



Unsettled crossings: Underpass journeys in an English town

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Abstract: What kinds of 'sensory configurations' (Thomas, 2010), and moral orders, are created in places that are simultaneously formed and rendered marginal by infrastructures of hegemonic automobility? In this paper, we explore this question with reference to one micro-site we have encountered in our current study of security and everyday life in an English town – Macclesfield in Cheshire. That site is the Gas Road underpass, a key pedestrian route between the town centre and the east of the town on the other side of its busiest road. Underpasses are generic urban artefacts, mundane features of necessity, of light and darkness, of entry and exit, of solitude and transient encounter. This residual place is for many users one to be passed through, often quite quickly, without particular engagement. It is, on the other hand, also a regular gathering point for the homeless and young people, and a focus for intervention by local authorities, responding to concerns about public drinking and other undesired activities. The underpass provokes concerned talk among residents about the safety of those who (have to) use it, and unsettled debate among local decision-makers over how to beautify, illuminate, regulate, or otherwise improve it. In the paper, we use film, photographs, interviews and *in situ* observation, to explore the contested ways in which this place is *sensed*. We argue for a situated understanding of how this residual space unsettles the town's sense of place, and for acknowledgment of how history and landscape shape the local meanings of such places and journeys.

Introduction: Moving though, and dwelling in, place

People's experiences and feelings of security in everyday life, and attendant sense of ease or discomfort in urban environments, are closely bound up with the practices and infrastructures of mobility. In part this is a question of how others move across and through space and its effects on the sensory feel and mundane experience of inhabiting place. Castells (1996) refers to the 'space of flows' as all the materially consequential aspects of late modern societies that do not rely on physical contiguity; the circulation of information, images, money etc. that escape place and propel global networks. By contrast the 'space of places' often *all* feels residual (one kind or another of 'defensive trench', Castells says). Castells defines a place as 'the locale whose form, function, and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of territorial contiguity. People tend though to construct their life in reference to places, such as their home, neighbourhoods, city, region, or country' (Castells, 2013, p. 296). On the whole we can't help but inhabit places, however much they have been transformed or subverted: 'You may have no community, but still refer to your place as your main source of experience' (ibid). One germane aspect of the relation between the 'space of flows' and the 'space of places' concerns the effects of automobility – the practices and infrastructures of motorized movement *through* and *between* places (Urry, 2004) – on the sensory experience and felt security of those who dwell *in* those places (Sennett, 1996, p. 18).

Yet the relation of security to mobility is also a matter of the ease and comfort, or unease and discomfort, that attends everyday movement within and across places – towns and cities that have themselves been designed in ways that prioritise and facilitate car transit. In this respect, one needs to think of different mobilities – whether undertaken by car, bus, by bicycle or on foot – not simply as functional means of getting from A to B (cf. Blomley, 2011), but as habitual practices that produce understandings of place and identity. 'People not only observe the city whilst moving through it', Jensen (2009, p. 140) argues. 'Rather, they constitute the city by practicing mobility. The meaning of places in the city is constituted by the movement as much as their morphological properties'. In urban environments designed for, and structured by, automobility, the question of how mobile practices 'alter the dynamic or the atmosphere of a situation of place' (Kazig et al., 2017, p. 9) means focussing, as Kazig et al. put it, on the effects of motorized movements 'on the daily lives of pedestrians' (see also, Patton, 2007). How, Kazig et al. ask, are 'multiple logics of speed of flows managed in the same space-time?' (ibid., p. 10). What kinds of 'sensory configurations' (Thomas, 2010), and moral orders, are created in places that are simultaneously formed and rendered marginal by infrastructures of hegemonic automobility?

In many towns and cities, these questions are posed with respect to a few specific sites, deemed more dangerous, more unsightly, more prone to attract unsuitable uses than others in the locality. For whatever reason, whether to do with features built into their function and fabric, or because of reputations that are too entrenched to shed, the difficulties persist. Such places attract and resist repeated attempts to beautify, enhance or supervise them. Those efforts leave their marks, and yet often do not dispel the concerns they set out to change. Underpasses, tunnels, and subways are commonly among these places. In this paper, we advance the 'micro scale of understanding' that Kazig et al. (2017, p. 9) propose by exploring aspects of the unease and contention that surround one such site. This is the Gas Road underpass, in the town of Macclesfield in north-west England.¹ Using film, photographs, interviews and *in situ* observation, we explore the contested ways in which this place is *sensed*. We argue for a situated understanding of how this residual space unsettles the town's sense of place, and for acknowledgment of how history and landscape shape the local meanings of such places. Some initial sense of the underpass and its ambience – seen from the perspective of someone lingering within it - can be gleaned [here](#).

We came, or rather returned, to Macclesfield in November 2019 and have over the last four years been investigating the everyday security concerns of the people who live and work there. Macclesfield is a town of 52,496 residents in East Cheshire, about 20 miles south of the nearest large urban centre, Manchester. Our previous study of crime-talk in the town, conducted between 1994 and 1996, resulted in a book-length account of how worries about crime featured in local social relations in the mid-1990s (Girling et al., 2000). We returned, some 25 years on, following a quarter of a century of technological, socio-economic, cultural and political change that included the digital revolution, austerity, migration, Brexit, greater climate consciousness, and – shortly after we commenced our research - the Covid-19 pandemic.

1 <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Gas+Rd,+Macclesfield/@53.2608673,-2.1250979,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x487a493f25e7daa7:0x7e37e113e03b84de!8m2!3d53.2608673!4d-2.1229092!16s%2Fg%2F11h0kbzgx>



We did so with a view to using the town – a place of relative affluence and relative safety, but not entirely without its problems – as a site for exploring what it means to be and feel secure in Britain today. We were interested in finding out what troubles afflict the daily lives of differently-situated people across the town and what actions they took, or demand from responsible authorities, to deal with the things that threaten them. To address these questions we have deployed a range of methods within a study whose overarching sensibility has remained ethnographic. We have spoken to residents individually and in small groups – in people’s homes, public rooms, and while walking or cycling with them. We have solicited diaries; conducted two local surveys; analysed social media, observed local community action; and interviewed and observed the police and other local security providers.²

Where people routinely go, or avoid going, is one important aspect of everyday life; and the ease or discomfort that people experience in moving around town, or getting in and out of it, is a recurrent element of what they tell us about their sense of what it is to live there now and how they envision the town’s prospects. The Gas Road underpass is a point where some of these perspectives on mobility intersect in ways that we consider revealing with respect to people’s views of life in the town, and of one another across boundaries of age, gender and class. The somewhat troubled sense that many people have of this place-within-the-place speaks to the legacies of past decisions in the present, and to the bearing of present realities on our clouded visions of the future.

Roads and residual spaces

The underpass is one of a small number of crossing-points for pedestrians and cyclists beneath a major road. This is the A523 Stockport-Derby trunk road, known locally as the Silk Road. There is nothing silky about the road, apart from its name, which is designed to evoke associations with Macclesfield’s heritage as a former silk-weaving town. At this point it is a busy dual carriageway that connects Stockport, on the southern edge of Greater Manchester with Macclesfield and other towns along the way to Derby. That dual carriageway runs for five miles from the north to the town centre, punctuated by three roundabouts and two busy traffic light junctions. A little further south of the underpass, beyond the railway station, the road narrows, and morphs into Mill Lane and then London Road. It is now no longer a Silk Road, but a rather congested urban thoroughfare running through the southern edge of the town past the football stadium, terraced houses and fish and chip shops, and derelict former mills. Out of town, uphill, to the east, lies open country - Macclesfield Forest, and just beyond it the Peak District National Park. Here there are affluent villages and evocative names - Pott Shrigley, Rainow, Wildboarclough. To the west of the road is the Moss – a former council estate. This is a ‘by-pass through the middle of the town’ – its underpass a case-in-point of what Beckmann (2001) calls a ‘residual place left blank by the road network’ (p. 598).

The Silk Road was built in the early 1990s to relieve the town centre of through traffic. At the public enquiry in 1989, support for the road appeared overwhelming. ‘Only a very few people objected to any relief road, only one of whom gave evidence’, the final report noted. The objections focussed on an alternative (and in the end rejected) by-pass which would have skirted the whole town to the west, through desirable properties and real estate. The preferred route bordered the Hurdsfield estate, the industrial landscape of the old gasworks and train station, and the locally notorious Victoria Park flats (Girling et al., 2000, pp. 64-8) – see *Image 1*. It may be no accident that the Silk Road was routed adjacent to this particular ‘eye-sore’ and ‘trouble-spot’ – what one resident in our original study called ‘the town’s worst nightmare’ (*ibid.*, p. 64). It may also be that the underpass’s felt incongruity within the town was heightened after the flats were demolished in 1999 and replaced with more desirable properties. The dynamics of these past decisions, and their felt legacy on the ecology of the town, can be gleaned from the following exchange:

Joe: It was very, very different. When the Silk Road came along, and another unpleasant aspect is that I hate the fact that it buries the river, the River Bollin.
EG: Yes, you can just . . .

² The first study - ‘The Symbolic Construction of Crime in Middle England’ – was conducted under the ESRC’s ‘Crime and Social Order’ Programme (L210252032), 1994-96. The current study - ‘Place, crime and insecurity in everyday life: A contemporary study of an English town’ - is also funded by ESRC, for whose support we are grateful (ES/S010734/1). See further: <https://securityinplace.org/>. A theoretical prospectus for the study can be found in Loader et al. (2023).

The data used in this paper will be made available at the UK Data Service (<https://ukdataservice.ac.uk>) at <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856634> after a period of embargo.

Joe: I hate seeing that happen to a river. It was, I think, I know a little of the history as to why the Silk Road went through the middle of the town instead of around it. A lot of that is to do with the fact that a lot of the surrounds of this town, there's a lot of money out there and a lot of influence. It shouldn't make a difference, but you bet it did. That's why you end up with the guillotine through the middle of town.

(Interview, male businessman, 40s)



Image 1 - [Macclesfield and Victoria Park flats prior to the building of Silk Road³](#)

The road itself is not the boundary between the town and country, but the proximity of the countryside is important to many residents, and the hills and woods are visible to travellers from various points along the Silk Road. These are among the attractions of Macclesfield to many of its more recently arrived, and generally more affluent, residents; and many have explained to us that the ability to drive, walk or cycle 'out' is part of what brought them to settle here. As one woman, who moved to Macclesfield a year ago, put it: 'I think it's very varied and there's lots of countryside around, which is brilliant. So, it's a safe kind of haven. And the town's quite compact, but there's lots of different variations, villages around, which are all quite distinct'.

Yet the hills which one glimpses through the gaps between buildings and roads from many points around Macclesfield stand in stark contrast to the underpass and the hammering road above it. The urban intrusion of the underpass is incongruous - 'out of joint' with the pastoral backdrop and heritage aesthetics of the town centre. Those living to the east of the Silk Road may especially relish their ability to escape into the Peak District in a few minutes and quite often speak of seeking and finding a lifestyle 'close to nature', as if Macclesfield is a 'socio-natural environment' in which the boundary between the built and 'natural' landscape blurs (Angelo, 2019, p. 648). As one female participant in a town centre focus group remarked: 'that's one of the things I like about Macclesfield, that it feels like you're sitting in hills'. Yet people living in those parts of the town (the new, desirable housing that replaced the flats around Victoria Park, and the Buxton Road and Hurdsfield areas) are particularly likely to have to negotiate this route into the town centre. In this sense, the idea of Macclesfield as still being a small, 'walkable' town, with ready access to countryside, is a value for many residents. But for those moving from east to west within it, this walkability has mostly to flow through the underpass.

A few yards west of the Silk Road, and almost parallel with it, on the town side, is the railway line. This is the main line between Manchester Piccadilly and points south, including Stoke-on-Trent, Birmingham and ultimately London. Some of the inter-city trains, and many local ones, stop in Macclesfield, while others speed through.

³ Image reproduced with permission of The Manchester School of Art Slide Library at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections.

A space of flows?

So the underpass is created by two bridges, the road being much the wider, with a narrow strip of sky between them – see *Image 2*. There is some natural light here, during daylight hours. There is also noise. The most insistent sound is that of the traffic on the Silk Road above. As well as engine and tyre noise there is the thud of vehicles passing over joints in the bridgework, an irregular, emphatic drum-beat. There are other sounds of movement too. Trains slow or accelerate into or out of the nearby station. There is the sound of running water through the culvert where the River Bollin has been diverted, before being allowed to resume its meandering course a few yards to the north. Often enough there is also dripping water from the railway lines and road above.



Image 2 – Into and through the Gas Road underpass⁴

Between them the road and railway effectively divide the town in two, though the road is experienced as providing by far the greater barrier and it punctuates local stories of the town's bifurcation rather than the railway which predated it. Together, they cut off the Buxton Road, Hurdsfield and Victoria Park areas to the east from the rest of Macclesfield. To the west lies the town centre, where most shops, cafes, and restaurants still are, the underpass serving as pedestrian gateway to the train station, bus station and the town's central medical practice. On the east there are houses and light industry (including Astra Zeneca, one of the town's major employers), as well as an increasingly significant concentration of the town's supermarkets and other large retail outlets. There are only a few safe crossing places, and no bridges, so the underpass is an important point of transit for people moving across town without a car. The recent opening of a new edge-of-town shopping outlet (evocatively named Barracks Mill) means that the underpass is no longer just a path from the east to the town centre for those seeking consumption, travel and entertainment. It is now also a route from central and west Macclesfield to the newest retail plaza – and is thereby implicated afresh in local concerns and contests over the meaning of a town (what is a town without a vibrant centre?), its economic future, and its liveability for the 20 per cent of the town's adult population without access to a car.⁵

The irony that the key transport arteries that connect Macclesfield to the world effectively disconnect its eastern and western quarters from one another is not lost on people living there. A resident recalled

⁴ All photographs were taken by the authors, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ This figure is taken from the 2021 UK Census.

talk of the way in which the town changed when the Silk Road was built. The town was ‘guillotined in two by the dual carriage crossing through the middle’, they said (*east Macclesfield resident*). So the underpass represents something of a contradiction, where certain, literally inferior, kinds of crossing (those undertaken on foot or by bicycle⁶) occupy the residual spaces created by others (cars and trains). Experienced from below, meanwhile, the means of mobility (the road and railway) are also obstacles.

Seen from the underpass the dominance of the car, and what it means (or might come to mean) to be without one, is perhaps the most consequential signifier of social change in all those stories. For these reasons it seems to us an important and indicative place, even if most of those who pass over it have no idea it is there. The road and rail connections are crucial parts of what situates Macclesfield within the ‘space of flows’ as a viable and desirable place to live for many of its current inhabitants. They connect it, and signify its connectedness, to Manchester (and its airport), London and everywhere else. They enabled it to attract and retain the pharmaceutical industry that helped this former ‘silk town’ to avoid the worst ravages of decline that afflicted other Northern towns in the late 20th century (Niven, 2023). They allowed it to modernize, restructure, survive and modestly prosper. At the same time many of those drawn to move or return here strongly desired the town to retain aspects of its Northern-ness, its industrial and craft heritage, its homeliness, and its embeddedness in an expansive and intensely aesthetically valued rural landscape. Towns like Macclesfield, Glossop and Whaley Bridge are ‘dotted’ across and around the Peak District. They are not contiguous with Manchester, nor with one another. The flows have to happen to make the places economically viable. Yet residents of these towns tend to prioritise their (unique) qualities as places, as well as their connectedness to wider flows of social, economic and cultural capital.

The road and the railway created the underpass. Like many such residual spaces, the underpass is what is left by the gaps between and beneath the engineered structures. It is nonetheless a complex space, as can be seen [here](#), with several ways in and out, opening onto quite different aspects of the town, including up Brunswick Hill steps to some adjacent housing, the police station and library, and out the other side to the up-market Arighi Bianci furniture store. It is a place for crossing, never intended for lingering. Yet some people do linger or dwell there, as we go on to describe, and therein lies much of the unease that attends it. Since so many paths converge here, perhaps it is little wonder if we can read it as a contradictory and sometimes conflicted space.

Senses of unease

We have not sought as part of our study to interview the young people and homeless who from time to time assemble in the Gas Road underpass. Rather, our concern has been to understand what their presence signifies to others who live in, or seek to govern, this relatively safe and affluent town. By being present, staying put, or leaving markers in the territory, groups of young people and others who hang around or shelter there make a claim to use the underpass in ways that have not been authorized, and thereby prompt negotiation over its meanings (James Smith & Hall, 2017).⁷ At least part of the ensuing unease flows from their inhabitation of a place made and designated as a space of crossing. The signs of such occupancy – even appropriation – adorn the environment (see *image 3*). The remnants of a warm fire and a discarded coffee cup are residues of unauthorized gathering. The unofficial graffiti hints at a sense of attachment and a claim to ownership, a record of having spent time there, a use of the space as more than a space of flow that connects the passer-by with bodies unknown (Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 278). The ‘fixing’ of the problem of graffiti which residents request through ‘Fix-my-street’, and to which local authorities respond to by removing or cleaning, is an ongoing dance between the passer-by and those unknown bodies, one that renders the non-space as an eventful place. The graffiti hints at, and reminds passers-by of, ‘ungovernable desires’, to borrow Halsey and Young’s (2006) evocative phrase. Having recalled that groups of teenagers congregating in the underpass had ‘not ever changed’ during their many years in the police, this officer recounts its more recent history, and its appeal as a place of dwelling:

PO: The underpass is only used by the homeless people since last year. It is perfect because you’re sheltered, you’ve got lighting now, you’re close to the town centre, and kids have always said

⁶ One of only two dedicated cycle paths in Macclesfield passes through the underpass. The path also forms a part of Route 55 of the UK’s National Cycle Network.

⁷ In using the term ‘homeless’ we have borrowed a local ascription that is typically made without knowledge of any given individual’s housing situation and in a manner that effaces the complexity of their lives.

you've got quite easy access to run-off if you need to. But the kids have always said they want shelter, lights, wifi.

EG: Is there wifi there?

PO: No, but this is what they've always said – shelter, lights, wifi and close to town. So close to food.



Image 3 – Traces of appropriation

The signs of 'ownership' make the underpass a landmark in the travelogue of safety concerns among other Macclesfield residents. On hearing about our research some point helpfully to the underpass as a place with which we should be concerned – 'You know about the underpass, right?'. It is often the first place to be shared by residents when asked about the places where they feel unsafe or avoid using – one woman, having raised the underpass for discussion, mournfully remarked that 'this is the first time I've made a tangible, from experience, negative comment about where I live, because that really is the main one'. There are various strands to this unease. Many refer to it as a well-used crossing that they are happy to pass through during daylight – 'it just seems like a reasonably high-traffic area pedestrian-wise, so it doesn't put me off in any way' (*female professional, 30s*). But its configuration – despite the lighting (see below) – makes it for many not a place one enters after dark: 'I can't imagine it at night. I don't know how people just walk through there. I'm just like, no that's not for me' (*female, retired*). Another respondent added: 'It's not very light. That's what I'm saying. And I think people feel safer in well-lit areas. That's how they feel. Whether it's a fact or not, it doesn't really matter' (*female professional, 60s*).

The underpass is also a place of gendered disquiet. Female runners spoke of altering their route to avoid the underpass at night, or else of 'being a bit on alert' for 'quite large groups of teenagers making comments' (*female professional, 30s*). One parent reported prohibiting his teenage daughter from crossing the underpass, a restriction he described as 'just plain, straightforward common-sense' (*male businessman, 50s*). Others recounted rumours and experiences that made the underpass into a hostile and best avoided passageway across town: 'We call it rape alley because there was a rape there one time. Then there was that area where they were throwing a wheelie bin down the stairs. When I looked at him, the kid said to me, "what are you looking at, paedo?"' (*focus group, east Macclesfield residents*). Or else people fold the underpass into a social-physical ecology that impedes walking from the east of the town into its centre:

Owen: From Arighi Bianchi you can walk through the underpass.

Angela: Yes, you can.

Owen: But that's dodgy because then you're taking your life into your hands because there's ne'er-do-wells that live down there.

Travis: Absolutely. And then you've got this steep climb.

(*focus group, town centre residents*)

So what is going on here? Partly, this felt unease about the underpass appears to flow from experiences of,

or worries about, the presence and unpredictable behaviour of those who exist on Macclesfield's economic and social margins. It is about 'us' having or imagining close encounters with 'them'. But the concern about young people and the homeless is also that they 'block' a vital walking artery between different parts of Macclesfield – they erect and appear to guard a 'door' over what should be a 'bridge' (Simmel, 1994). The objection – echoing the imperatives of 'pedestrianism' (Blomley, 2011) – is that a crossing which is supposedly available to *anyone* has been colonized by *one* social group. This exchange between two residents living in the east of the town encapsulates the maelstrom of first-hand observation, rumour and concern that that the underpass provokes:

- Jeffrey: There's a lot of people sleep there, but they light fires so that's even damaged some of the walls and stuff like that as well. And the area itself, because it's under the road, people do congregate there, and there's no intention taken up by the police to go, and that could be a potentially problem area I think.
- Cameron: I did hear, somebody I know is very worried about being mugged, and she heard a rumour that somebody had been mugged in the underpass there.
- Jeffrey: It's like all cities, London, or even the US, and even further, where you get that under-road thing. They did put lights on there, but they're not cleaned and the area itself is not cleaned, weeds in places, and all that gives the impression of it not being looked after.

The governance of unease

The underpass is treated by local authorities as a site of notoriety and concern and is what one police officer called 'one of our biggest sources of demand'. It is periodically described in the local press as a 'crime-ridden', 'no-go' area: 'plagued by antisocial behaviour, drug-taking and street attacks.'⁸ The 'Waters Green underpass area' was the first in the town to be made subject to a Public Space Protection Order by Cheshire East Council in 2015.⁹ It is a frequent object of police talk and activity, focused on the underpass as both a place of disorder, and a site where vulnerable young people encounter dangerous others (drug dealers, addicts, the homeless). As another police officer we interviewed put it:

A lot of the 13-year-olds will roll-off names of people that have been on the street. And you think, how do they know these names, which is really concerning and worrying. And they did it under the underpass where there was a few of them in tents that they just congregate to. But a lot of the kids will dare each other to ask for cigarettes and for alcohol. And then it pushes the boundaries, but then you get into, possibly, drugs and things like that. We had a lot of vulnerable teenage girls down there that were doing it.

Social media posts by local Police and Community Safety Officers also propel evidence of graffiti, anti-social behaviour, fire-lighting and fireworks into the digital life of the town, or else post images of a deserted underpass at night, the form and looming sense of emptiness and unease thereby shared. They seek to reassure followers that the underpass is heavily monitored due to anti-social behaviour. In the comments sections to such post residents populate the deserted underpass with their own and their friends' accounts of being harassed or 'mugged', bemoan the troubling presence of young people and the homeless, and complain about the absence of promised security cameras. The proximity of the police station to the underpass (albeit via a rather steep set of steps) up Brunswick Hill is on occasions brought up ruefully: how can such a crime-ridden crossing sit so near to the police station?

In these ways, the underpass becomes a site for condensing the social suffering that lies mostly on the peripheral vision of those who belong to what one of our respondents called 'consensual, mainstream Macclesfield': this, it says, is also a town (like many others) of homelessness, addiction, mental ill-health, 'county lines' drug-dealing, neglected and exploited children. One woman spoke of her concerns about local young people in this regard: 'I've seen blokes down there with little dogs, because they always love the dogs don't they. But they've got cans of alcohol. Kids are comfy to go down there with adults who they

⁸ <https://www.macclesfield-live.co.uk/news/images-macclesfield-projected-onto-underpass-11139588>

⁹ Public Space Protection Orders (PPOs) were introduced in the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, 2014 (s.59): <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/4/chapter/2/crossheading/public-spaces-protection-orders/enacted>. PPOs confer extensive powers on local authorities to regulate access to specified spaces for a given period of time in order to prevent or reduce behaviour that has persistently had a 'detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality' (see further, Brown, 2017)

don't know, and it scares me. I think, a lot of it is down to parenting, I really do. And parents, when kids get to maybe ten or 11, they just don't care where they are. And they'd rather stay at an underpass all night than go home.' Others read the underpass as a sign that Macclesfield is no longer exempt from the social problems that afflict other parts of the country:

Alan: And then we had the homeless little camp underneath the Silk Road which I've never seen anything like that before in Macclesfield.

GP: What do you think changed, that it started to happen?

Alan: Well, if it is the last ten years, then it's got to be austerity I would have thought.

David: Well, yes, I'd say the Tory government, but we don't want to get too much into politics. But, yes, it's austerity, and reduction of benefits, and the failings of universal credit.

(focus group, town centre residents)

The trappings of official concern litter the underpass itself: 'no tipping', a 'designated no-alcohol area'. Yet the governance of place does not fully extend to camera surveillance. There is a residual – graffiti covered - sign from the days of the now disbanded Macclesfield Borough Council advising of mobile cameras. There are CCTV cameras outside the nearby Travelodge on the south entrance to the tunnel, and on route to Arighi Bianchi's car park. The police told us that both these cameras can 'zoom in', though the images 'are not amazing, and there are blind-spots'. But the underpass itself is a place of non-visibility. This stands in stark contrast to the ways in which formal and informal surveillance permeates everyday life elsewhere in Macclesfield (from door-bell cameras, dashcams and the staffed local authority CCTV scheme that monitors the town centre). Maybe such intervention in the underpass would drive young people and adults seeking shelter elsewhere? Perhaps it is better that they assemble here, under the road, in the dry, out of sight and sound of that 'mainstream'?

The underpass is not simply the object of standard modes of police governance. It is also subject to ongoing efforts by local authorities and civil society to prevent this space from 'sinking' into a 'parafunctional state of ambiguity and contamination' (Papastergiadis, 2002, p. 45; see also Hayward, 2012, pp. 452-453). This means familiarizing the underpass's incongruous presence in the town by bringing representations, and a widely-felt sense, of Macclesfield's proud and particular history into this anonymous, out-of-place, location – see *image 4*.

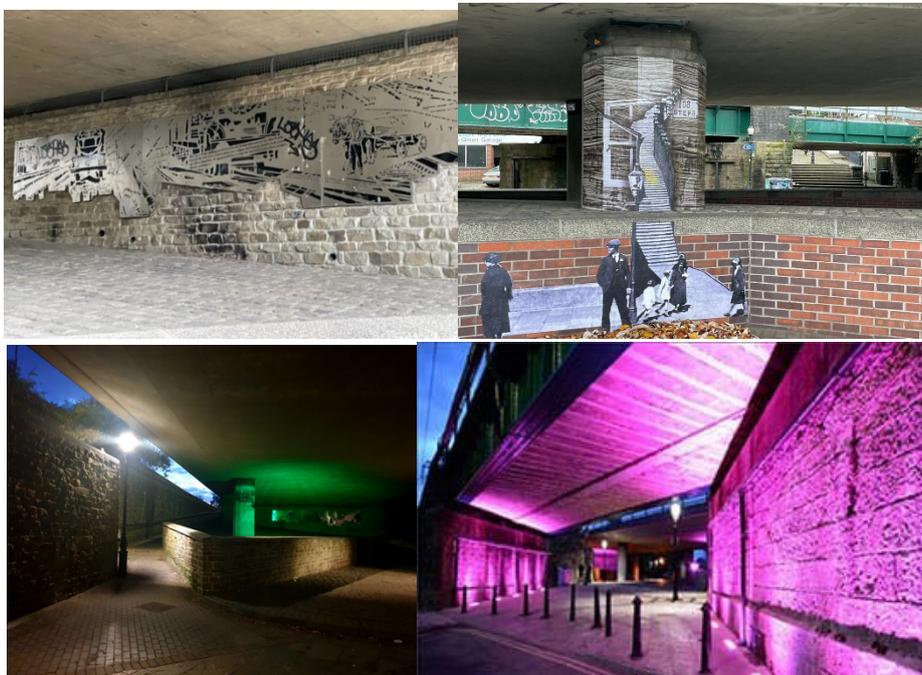


Image 4 – Modes of aesthetic governance¹⁰

¹⁰ The image of the underpass illuminated in purple is from Cheshire East Council's archive of regeneration schemes in East Cheshire towns https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/business/major_regeneration_projects/town_centre_vision/older-town-centre-regeneration-schemes.aspx. Versions of that image taken afresh populate police social media posts about the underpass.

Aesthetic encounters in public space are common in Macclesfield. In recent years artists have inscribed industrial heritage, music heritage (a large mural of [Joy Division's lead singer Ian Curtis](#) adorns a wall in the town centre¹¹), vernacular architecture, a green aesthetic, and poetry about Macclesfield in artworks across the town.¹² In the underpass, aesthetic intervention has taken various forms. The site is illuminated by 'Victorian' lampposts which remain on all day, and at night by programmable multicolour LED lights (*see image 4*): some residents and security providers describe them as 'disco' lights and 'dim' lighting which they thought attracted those who unofficially gather and linger there. An artwork installed in 2016 was the subject of extensive consultation that invited local people to linger, stop, and sit down, and to proffer their views on the proposed installation. (It is noteworthy that aesthetic enhancement has never encompassed benches – this remains officially *not* a place in which one is meant to linger.) The [artwork chosen](#) – which the *Macclesfield Express* described as transforming 'a notorious crime-ridden underpass into an safe and welcoming environment' – sparingly and discreetly projects onto the pillars and walls of the underpass the town's silk history and images of early twentieth-century residents inhabiting the landscape. The graffiti that intimates a claim to ownership by local teenagers thereby sits uneasily alongside – and seems somehow to exist in contest with – official 'graffiti' which reclaims the underpass with – and for – Macclesfield's industrial heritage (*see Image 5*).



Image 5 – official and unofficial graffiti

During the town's Barnaby Arts Festival in 2021, an evening walking tour 'around the ginnels, twists and turns of Macclesfield town centre' organised by an artist from Salford ended at the underpass. The incongruent, place-out-of-place atmosphere of the underpass became the spectacle. The artist recalled his experiences of working on a project in Macclesfield Forest and projected photographs of the Forest at solstice – *see image 6*. The underpass was an apt location to end the tour, the artist remarked to the assembled tour group, because that is where Macclesfield, its urban infrastructure, the glimpses of industrial ruin, the sounds above, were at its grittiest – a fitting place to bring the Forest into the town and to insert (and assert) Macclesfield's sense of place onto (and against) this ill-fitting residual space.

¹¹ Ian Curtis was born and lived the greater part of his life in Macclesfield and his grave, a site of pilgrimage for committed *Joy Division* fans, is in Macclesfield cemetery.

¹² The town's other (smaller) underpass was transformed over a two-year period by a community art project led by a local councillor. The aesthetic, hand-painted bricks made by residents creates a very different atmosphere to that of the corporate heritage inscribed on the Gas Road underpass.



Image 6 – 'Nature' comes to the underpass

Conclusion: On caring for place

In this paper, we have sought to explore in miniature – through the sensitive observation of one (troubled) site of pedestrian movement created by the dominance of motorized movement through a place – how the balance or imbalance between the claims and experiences associated with different forms of mobility and dwelling shape people's sense of everyday security. We started out from one uneasy, residual crossing-point - the Gas Road underpass in Macclesfield, in north-west England - in order to explore its relations with the town beyond and people's accounts and imaginations of its past, present and futures. For some of its users the underpass is both entirely necessary and a source of worry and frustration. For many others, it is a site of imagined, mediated discomfort, seldom or never visited but nonetheless troubling, a place-out-of-place in a place like Macclesfield. For others, not only young teenagers but also the town's homeless, it is an *ad hoc* gathering space, a place of shelter, an inadvertently created site of rest, or sociality and enjoyment.

In trying to apprehend some of the contemporary meanings of the underpass, we have found it necessary to *situate* it – it has a very specific position within the town, at the intersection of many trajectories. It is in some respects not much of a place, just somewhere to move through, a site of unthought daily routines. But it is at the same time incongruous – an intrusion of generic urban-ness, in a place seeking to define itself to heritage, authenticity, and locality. In this respect, the sources of the incongruity are also historical. They belong to the realm of what Jessop (2009) calls 'cultural political economy'. There are material, embedded reasons for its presence and form; and in a sense for its signification too.

Once there, the underpass is used, both as 'intended' (if that's the word), and otherwise. Some people, young people and the homeless, have improvised unintended uses for it, that perhaps compensate for the absence of other amenities and support. Indeed, why would a point of intersections *not* become a place of meeting and gathering? And the meliorative approaches that local authorities have taken to this reality (the lighting, not having placed surveillance cameras in the underpass itself) seem to suggest a degree of willingness to accommodate to it rather than try to eliminate it. So the underpass may not fit, and it may give rise to discomfort. But it has not been abandoned. It may be an unloved space for most adult residents and for local authorities. But it is not unused. In fact, it is a site of ongoing attention, care and maintenance (Hall & James Smith, 2015) - curated rather than purged. The underpass has, in short, come to exist within a 'complex relation between movement, care and the politics of city space' (James Smith & Hall 2017, p. 377).

One question this leaves us with is what is at stake in this process of care and repair. To what ends are these interventions conducted? To what (other) ends might they be directed? One answer treats the underpass as an unwanted but necessary piece of anonymous automotive infrastructure that requires continuous – and for most part overlooked (Graham & Thrift, 2007) – efforts of maintenance and repair. The task at hand is not simply to attend to its safety and cleanliness. It is to engage in practices of upkeep, repair and enhancement the purpose of which is to mitigate the 'infrastructural harm' (Kallianos et al., 2017) the underpass has enacted on the ecology of Macclesfield and strive somehow to incorporate this 'alien' structure into the town's social imaginary. A second answer treats the underpass as necessitating

constant 'roadside repair' (James Smith & Hall, 2017, p. 378), but of a kind that is social rather than physical. On this view, the underpass is sensed first and foremost as a site of disorder and vulnerability; a gathering point for the troubled and the troubling, an unwelcome infrastructural reminder of 'another', mostly hidden, Macclesfield. The attendant maintenance job here is one of care and control. It is to surveil, supervise, move on, and intervene with a view to making this place safe for legitimate circulation, while assuaging the anxieties of those for whom the underpass has become a local symbol of wider societal difficulties. But there is a third response – a road not taken if you like. This is to see the underpass, not simply as a place requiring physical or social repair, but instead as one capable of being addressed within the frame of 'the good city' (Amin, 2006; Kern, 2020; Goh et al., 2022). There is no clear or single answer that flows from such (re)framing. In general terms, it is an invitation to think of safer urban environments as also 'better', more habitable, environments. In the particular case at hand, it suggests approaching this residual site as one capable of being imagined as a common space for diverse kinds of transit, and meeting, and engagement, not just as a problematic by-product of the age of automobility.

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