DRAFT

A RESPONSE to

THEY MOVED LIKE FISH

The Birmingham Riots of August 2011

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by Kate Cooper: February 2012

this is a beginning: new minds

Your Report is original and insightful, right to remind us of the goodwill here in Birmingham. It's a reminder, too, that although our individual ancestry might differ, we do and will share descendants — and that great societies nurture and celebrate all their children.

There are many other Brummies far better placed than I am to respond directly to your Report. What I seek to do in this response is to present tangential perspectives, some abstract. Radical change starts in our minds; there's nowt so practical as a good theory. I'm hoping these kinds of perspectives will contribute to us making better decisions.

I start with a few assertions about our collective psyche. We're an inward-looking city. It is time for us, as the original Lunarmen did, to look up and see outside our boundaries, asking ourselves what we can do for the world, not what the world can do for us.

imagine
a game of chess
in which the playing
of the game creates new tiles
upon which new pieces
come & play with
new rules.

Why have we been so insular, so inward-looking? Unlike all other major UK cities, we *began* as a manufacturing centre. Perhaps our 20th century psyche was shaped by manufacturing more than by our Nonconformist heritage, our minds willingly steeped in the powerful global auto-industry monoculture as illustrated in recent leaders' oft-sung top-down mantra we need speak with '*one voice*'.

Influenced by the new science of complexity theory, Kevin Kelly's *New Rules for the New Economy* was published in 1998, half a generation ago. He wrote then about opportunities not efficiencies, plentitude not servitude, no harmony, all flux. He wrote about networks, swarms . . . follow the free . . . feed the web first . . . from places to spaces . . .

New rules. New minds.

John Naughton's
blogpost entry
21st February 2012

"a city of infinite connections": geography matters

"it was like watching a shoal of fish, dispersing and regrouping"

Shoals, flocks, social insects, humans in crowds, all follow a few simple boid-like rules from which complexity emerges — termites practise fungi farming, hive bees forage, crowds move along streets through turnstiles and into stadia, rioters 'know' where the action is.

Yet, as the Report says, many of our streets present an opposite challenge. They're empty of people, pavements untrodden, paths and places unexplored, desolate, unwelcoming, scary.

Exhorting people to walk more or use public transport won't make a difference. That's because empty streets are an infrastructure challenge; *infra* means beneath, below, so it's *sub*structure that's the challenge. Without connectivity, structures are empty, dead; with it, they're social hubs. (And just-enough connectivity; over-connected hubs clog the system.)

Here are a few ideas about physical connectivity in our urban landscape:

Think of the phrase "the same footing". Walking puts us all, rich and poor, literally on the same footing.

Mass transit systems don't provide door-to-door journeys. So people walk part of the way, perhaps only 200 yards or so. But they walk. And if you walk or go on a bike, you can't carry much. So small scale shopping happens, and small scale markets and activities thrive.

It's worth remembering, too, that surprising things happen when everyone travels at relatively similar speeds. Enforcing low speed limits means, seemingly paradoxically, we get to places faster – an insight which led to the speed controls on motorways, first used in the UK on the M4 around Heathrow.
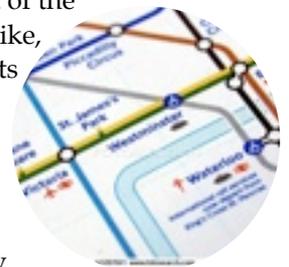
Sharing geography safely matters, especially to toddlers and teeterers who can't respond quickly to movement. Imagine cyclists riding on pavements but where all pedestrians were safe, too; that's achievable by a speed limit of, say, 6mph on all our pavements *all* the time. We could have 6mph limits on all our roads, too, for *some* of the time, say for the school runs.

Imagine, too, if we had something similar to the Dutch law which makes it the motorist's fault if they hit a cyclist under any circumstances whatsoever. We could add a few extra clauses so it'd always the *cyclist's* fault if they hit a pedestrian . . .

Boris-type hire bikes? Car-free roads? Car-free times? Car-free days?

Slow geography encourages the making of temporary hubs as well as permanent ones, temporary "village wells", places to chat . . . on well-worn benches, passerby listening to buskers, at pop-up eateries, watching cookery demonstrations, street theatre, using Ikea-style drop-in playcare . . .
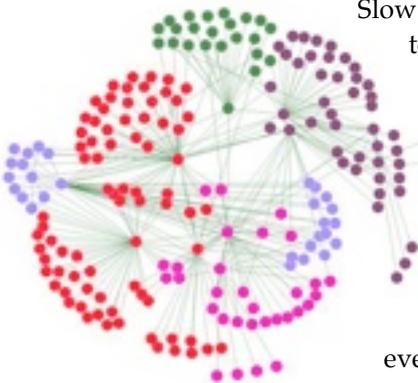
Imagine the difference to Aston Hall and Nechells were the A38M a walkway, better still . . . a grassy woodland walk. (Mock not, in 2005 Soeul replaced an elevated highway with parkland along a once-natural stream. It became a fun place to be *and* opened up the city to the car-less; google 'Cheonggyecheon').

We're six spaces from everyone on the planet, only two or three maximum from everyone within this city. And for small worlds to work, people connectors matter.

Even more important, though, are connectivity signals on our geography.

Imagine throwing a glance across any public space and knowing where out-of-sight hubs are, where unknown but to-be-explored spaces are.

Imagine bus maps, cycle maps, walkit maps plastered all over the city — as easily intelligible as the London Underground map.

Imagine having a map on every bus-stop telling you how far you can get on foot in 5 minutes, in 10 minutes, in half an hour — as they do in London.

Slow geography, rapid choreography.

macro–economic matters and their impact on us

The global as well as local economic changes we're witnessing are testament to big shifts in resource allocation, resources shifting away from us.

What's needed to compete in today's manufacturing marketplaces is either cheap labour or substantial capital along with a highly educated workforce, none of which we have.

This suggests continuing high levels of unemployment, especially among the young and is, the pundits suppose, a Really Bad Thing.

But is it? Bronnie Ware (the Australian palliative care nurse whose book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* was recently published) reports that the second most common regret of the dying was "*I wish I hadn't worked so hard*".

If work means paid employment, then "work" gives economic independence, the foundation of being adult. (Over 60 years ago Simone du Beauvoir in *La Deuxieme Sexe* pointed out that women needed economic independence, not some notional "liberation".)

There are many really exciting, worthwhile things that need to be done in Birmingham; what we need bend our heads around is how to to match them with economic activity.

An example: I have lots of exciting, interesting stuff that could be done by youngsters. Finding money to pay them, management capacity to nurture them — and what they do in the slack times — are currently intractable issues.

the pachyderms in the room

Humanity is facing huge challenges — climate change, resource depletion and population pressures.

Here in Birmingham we are fairly isolated from them, fleetingly aware of feed-in tariffs, the odd wild storm, longer queues, a small hoick in energy prices . . . But that will change, and change soon. It's already changing dramatically for people and families living in more vulnerable climates than our own.

What can we do in this city to enable our children to lead good lives when they will have to be engaged in mitigating or adapting to these massively threatening challenges?

There are already a couple of initiatives that I know here in Birmingham that might really make a difference. (And what else is here or on the horizon . . . ?)

distributed energy

The first is the possibility of Birmingham having a distributed heat and energy generation system; the starter-for-ten is the EBRI power plant at Gosta Green.

If the vision of Professor Andreas Hornung and his colleagues comes to fruition, there will be, by the 2030s, a "thermal ring"of 12-15 of small power plants generating heat and electricity by a *carbon-negative* process, enough to meet all the Council's ~£25M annual energy needs, and fueled by 'waste' going to landfill, currently at a cost to us of some £40M.

And soon there'll a smaller power plant available for communities to buy or have shares in for only about £1.5M, the price of a posh house in Brum or a banker's bonus in London.

The city imports some £1.6bn-worth of energy a year. The potential we have to cut a great swathe in this amount is an even bigger a deal for the city than the one Joe Chamberlain and his generation took to provide citizens with a reliable supply of clean, safe water.

20%, 30%, 50% energy self-sufficiency? And with an exportable technology? A game-changer — and another matter about our children's future we all need bend our heads around.

an edible commons

The second initiative comprises fragmented but thriving food growing projects here in the city — our 7K allotments, our garden suburbs, individual households benefitting from the Victorians' passion for gardens, veg patches in schools and nurseries and in our parks. Plus pop-up allotments on derelict land, a mobile fruit juicing service, top restaurants accessing local production of herbs and greens, even cookery courses in unlikely places . . .

From Toronto to Todmorden's Incredible Edible, from Detroit's urban farming to London's Capital Growth, many towns and cities are discovering that people growing their own fruit and veg has dramatically beneficial impact on everyone involved. Civic benefits abound too — in public health, crime reduction, social cohesion. And it's fun!

design by
Daniel Blyden

The New Optimists Forum, informed by regional scientists, is generating scenarios for food futures for Birmingham in 2050. One of the early potential spin-offs is the idea of "Growing Birmingham", an umbrella initiative for city food-growing projects, and a marker for edible help-yourself planting in public spaces (see left, a logo concept).

Although no amount of horticultural effort will significantly impact the city's total food requirement, it can contribute significantly to that of individual families and there will be spin-off SME opportunities, if the Todmorden experience is anything to go by. Plus, as well as social benefits, small-scale horticulture is labour-intensive so could provide worthwhile, productive work for many of our young. And . . . if we *do* have a local heat supply, maybe, just maybe scale-up into vertical farming will become an economically viable proposition.

nurturing our (children's) plural identities

"A solitarist approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups — we belong to all of them. The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English)."

"Central to leading a human life, therefore, are the responsibilities of choice and reasoning. In contrast, violence is promoted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique — often belligerent — identity that we are supposed to have and which apparently makes extensive demands on us (sometimes of the most disagreeable kind). The imposition of an allegedly unique identity is often a crucial component of the "martial art" of fomenting sectarian confrontation."

Amartya Sen
Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny

here's an ending: we're not alone

Mass literacy, cheap print technology, today's digital infrastructure and thereby most people can pick the brains of the finest thinkers of their generation and those of generations past.

And some of today's leading thinkers write for the layreader . . . Here's a few books I've found helpful in my thinking for writing this response to your Report:

Appiah, Kwame Anthony: *Cosmopolitanism*
> s.a. his later book *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*

Barabasi, Albert-Laszlo: *Linked: The new science of networks*

Barkow, Jerome H, Cosmides, Leda and Tooby, John: *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary psychology & the generation of culture*
> NOTE: This is the first of two collections of academic papers in this list, here because it contains many of the significant papers written at the start of studies in evolutionary psychology including Cosmides & Tooby's seminal *Cognitive adaptations for social exchange.*

Fox, Kate: *Watching the English: The hidden rules of English behaviour*

Gigerenzer, Gerd: *Gut feelings: Short cuts to better decision-making*

Gladwell, Malcolm: *The tipping point*

Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, Samuel Bowles, Colin Camerer, Ernst Fehr, Herbert Gintis (editors): *Foundations of Human Sociality: Economic experiments and ethnographic evidence from fifteen small-scale societies*
> NOTE: This is the second collection of academic papers. Of particular interest is the stuff on the Ultimatum Game and similar experiments.

Jacobs, Jane: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Johnson, Steven: *Emergence*

Kahneman, Daniel: *Thinking, fast and slow*

Kelly, Kevin: *Out of Control: The new biology of machines, social systems, and the economic world*

MacKay, David J C: *Sustainable energy - without the hot air*

Maxton, Graeme P & Wormald, John: *Time for Model Change: Re-engineering the global automotive industry*

Nowak, Martin: *Super cooperators: Evolution, Altruism & Human Behaviour (or Why we need each other to succeed)*

Sen, Amartya: *Identity and Violence: The illusion of destiny*

Surowiecki , James: *The wisdom of crowds: Why the many are smarter than the few*
> NOTE: I was tempted to include Charles MacKay's brilliant book *The Madness of Crowds* published in 1841. The next book says similar stuff but in a 21st century context and informed by another 170 years of post-Enlightenment thinking . . .

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas: *The Black Swan: The impact of the highly improbable*

Watts, Duncan J: *Six degrees: The science of a connected age*

Zimbardo, Philip: *The Lucifer Effect: How good people turn evil*