 2006).

The focus here is on buildings rather than contentious statues, to test the application of ideas discussed above. Most of Birmingham's monumental civic buildings, alongside other monumental forms, are now protected through their location in a locally-designated 'Conservation Area' and many through national designation as 'Listed Buildings', but they have all been adapted and restored to meet the pressures for change in the early twenty-first century. Two major civic structures are considered in this paper, exemplifying the variable influences of people, personality and process in revaluing the city's monumental landscape. It analyses public documents, official policies, reports, and different media to highlight the interplay between the official design ambitions associated with

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monuments and the multi-layered meanings which people ascribe to the monumental landscape during their everyday interactions. This is supplemented by a review of publicly available oral history recordings collected during recent local efforts to retain and restore a controversial monumental building were also evaluated.[2]   Analysis of this material extends established approaches which consider changing urban form via explorations of those actors and decision-making processes and examine the competing power relations among and between the individuals and organisations involved.

Saving a public monument: the Moseley Road Baths

As with other rapidly-urbanising cities of the nineteenth century, Birmingham displayed powerful expressions of late-Victorian civic grandeur. These ideas blended with notions of political / religious duty, municipal socialism, public health reform and the city's role in articulating civilising narratives associated with late-nineteenth century British imperialism (Green 2011).   Showcase projects, brimming with examples of grandeur, were entwined with much-needed improvements in street design, transportation and sanitation. After achieving 'city' status in 1888, nonconformist (ie specifically not Church of England) city officials demonstrated these values in the city's 'civic gospel': "municipal corporations became […] moral agencies committed to promoting 'civilisation' within their borders" (Beckett 2005, 47). Many prominent and architecturally-significant public buildings were constructed, all of which implied a substantial degree of confidence in driving forward Victorian ambitions of health and virtue, thus helping to sediment Birmingham's important political and economic role in the British imperialism (Chan 2006). These included The Town Hall (1832-8), the Council House (1874-9), later extended as a Museum and Art Gallery; the College of Art (1884-5) and Library (1879-82) (Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

The provision of public baths and wash-houses reflected the public health dimension of municipal government. Spurred by specific legislation from the mid-1800s and emboldened by "prevailing notions of civic pride and societal necessity" (Love 2008, 53), civic leaders offered to build both baths and a library in an area which they hoped to incorporate within rapidly-expanding Birmingham. The library was completed in 1896, and the adjoining baths were finished in 1907; the latter included two swimming pools, individual baths, a laundry and club room, and were built in the same ornate terracotta style (Gordon and Inglis 2009, 154-159) (Figure 2). Ultimately, though,

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expressive forms of civic monumentality and grandeur declined in Britain during the early-to-mid twentieth century as ambitious reformers, architects and other urban actors steeped in the doctrines of modern architecture adopted a general distaste for the 'nearly new', while the scale and style of some monumental forms, either became uneconomic or obsolete scapegoats to modernity (Delafons 1997). A lack of funding and income generation also compromised these projects; their function changed during the early-twentieth century, moving away from sanitation to leisure and recreation (Marino 2010). That said, the facilities continued to be well used, and many people expressed fond memories of their experiences of using the baths; some recollections record a degree of fondness associated with important life events, memorable social occasions, and the civic investment invested in the facilities (Beauchampé 2013, sections 4-7; Collins, 2020):

"We used to go to dances there, too, as well as swimming. [It had an] excellent sprung wooden floor […] one dance on VE Day […] I was eighteen at the time, a wonderful day at Moseley Baths" (Roger, local resident).

"I was utterly amazed at how much hot water we were allowed to have. [Years ago] people would use the [baths] if they didn't have bathrooms […] At home we had a lovely life, but we didn't have a lot of money [so the baths] were a luxury" (Jenny, local resident).

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Nevertheless, it took time for Victorian / Edwardian design to become officially valued: maintenance expenditure fell as the City Council's attention focused on new leisure centres, usually at the expanding fringes of the city, while the authoritative national survey of significant architecture, which surveyed this area in the mid-1960s, does not mention these decorative buildings (Pevsner and Wedgwood 1966). And, as with the urban change that occurred during the nineteenth century, the radical urban renewal, municipal boosterism and 'race neutral planning rationale' (Chan 2006) which rolled out across many UK city centres in the postwar period also prompted the now-widespread pro-conservation movement which lamented the social upheaval associated with sweeping change and the loss of nineteenth-century civic sensibilities (for example, Amery and Cruickshank 1975). Hence, by the 1980s, attitudes towards removal and protection changed: once-popular styles become reviled or 'exteriorised' (Girard 1977, 286), before becoming appreciated once more, especially when official conservation-planning approaches became important economic and political devices (Delafons 1997). While some traditional swimming baths were closed in the 1990s, Moseley Road remained open, and by 1994, the baths were officially recognised and Listed

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Grade II, reflecting their richness of décor and the rare survival of design features showing social segregation (first- and second-class baths) and shifting attitudes to personal hygiene.

In some ways, then, the baths' authorised heritage status continues to sediment certain historical associations and radiate power, civic virtue, patriarchy, and the ideological impress of the city's role in empire-building (Green 2011). All of which may be interpreted as being wholly incompatible with the needs of those living, working and socialising in an increasingly diverse city neighbourhoods. These, including Moseley, are made up of both local and global diasporic networks of decolonised communities drawn from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and the West Indies that were attracted to the city partly because of Birmingham's booming post-Second World War economy, especially in car and car component industries (Chan 2006). Similarly, individuals' accounts of the baths tend to convey particular tensions at the perceived discrimination associated with scheduling swimming activities around certain historically-rooted ethnic and class divides, expected "bodily and cultural practices" (Collins 2020, 11), and the different degrees of access afforded to men and women:

> "We had a few people last month that were phoning up saying, why have you got women's only swimming, they were like, that's sexist. Some guy said to me […], that's sexist, and I'm like, it's not, we have a men's hour as well, it's fine. It's just a balance really" ('Janice', local resident [cited in Collins, 2020, 11]).

The Listing was upgraded to II* in 2004, placing the building alongside only four other public baths with this level of heritage protection; and Moseley Road is the only one predating 1914 and still in use. But following a decline in funding and resources directed at public libraries and parks, and an expanded role for the private sector in leisure provision, the building began to decay. Emergency repairs were needed in 2004-5; and in 2008, consultants costed merely mothballing the building at £2-6 million, and a full restoration at £20-22 million (Elkes 2008). The building was then entered on the national register of historic buildings at risk. Although the baths remained a largely popular leisure and recreation facility for thousands of local people, in 2015, the City Council suggested closing the building, prompting it to become one of only two UK buildings to be included in the World Monuments Fund's Watch List. Debates around restoration sparked debate, locally and nationally. Some called for the removal of an unsightly landmark that is indelibly linked with an era of failed urbanisation, lamenting the 'depressing', and shameful 'sewer-like' baths (Bloom 2015). Others celebrated the late-nineteenth century municipal virtues and wished to see the building 'rise again' in an era of pecuniary stringency, entrepreneurial urban policies and the commercially

focused planning (Bloom 2015). Rather than any symbolic public protest designed to directly challenge unsavoury aspects of the authorised discourse, a more splintered form of scapegoating by owner neglect emerged (González-Ruibal 2021). The building began to take on an indeterminate quality, as it fell into disrepair and ruination, aided, in part, by long-running conflicts over funding, restoration and maintenance.

Apparently fixed meanings can loosen, too. People's memories and engagements may deviate from original design intentions and discriminatory practices, through evolving processes of 'becoming' (Allison 2018). The massive change in the local community through several decades of in-migration certainly affects this 'loosening' process; and individuals' sometimes-playful engagements, for example, created space for antagonisms to find expression (Knudsen and Kølvraa 2021), and as associations are reworked through evolving forms of "creative appropriation and transformation" (Frank and Ristic 2020, 562). The baths play a vital role in reaffirming psychological dimensions of people's 'place-protective' heritage interactions with community, even though that community is changing substantially. Indeed, a negotiated "sense of group solidarity and of overcoming difficulties" emerges from local narratives; they reflect a desire on behalf of some users to foreground specific needs of the users and "recognise that identity categories can serve as sources of strength" in the fight to save the building (Collins 2020, 79). New users and pressure groups appeared, including a Moseley Road Baths Action Group and the Friends of Moseley Road Baths, bolstered in part by a committed, sometimes-voluble Twitter following and strong LinkedIn connections; and the original use, for community swimming, remained active. Genuine anxiety surrounded how the facilities might remain accessible to the community, though those serendipitous interactions among diverse groups remain an important marshalling point in generating community-focused forms of placemaking (Edensor and Mundell 2021) (Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The strength of local feeling created sufficient pressure for the City Council to allocate a further £400,000 in 2017 to keep the pool open for another year, as mothballing would cost about £5 million, and full restoration costs had risen to around £30 million (Elkes 2018). Eventually, a consortium of influential international and national bodies emerged, including Historic England, the National Trust, the Prince's Regeneration Trust, the World Monuments Fund as well as the two local groups. Although the National Trust is arguably better known for its countryside 'stately homes', its interest in the baths reflects a move towards the curation of small-scale sites of social history and

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"culturally-oriented tourism" (Pendlebury et al. 2020, 675). While Historic England recognised that retaining the original use of a heritage structure is 'best' for securing the future of the baths, pressure groups sought possible 'alternative uses for some of the spaces to help cover ongoing costs' (Friends of Moseley Road Baths, quoted in *Birmingham Post* 2015). The Leader of the City Council also acknowledged the importance of local protest, and activity is ongoing, despite recent Covid lockdowns: urgent roof repairs were completed, and scaffolding was removed in 2020 (BBC News 2020).

Widespread support and broad alignment exist, albeit precariously, between local, national and international heritage actors. A National Heritage Lottery Fund grant for volunteer training, together with a local community crowdfunding appeal (matched by the City Council) and a new charitable organisation managing the swimming activities helped spur interest and action. A more critical reading might suggest that the City Council – as the site owner – only sought to draw on local feelings of civic mindedness, especially among potentially influential 'outside' agents to inspire inward investment, amid concerns relating to the impact of restricted government conservation-planning regulatory frameworks, weakly-defined planning policy frameworks, and general reduction of heritage expertise (Pendelbury et al. 2020). Further challenges lie ahead. Certain English local authorities have also attempted to either rebuild, extend or sell their commercial and residential property portfolios to support service provision, while pro-conservation groups can seemingly provide limited capital and resources needed to cover the cost of restoration (Pendlebury et al. 2020).

Demolishing an 'unnecessary monument': the Central Library

Although the fate of the baths remains unresolved, the story of the city's Central Library, some three kilometres away, was very different. Public library provision in Birmingham was permitted via the Public Libraries Act 1850, legislation that encouraged architects to create buildings of "monumentality [and] scholastic iconography" (Historic England 2016, 5). But funding libraries was difficult, and many were provided by philanthropic industrialists (Black 1996). It took until 1865 for Birmingham's first free Central Library to open. Replacing the traditional Classicism of the nineteenth-century building, the local architect John Madin designed the new Central Library (1969-74). This massive civic investment, part of the city's 1960s development boom, embodied the city's break from negative associations of the uncoordinated nineteenth-century growth by unlocking a

renewed sense of optimism and pride. Moreover, it was a large, prominent and potentially very valuable council-owned city-centre site.

Once described as Europe's largest municipal library, the building became synonymous with the city's post-war place-promotion ambitions. As a "pinnacle of Modernist ideology" (Belcher et al. 2019, 414), it was dominated by an inverted ziggurat form in rough concrete and brutalist appearance (Clement 2018, 35-36). But, as with other internationally renowned totems of 'failed' paternalistic post-war modernism, the building eventually became a "lightning rod" for affection and vitriol (Hughes 2021, 8) among certain urban actors (Larkham and Adams 2016, Tables 1 and 2). Of course, this period of rapid transformation has left a powerful symbolic and physical legacy which, half a century on, still resonates in a sharply-reduced confidence in the lofty virtues of expert-driven, patriarchal utopian planning; a widespread nostalgia, particularly among some older people; and a desire to recover local identities from the ravages of excessive building and the creation of shame-inducing concrete monoliths that largely failed to meet the needs of contemporary politicians, landowners, developers and citizens (Adams and Larkham 2019).

As with other UK cities, the Victorian civic gospel was being reforged to support new policy efforts that created a more internationally connected and competitive city; a new civic pride that appealed not only to certain resident populations and businesses, but also potential international investors, tourists and economic activities associated with the city's diasporic networks (Chan 2006). There were several official and unofficial attempts to (re)appraise and preserve the now generally derided modernist ideals attached to certain residential, commercial, civic buildings and public art (for example, Clement 2018). Yet, despite a growing influence of pro-conservationists, remnants of the under-appreciated or even reviled post-war rebuilding also face sometimes-merciless acts of demolition, neglect and / or radical alteration as development pressures and policy landscapes seek to build pro-growth public-private business alliances (Craggs et al. 2013). Eventually, the library became disliked by later city managers. It was a political tool in bitter struggles over economic and socio-political formations (Knudsen and Anderson 2019). Hence the visual and material ruination of this 'unnecessary monument' reflects both the end of postwar modernity and the failed promises for prosperity associated with the city's transition to late-twentieth century global capitalism (González-Ruibal 2021). The library was subsequently demolished in 2016 (Figure 3). A site for a new library in nearby Centenary Square was chosen in 2007; this was built in 2013.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

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Madin's original vision was of a building clad in Portland stone or travertine marble, set in landscaped gardens with fountains and water features. Reflecting the 1960s architectural penchant for robust, durable forms and cost concerns, the City Architect recommended pre-cast concrete with stone aggregate instead of the more expensive marble; this led to later criticism that the library was a 'concrete monstrosity' (Clawley 2015). An ambitious bus station underneath the main structure and linked to the inner ring road was never used. The water features and other yet-unbuilt parts of the civic centre fell victim to the 1970s oil crisis. The pedestrian entry-level space was a commercial opportunity, and in 1989-91 the open square was glazed to form an atrium, with single-storey stores and cafes.

In February 2003, the Twentieth Century Society (a pro-conservation public pressure group) recommended that Madin's library should be Listed. English Heritage supported this, and its recommendation was approved by the Head of Designation, Head of Conservation and the Chief Executive. It was signed off by the English Heritage Commission (English Heritage 2008). The relevant government minister rejected the bid for protection, and the City Council applied for a legal measure that would prevent Listing for five years. While this was being considered, in 2008, English Heritage again recommended that it should instead be Listed. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (another Governmental advisory body) disagreed. The *Birmingham Post* (2008) commented on English Heritage's recommendation that "[...] to most people the decision [to recommend listing] will be inexplicable, if not verging on the laughable. It is impossible to envisage anything of worth being built around the library building". The Leader of the Council, Mike Whitby, argued in 2008, that the library interrupted the Council's planned creation of a vista along Broad Street to the Town Hall (quoted in Vaughan 2008). For key policy makers, certain political elites and some members of the public, the central library inhibited local ambitions to revitalise the city core socially and practically, following the recession of the late 1970s and 1980s. For some, its demolition served as a ruthless display of urbicide by satiating a certain desire to expunge a seemingly unwanted structure, physically and symbolically (Hopkins 2017; Heathcote 2020):

> 'It leaks, and great big chunks of concrete keep falling from it […] It's ugly and unfit for purpose and would cost too much to properly renovate' (Birmingham Head of Libraries, Brian Gambles, cited in *The Guardian* 2010).

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> '[It had a] 'leaking roof with drip buckets scattered.. lifts and excalators (*sic*) rarely working damp and smelly yes but at least it was open all hours every day of the week with ample staff' (Anonymous, birminghamhistory.co.uk 2018).

> [My] 'library was a civic centre in the civic heart of the city [but the City Council] wanted to sell the old library site for … new commercial buildings!' (John Madin, interview, 2009).

Initially, demolition, clearance and removal of the building would release funds for other boosterist projects, including the new library. Margaret Hodge, then Minister for Culture and Tourism, visited Birmingham in 2009 and made an announcement on the BBC Radio WM Ed Doolan show, which was well-known locally for the vociferous expression of opinions. Clearly, the radio presenter did not see the architectural, historical, or practical use of Madin's library. Hodge mentioned the building's lack of historic interest and architectural prizes, but not English Heritage's support for preservation; and said that "I am not satisfied that this building is really of sufficient architectural or historic interest, so I've decided that it should not be listed" (BBC Radio WM 2009).

Issues of "negative heritagisation" (Belcher et al. 2019, 419-422) and complex, overlapping dynamics of heritage practices (Knudsen and Anderson 2019) emerged, as the Minister and certain local government officials sought to either suppress, dismiss, or repackage expert and (some) lay opinions, particularly the views coming from English Heritage and the Chartered Association of Building Engineers (Larkham and Adams 2016). And emotive rhetoric, at least from parts of national and local government, used different media to sway public opinion. Official pronouncements invoked a heady mixture of municipal patriotism fused with a continuation of city officials' mid-twentieth century ambivalence to town planning, indifference to architecture, and contempt of history (Foster 2005). City managers intended to demolish the structure even though it had been Listed. Whitby is quoted as saying that "Listing the building would make things a little more awkward […] but whatever the outcome is, we can still proceed. There is a process to ensure that we can carry out our planned demolition" (quoted in *Building Design* 2008). The city's senior town planner, Clive Dutton, agreed (quoted in the *Daily Mail* 2008).

A pro-conservation group, 'Friends of the Central Library', was formed. Champions of 'non-fallist' forms of preservation (Frank and Ristic 2020), and the 'Friends' website author, make some significant points, especially around whether a lack of architectural awards or the lack of Listing of its designer's other buildings should be criteria counting against protection (Clawley 2015). Within an expanding range of views, the extreme polarised views were best exemplified by local government

officials and local pro-conservation supporters. Many popular media outlets appeared to give greater voice to perceived architectural and design failings of the building (Belcher et al. 2019). Selective (mis)remembering and / or convenient forgetting emerged on all sides, including among powerful actors; criticisms of the roofing of the central open square and building of single-storey retail outlets relate to an initiative of the same Council now criticising them as detracting from the original design.

Discussions tended to centre on assessment criteria which stressed the importance of 'fitness for purpose', though the building's deterioration was, clearly, also directly caused by the owner's (ie the City Council's) lack of maintenance over an extended period. Madin himself noted that the stained and failing concrete was a result of the Council's decision not to pay for the marble cladding of the original design. Nor had there been any formal public consultation over demolition. Hodge's forthright personal views also created distance between other government departments, certain local actors and earlier local state decisions regarding maintenance. These factors, together with her public scorn at the practical and symbolic failings of the library, influenced the authorisation narrative, thus potentially affecting the outcome and bringing official protection processes into public disrepute. Its eventual expulsion might be read as being necessary to "deflect the vengeance" (Girard 1977, 16) of pro-demolition actors keen to downplay the virtues of the building's architectural qualities, as the logic of commercialisation trumped heritage value (Pendlebury et al. 2020).

Resistance to demolition emerged. Inspired by the building's interstitial qualities, campaigners mobilised a more homespun, "counter hegemonic" version of civic solidarity and political defiance against unfeeling powerful urban forces (González-Ruibal 2021, 371). An online petition to retain and reuse the library had reached 934 signatures by July 2015 (www.change.org 2015), but this did not halt the demolition; the replacement library had already been designed, constructed and opened by then. Moreover, exchanges across different media generated imaginative, speculative and sometimes-playful engagements with the library, illustrative of 'collective place-belonging' (Edensor and Mundell 2021) among an array of local and non-local urban actors:

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Despite campaigns for retention among different subjectivities, discussion around reuse tended to (over)emphasise the library's architectural importance over other socio-economic and / or

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environmental concerns. Any careful, sustained evaluation of adaptive or reconciliatory alternatives, beyond repeated, if nascent and enthusiastically engaged suggestions for the library to be transformed into a gallery, were also absent (Table 2). Moreover, while the baths provided an important social site that encouraged a grouping of different identities to coalesce, the library arguably failed to instil deep communal associations and / or significant, sustained feelings of attachment. And although the city has been reimagined to recognise the economic value associated with the diasporic roots of residents (Chan 2006), any serious consideration of the values attached to transnational forms of heritage placemaking were also lacking. Instead, narrow arguments surrounding the virtues of place-based, entrepreneurial profit-driven approaches for reuse infused debates: doubts were raised over whether a new mixed-use replacement necessarily involved diverting public money away from other essential council services (Hanley 2015), while supporters of conservation seemed to be portrayed as being somehow disloyal to the city's traditions of place promotion. Although this demonstrated a strength of feeling, it succeeded principally in coarsening the debate. Indeed, any space in which audiences were effectively engaged in developing reconciliatory approaches based on a civic learning appraisal of the building (Stephenson et al. 2021), while maintaining different voices and subjectivities, tended to 'slip back', as more powerful, political and economically inspired narratives took hold (Knudsen and Kølvraa 2021).

Conclusion

Different monumental forms are often political tools in struggles over race, social and political formations. In this sense, controversial heritage may contain important visible and affective symbols that are at odds with contemporary interpretations of race, gender, sexuality and other subjectivities; and dissonant historical associations continue to endure through sometimes-lengthy waves of debate (Knudsen and Anderson 2019). Neither the baths or the library easily aligns with definitions of 'difficult' heritage, insofar as these sites are not directly part of public-private apparatuses designed to convey self-affirming narratives by perpetuating forms of suffering, control or discrimination (MacDonald, 2009, 2).   Yet when viewed from the early twenty-first century, both the baths and library are expensive monuments that continue to radiate earlier ideas of pretentiousness, civic and national pride, and overtly moralistic, patriarchal and / or exclusionary notions of health and self-improvement. In many ways, then, the buildings appear incongruous with the desires of those groups living in an urban centre bristling with varied transnational connections, cultures, languages, memories and identities (Chan 2006). Moreover, these sites are / were at different points in the cycle of appreciation, decline, re-appraisal and retention / demolition

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(Delafons, 1997), though in both cases, 'lofty' historical associations were blended with the changing needs and identities of different urban dwellers, and as people with different ages, genders and subjectivities entwined through their everyday interactions, protests and mobilisations (Knudsen and Kølvraa, 2021).

The Central Library represented a potent, if discordant, symbol of city's effort to promote itself as the vanguard of British modernity, serving as an improved version of the outdated Victorian library (itself speedily demolished in 1974) and purposely built to engender feelings of civic pride. But the library was still heavily used – even in 2011, it received some 1.2 million visits (Clawley 2015). Nevertheless, the building remained largely unpopular with city and national decision-makers, local organisations and some of the city's residents; its decline and ruination, created in large part by a combination of state-sponsored forms of neglect, 'natural' decay, and shift in socio-economic and political circumstances (González-Ruibal 2021). Those who accepted its architectural value comprised only a limited *cognoscenti*, although this included the Government's expert advisory body. Hence forms of rhetorical destruction influenced the local authority approach, stripping any value, heritage or otherwise, from the structure. Hence a very costly and large-scale civic monument was swept away and replaced by an equally controversial and expensive new library that aligns with twenty-first century civic aspirations.

Unlike the baths, its architectural style was only recently being critically reassessed, and it suffered a similar fate to those relatively recent housing estates, libraries, town halls, theatres and other seemingly outdated and mundane features of the urban landscape that have been demolished or are currently threatened (Hopkins 2017). While supporters mounted an effective and articulate social media campaign, these groups succeeded in invoking the architectural significance of the library but mobilised too little support for their defensive heritage discourse (Pendlebury et al. 2020), while little evidence emerged of implementable cosmopolitan ideas of reusable heritage and collective placemaking (Edensor and Mundell, 2021) forged around the city's socio-economic and cultural diversity. Entrenched views followed, as people's opinions perhaps unhelpfully solidified around on the building's usefulness, or perceived lack thereof. Instead, public comments following the announcement that the building was to be demolished were personal and vituperative, creating an inflammatory atmosphere of personal beliefs intermingled with a vast proliferation of contradictory perspectives.

When Victorian / Edwardian architecture had become widely accepted and revered, embedded in the AHD, there was relatively little conflict about protecting the baths through the Listing process,

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and their uniqueness celebrated (Gordon and Inglis 2009). Conflicting public views, even on social media, were minimal: conflict was largely bureaucratic, though modes of decay were arguably mobilised by state actors reluctant / unable to oversee repair and renewal, given levels of funding and shifting priorities. The largely amicable encounters associated with the baths and captured in different local narratives help in the struggle against rapacious forms of urban governance (Collins 2020). The baths helped create a local place identity, reflected in creative ideas for community engagement and reuse; the library, though, appealed more to the identity of a particular architectural type than a 'place'.

Finding ways of encouraging pluralist views to change the authorised discourse, particularly during a time of fiscal constraints and pro-growth agendas – remains a difficult task. Yet the data presented in this paper help reveal useful insight into how heritage bodies, landowners and communities might conduct informed reviews of potentially problematic structures. This includes a) examining the strength of public opinion towards controversial heritage forms; b) acknowledging the national / local significance of structure/s; c) evaluating those shifting emotional encounters and values attached to heritage objects; d) investigating the legal authority, planning frameworks and motives of managing monuments and memorial features; e) assessing the historical and architectural significance; f) issues of practicality and cost surrounding retention / reuse / demolition. Developing and extending these guiding principles within broader strategic frameworks is especially useful in helping to move towards monumental landscapes that are "transparent, inclusive, accountable and fair" (Stephenson et al. 2021, 3).

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Notes

[1] See: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust.

[2] A description of the oral history project is set out here: https://friendsofmrb.co.uk/category/pool-of-memories/. The oral history interviews are available via: https://audioboom.com/FriendsofMRB.

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