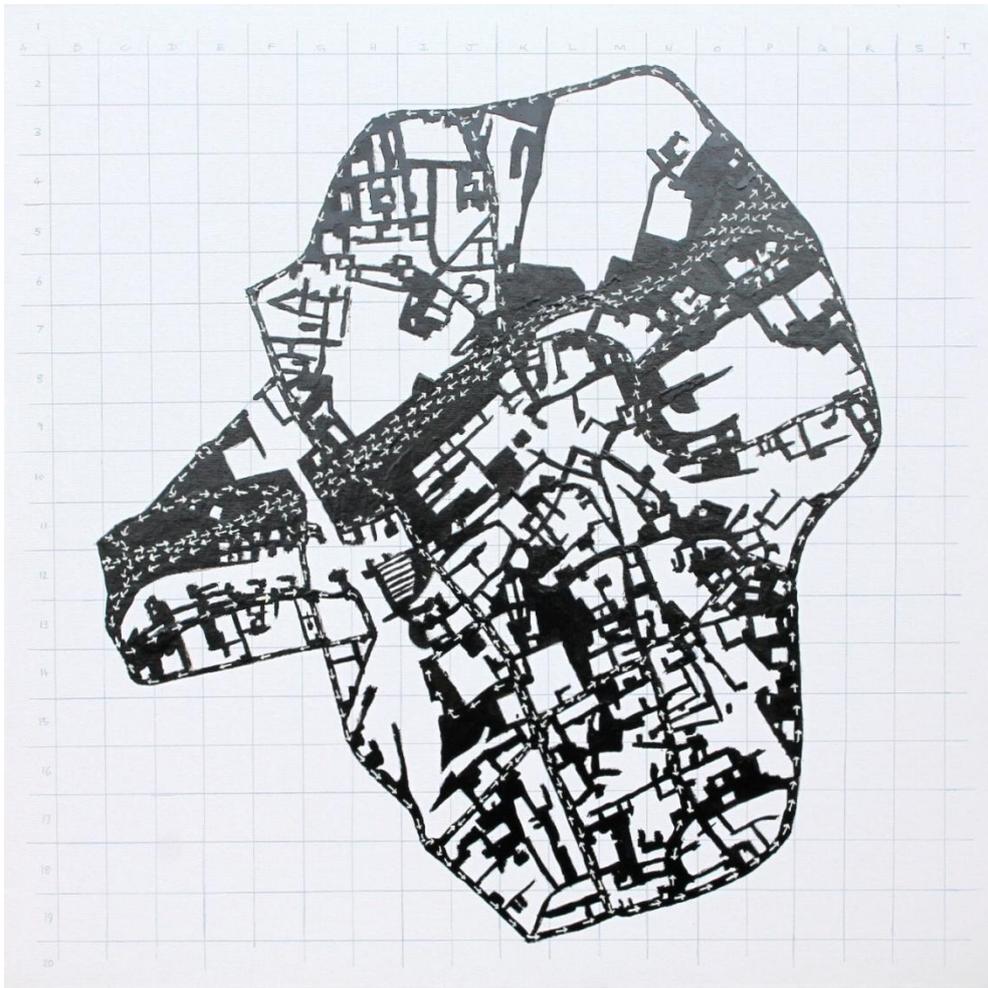


THE STOCKPORT PLANNER

The head, with a speculation about what might be going on inside it



Background; contemporary town planning in Stockport

Stockport Council is currently spending £900m on projects to improve the town¹. A substantial proportion of this funding is to support a series of highways engineering infrastructure projects, including the Town Centre Access Plan and the A6 to Manchester Airport Relief Road. Why is this?

The Council claims that these highway projects will “generate economic growth... promote job creation and the regeneration of local communities”². This was exactly the claim made by Stockport’s Director of Development and Town Planning in the early ‘80’s, looking forward to the new motorway through the town centre. *“As the arrival of the M63 brought investment, so will this (M62). The town’s accessibility will be increased, and its catchment area widened. Stockport is indeed set to become one of the ‘boom towns’ of the 80’s and 90’s.”*³ Well, figures for Percentage Breadline Poor or below in Stockport are as follows: 1980 = 27.0%, 1990 = 36.3%, 2000 = 37.8%⁴.

The Council claims that these highway projects will “reduce traffic congestion”⁵. Current evidence suggests road widening merely leads to increased traffic flow and further congestion⁶. The access plan statements about “improving the flow of traffic around the town centre” etc, are wholly misleading, as the proposals will not improve flow but rather increase quantity.

The Council claims that these highway projects will “support lower carbon travel”⁷, also that the current condition “contributes to air pollution” and by implication this will be remedied. This is a particularly misleading claim; the opposite is true – increasing capacity will increase car usage and therefore pollution.

The Council claims that “a full and inclusive consultation has been undertaken”⁸. This consultation has been conducted on the basis of millimetre-designed final drawings; for the general public an arcane and barely readable technical document designed to outwit any proper response. Rather than consultation in the sense of an exchange or discussion, the document is a statement of intent.

Council policy is therefore either misguided or misleading, or both.

At the same time the same council expresses angst about how to make comparatively minor cuts to other budgets⁹. Funds exist; perhaps they just need to be redirected. And what is the end game? 51% of the surface area within this ring road is now devoted to highways¹⁰. This compares with 29% in York and 24.5% in Lincoln, places where we might feel more comfortable walking around¹¹. Our highway engineer’s next project is probably to connect the Airport Relief Road with the M60 at Brinnington, through the presently beautiful Goyt Valley, as marked on the borough plan¹². At what % coverage in tarmac will Stockport refocus its planning priorities from cars to people?

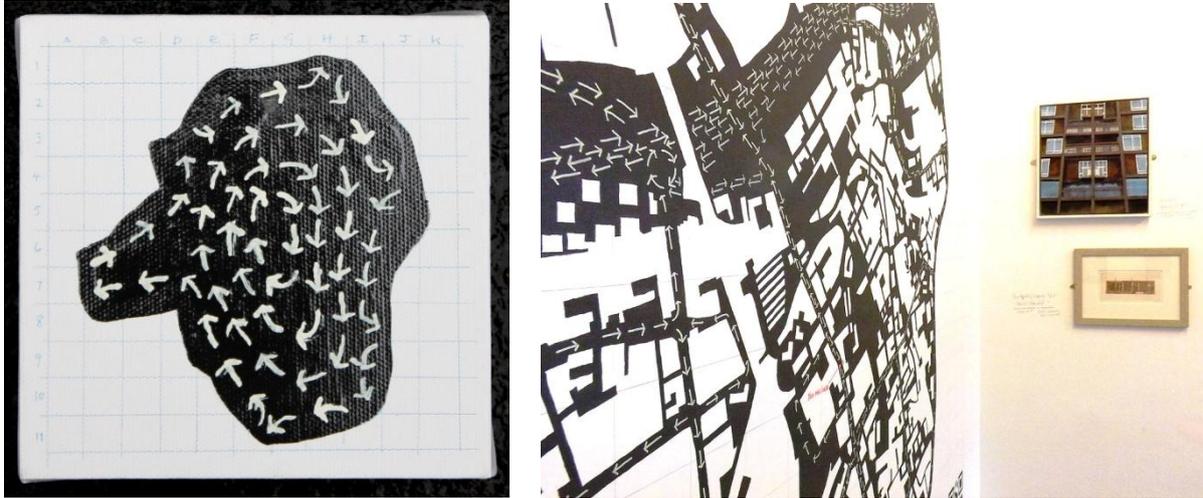
Gallery painting No1



My painting is a commentary on this situation¹³. It is made of “authentic” materials. The plain white canvas represents the *tabula rasa* created firstly by sweeping away the existing urban/landscape context. I had thought about a representation of landscape for this layer, but on reflection the very idea of a “blank canvas” is somehow more appropriate. On this is drawn using a technical drafting pencil with engineering blue lead, firstly a Cartesian grid representing the carving-up or acquisition of landscape, and secondly the plan of Stockport’s road system. To this latter is applied black bitumen tar, the blacktop area corresponding to land used for, or sterilised by, highways. The shape is that of the town centre plan within a central ring road defined by Tiviot Way, St Mary’s Way, Shaw Heath, King Street West, Wood Street, George’s Road and Belmont Way. Clearly visible are the M60, Merseyway and on a cross axis the A6. It is painted with an old brush; the broad brush of top-down desk-based planning. The top layer is a series of directional arrows in white road paint, gooey and difficult to apply, but ethically correct. If the ring road appears one-way, this is because it is drawn to its centreline. The arrows are a nod to Louis Kahn’s drawings for Philadelphia¹⁴, and perhaps direction and flow arrows are all the traffic planner sees? I have resisted the temptation to cover the whole thing with a final coat of whitewash to represent the consultation process. 2’x2’ canvas exhibited at Stockport Art Gallery in 2016.

Gallery Painting No2

A 'mini-me' executed in the same materials, this time without definition of internal non-highway space. Perhaps the entire town is now under tarmac, and is little more than a roundabout. 5"x5" canvas exhibited at Stockport Art Gallery in 2016.



Gallery Painting No3

A gallery wall painting executed in vinyl matt emulsion. Colour sampling of the extensive highways depicted on 5 Stockport MBC 'flagship' projects found RAL 7012 to be the closest colour match for the emulsion work. 3mx3m wall painting exhibited by invitation at EPOK Gallery, Stockport, part of "The New Townscape", 2016.

New Townscape: Vol. I is an exploration into a new art movement, The New Townscape. "In no sense a planned agenda but a type of synergy; some emerging artists shared concern for the promise of urban life as the country experienced a polarization of wealth and poverty. These artists like a deliberately subversive act, found beauty in "subtopia"; the urban fringe where the rot had set in." (David Chandler)

Anthropomorphism

Black and white; the end result is at first sight a curious perversion of a figure ground or Nolli¹⁵ plan, in which the highway takes the place of building form. It is also oddly anthropomorphic, and I like to call this character **THE STOCKPORT PLANNER**. This invites the picture to be considered simultaneously as landscape, abstract and portrait.

James Dyson, July 2016

James Dyson is an architect with over 30 years experience in public and commercial practice, with a passion for architecture, urbanism and all things design. "The Stockport Planner" exposes the quotidian dedication of contemporary planning in the town to vehicle traffic at the expense of human comfort.

<http://www.dysonarchitect.com/>

Postscript:

The Stockport Planner's Ancestor?

The Stockport Planner's profile bears an uncanny resemblance to one of the characters painted on the East gable of the Solar at Bramall Hall, also in Stockport, thought to date from c1610¹⁶. He has a similar bulbous nose, deep brow, uncertain mouth, little or no chin, and a Neanderthal 'bun' at the back of the skull; the A560 Knightsbridge route as it curves around Sainsbury's car park exactly traces the ancestor's ear.



Notes

¹ Source: for example,

<http://www.stockport.gov.uk/services/communitypeopleliving/newapproach/investinggrowth/>

² Source: for example,

<http://www.stockport.gov.uk/services/communitypeopleliving/newapproach/investinggrowth/towncentreaccess/>

³ Dick Hargreave, Director of Development and Town Planning, quoted in "Economic Enterprise – Stockport's Way", undated (1980's).

⁴ Source SASI, University of Sheffield, "Poverty Wealth and Place in Britain 1968-2005".

⁵ Source: for example,

<http://www.stockport.gov.uk/services/communitypeopleliving/newapproach/investinggrowth/towncentreaccess/>

⁶ From The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion: Evidence from US cities, University of Toronto, 2010: "If you increase the number of highways in a city by 1 percent, it causes driving to also increase by 1 percent". This phenomenon is known as induced demand, where the standard response to congestion of road widening results in increased traffic flow, causing congestion to occur elsewhere, "Widening roads to ease congestion is like trying to cure obesity by loosening your belt" (Roy Kienitz, executive director, US Surface Transportation Policy Project).

⁷ Source: for example,

<http://www.stockport.gov.uk/services/communitypeopleliving/newapproach/investinggrowth/towncentreaccess/>

⁸ Source: for example, http://www.stockport.gov.uk/2013/2978/8803/998531/app_k_stcap_consultation page 6

⁹ Source: for example, Manchester Evening News 22 October 2015.

¹⁰ See below analytical plan of Stockport.

¹¹ See below comparative analytical plans of York and Lincoln.

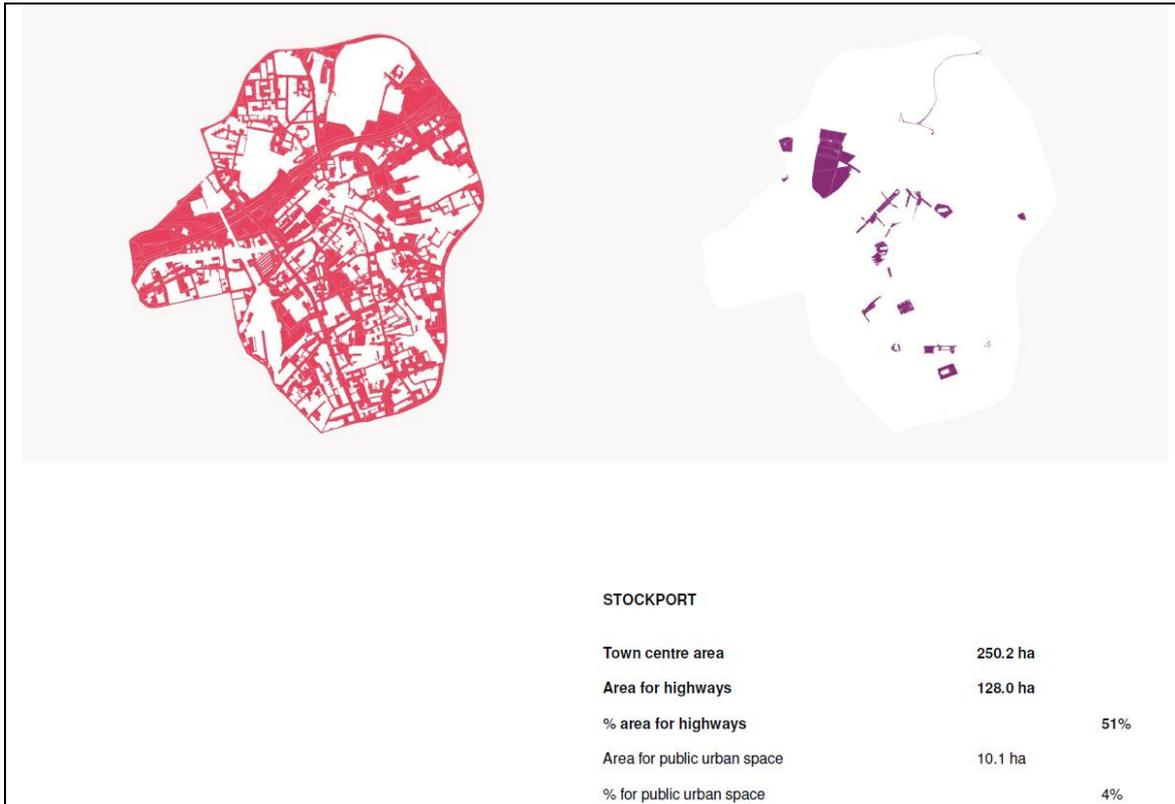
¹² SMBC Unitary Development Plan (UDP) 1998, Reviewed 2006.

¹³ I am not a professional artist

¹⁴ Louis Kahn, Plan of Proposed Traffic Movement Pattern, Philadelphia, 1952.

¹⁵ Roma di Benedetto XIV, La Pianta di Giovan Battista Nolli, 1748.

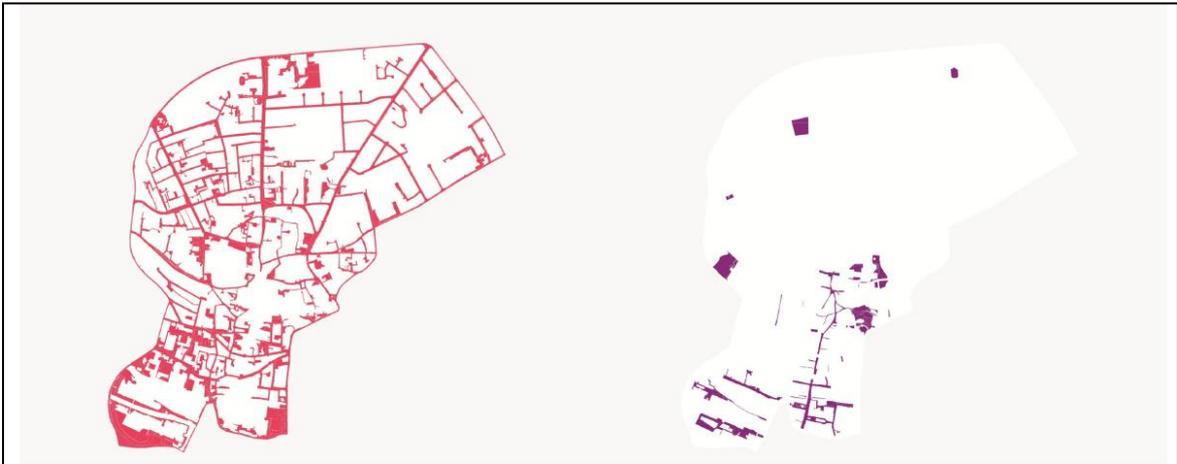
¹⁶ Historic England listing, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1260476>





YORK

Town centre area	117.1 ha	
Area for highways	33.9 ha	
% area for highways		29%
Area for public urban space	7.9 ha	
% for public urban space		6.8%



LINCOLN

Town centre area	256.4 ha	
Area for highways	62.9 ha	
% area for highways		24.5%
Area for public urban space	9.3 ha	
% for public urban space		3.6%