

Looking For the City That Is to Come

A conversation with Bill Morrison

The perceived successes or failures of city planning often forms the datum of discussions on the recent history of cities and regions, and this is no less of the case than in Belfast and Northern Ireland. Motorways, New Towns, housing provision and district branding are topics that inevitably form the backdrop of any serious conversation on how a city developed in the 20th century. Locally of course we have an additional issue; that sizeable elephant comprised of innumerable complex socio-political issues commonly bundled under the benignly understated term of 'The Troubles.'

This broad sweep of issues – coupled with the unusual pairing of sixties rock and roll and the early years of the Northern Irish planning movement – created a rich forum for a discussion with Bill Morrison, retired Architect-Planner who reached professional prominence during these heady days and played a key part in the planning of the Belfast region until his retirement in 2001. I started by asking how he first got into architecture.

"I was an only child living with a widowed mother; my father died when I was 10. Money was tight and the advice was to leave school and look for apprenticeship opportunities even if it meant abandoning hopes of higher education. I was told by the headmaster that I should look for a job as a draftsman in the shipyard or alternatively look for any opportunity to gain experience of work in the drawing office of a professional architect. When I told him I had been to see a few practicing architects with my mother and it was not looking too hopeful, he rummaged through a drawer; pulled out a letter from a

former pupil and spun it across the desk in my direction. I left school at the age of 16 to become an apprentice architect."

That former pupil was Thomas Houston, an architect who had taken on his father's practice T T Houston and Partners and who, through his work with National Trust, had a particular interest in architectural conservation.

"Tommy (Houston) had a drawing office in College Gardens overlooking Methody. He had good people working for him, such as Shane Belford, Brian Boyd and Will McVeigh. I will remember taking part in a loud, placard-waving protest at the impending demolition of the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institution opposite the end of Elmwood Avenue – to be replaced by an additional wing for the City Hospital. Brian Boyd was a front-runner among architects seeking to save the city heritage.

"It was with T T Houston that I developed a passion for conservation which was virtually unheard of in the 1950s and 60s. Working on National Trust projects was great experience. As the 'new boy' I had to put up with practical jokes – such as the time I was instructed to climb up a ladder and crawl round to the cliff face side and report on the state of the lead flashing on the cliff face of the Mussenden Temple."

"Tommy was happy to sign up with the Belfast College of Art for me to study one day a week on a day-release basis which enabled me to sit the RIBA exams externally."



Bill Morrison (third from left) with fellow students outside the School of Architecture, Durham Street, Belfast, c.1963.

The concept of architectural apprenticeships is now making a welcome return, and at a time when social mobility and access to the profession is a big issue, I can think of no better example for the benefits of apprenticeships than Bill Morrison's path into the profession. While apparently not performing well at school, Bill would go on to achieve a lot and would prove to be incredibly influential in each role he occupied.

Following on from T T Houston, Bill joined the team at Munce & Kennedy, working with Adair Roche on the City Hospital, and then with Robert McKinstry, another notable early trailblazer in architectural conservation in Northern Ireland.

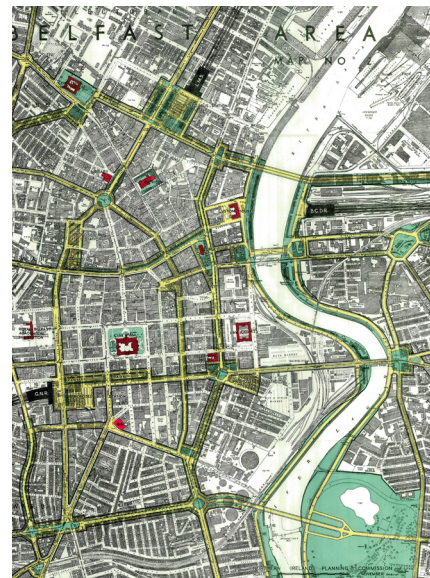
"I met a lot of prominent architects, and they were a real inspiration. It was certainly the right decision to go into architecture at this time. The influence of architects like Victor Robinson and Robert Carson; and the organisations they brought into being such as the Architectural Group and URBS (Urban Renewal Belfast Society) could not be overstated."

Despite the passion and zeal which feels like a real awakening for the young architect, it was a mere two years after qualification before Bill chose to pursue another career.

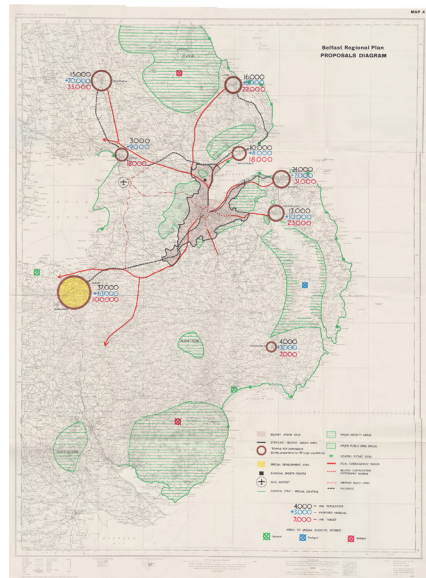
"I won a Bursary to go to Queens to be in the first year of the Environmental Planning degree, and again, this was some of the wonderful luck. There was a great enthusiasm at that time to have architect-planners working for the government, so once again I found myself in the right place at the right time."

It's worthwhile pausing here to look at the background of planning in Northern Ireland, and the rich optimism which pervaded the sixties before it all came to a shocking end in 1969. Planning was slow to be introduced to the nascent state of Northern Ireland. An early outline advisory plan for the region was introduced in 1945 by architect-planner W.R.Davidge, an influential early exponent of the town planning movement, but this served to merely highlight the problems, and any physical proposals made by the report went largely unrealised.¹

The housing crisis – precipitated in part by the Blitz and by the increasing influx of people from the countryside into the city – led to a real risk of uncontrolled suburban sprawl around the city of Belfast. These issues lead to a power struggle between the Stormont government and the increasingly powerful Belfast Corporation. Eventually, an independent assessor was



The 1945 Planning Proposals for the Belfast Area, otherwise known as the 'Davidge Plan.'



The 1963 Belfast Regional Survey and Plan, otherwise known as the 'Matthew Plan.'



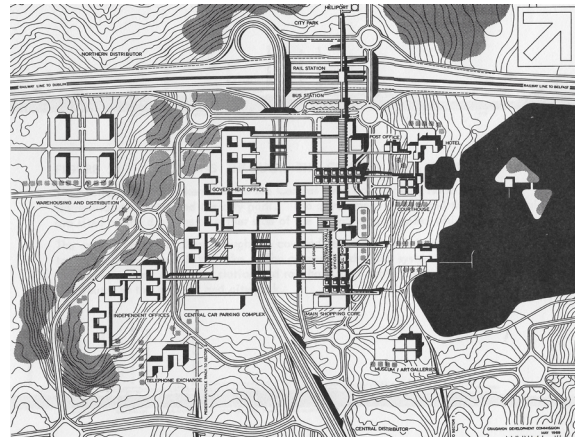
Report on Belfast Urban Motorway, R. Travers Morgan & Partners, 1967.



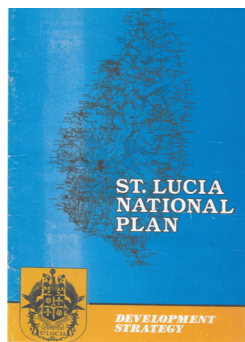
Belfast Urban Area Plan, Building Design Partnership, 1969.

brought in to defuse the tension and advise on density and location of new housing areas. Edinburgh based architect-planner Robert Matthew was appointed and he quickly set about developing a regional plan for the city, the first serious planning exercise in the history of Northern Ireland

The so-called 'Matthew Plan,' published on the 26 February 1963, continues to have a significant effect on the fabric of the area, both physically and statutorily.² It imposed a Stopleveline limiting the city's outward expansion, it created a single planning authority limiting the possibility of corruption, closed an easily exploitable compensation loophole in the planning system, established growth towns to absorb the excess population overspill from Belfast and proposed the construction of a New Town between Lurgan and Portadown. In February 1963, the date the Matthew Plan was published, the 20-year-old Bill Morrison was not only taking his tentative first steps into the profession of architecture but also becoming increasingly involved in the rebellious and progressive world of rock and roll, having established a band with classmates



Craigavon New City, Strategic Plan for Central Area, 1969.



Cover of the St. Lucia National Plan, 1976.

from Campbell College some years before. They became a fixture on the local music scene, no doubt inspired by the trans-Atlantic success of Van Morrison's 'Them.'

The early high-level ideas of Robert Matthew were increasingly formalised into the motorway plans for the Belfast region, published by Travers Morgan in 1967, by which stage Bill's had left his first band The Dominoes and had formed new band The Group.³ As the summer of love took hold and Bill entertained throngs of the young and the hip in clubs like The Pound and the Astor Marquee, proposals for a ringroad totally encircling the city centre were being finely tuned along with a road system efficiently connecting the Matthew growth towns. At the same time, vast swathes of land on the southern shore of Lough Neagh had been aggressively vested for the formation of Northern Ireland's first and yet to be named New Town.

By 1969, The Group had transformed into Chips and were beginning to achieve success beyond the local scene. The same year Building Design Partnership (BDP) published the Belfast



Concept Plan for Laganside, Building Design Partnership, 1987.

Urban Area Plan which even further solidified Matthew's ideas into concrete proposals.⁴

"The grand designs for Belfast were largely created by the minds of a few people from BDP. I think they did a good job, but there was very little they could do when presented with a road pattern like that (designed by Travers Morgan), and it behoves us now to deal with what we've got. I would say I was on the periphery, but I was influenced by the BDP approach and the personalities who were involved. I wouldn't be condemning the BDP plan, it was ahead of its time and maybe things that are ahead of their time are misunderstood."

On the 15th of August 1969, as 400,000 people descended on a dairy farm in in upstate New York for the Woodstock festival promising 'three days of Peace and Music,' every single house on Bombay Street in West Belfast was burnt out in a shocking incident often considered to be the starting point on the contemporary Troubles. This fundamentally changed the context of the progressive planning legislation of the previous six years.⁵ On the 21st of March 1970 Chips took to the stage in the Pound with the last song "specially dedicated to Bill," as was announced through the PA, "who is leaving to find his fortune elsewhere."⁶ As it turned out, that unlikely place to seek a fortune was the New Town of Craigavon, where Bill got his first job in the DOE as a qualified planner, taking over from Bob Strang as Principal Planning officer for the by now controversially named New Town.⁷

Bob Strang, along with fellow planner Sandy Bannerman, was part of a team of planners brought over from Glasgow. They were originally led by the eccentric architect-planner Geoffrey Copcutt, who controversially quit shortly after being appointed to work on Ulster's first New Town.

"Geoffrey Copcutt arrived, made a lot of noise and then was gone. Some of his ideas shouldn't be dismissed. He was Corbusian. The product of his ambition was the town centre of Cumbernauld. I think he was elevated by the deference that civil servants held for Cumbernauld, thus stripping Cumbernauld of all its professional staff. Sandy and Bob Strang, Bill Kearns the landscape architect from Edinburgh; all worked on Cumbernauld, and all were brought over to Craigavon."

As Bob Strang moved on to head up the design and feasibility unit of the newly created Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Bill was brought in to take his place.⁸ In 1973, shortly after Bill started working for them, the government dissolved the Craigavon Development Commission a mere 8 years after it had been formed. This was in part due to the oil crisis, and of course related to the increasing ferocity of the Troubles. Where Matthew's idea for both the Growth Towns and the New Town was to demagnetise the city, Belfast lost its magnetism over a few short nights in the summer of '69.

"The winding up of the Commission meant that Craigavon was not even one fifth complete. I really am quite fond of



Bill was in a number of bands throughout the height of sixties rock and roll before eventually leaving to become a full time planner in 1970.

Craigavon. For years there was stigma attached to the crazy notion of regional planning, and there were people like Bob Strang and I who argued that we mustn't abandon these ideas; but the Troubles absolutely came out of the blue and nobody could understand it, the abruptness of it all and the sudden hatred. It was the end of an era. Belfast became a derelict city, and it was a wonder that anybody was able to take pride in it, but the conservation movement proved quite influential.

"It was an exciting time and Charlie Brett was a bit of a hero. Although he used to be loathed collectively by the planners and Charlie rubbished anything that was produced by the planners, I found myself having a rapport with him. I was invited to dinner with him to his house and some of my colleagues suggested it was like sleeping with the devil. Without him I think it would have been difficult to visualise good things for Belfast at a time when it was facing destruction."

As explained in my previous piece on Charles Brett, planning legislation was successfully introduced to Northern Ireland in 1973.⁹ Thanks to Robert Matthew, those early exponents of planning in Northern Ireland (most of whom appeared to be Scottish), and a throng of newly qualified local planners emerging from the new course at Queens, the province now had a robust planning system and the trained personnel to staff it.

Bill's next professional move, however, was a surprising one.

"It was a series of coincidences. I was sitting in my office one day and Sandy Bannerman opened the door, and said, "That sounds good, doesn't it?" He threw down an advertisement for a job as architect-planner in St Lucia, and I said, "Where's St Lucia?" I ended up going over to London to be interviewed. The news was very bad at the time; the Abercorn bombing had taken place and the Ulster Workers' Strike, so I didn't quite go on impulse. I wasn't even dreaming that I was going to be offered a job, but I got it!"

"It was a small island, and at time I was there it was heading for independence; it hadn't been agreed yet, but they were getting all their ducks in a row and that was part of my purpose there. I recall being invited to a reception in the governor's office being given for a visiting American oil billionaire. He had this idea to build a development on a hill close to the capital, Castries. The big worry that I had was that it would be half finished before he decided to go elsewhere. I had a lot of reservations, so it was about this time I decided they needed a National Plan. I ended up just feeling that I had achieved something.

"I could have stayed longer, but I was getting nervous about ever getting back into the civil service back home. It was the same situation to decide whether to go, leaving behind a widowed mother all on her own. But it was the right thing to do as it turned out, I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

In 1978, after four years in the West Indies, Bill returned to a province in crisis. In his essay written for Fred Boal's 'Enduring City' Bill states "In the seven years after 1971...77,000 people – almost one fifth of the population of municipal Belfast – were recorded to have moved from and within inner city areas." The tendency was for Catholics to retreat into inner city estates, whereas young Protestants left the inner city altogether, creating what Bill refers to as a tale of two cities; "an overcrowded and youthful Catholic inner-city interwoven with a sparsely populated and elderly Protestant inner-city."¹⁰ As a now very experienced but still resolutely idealistic architect-planner, Bill was perfectly positioned to grasp the nettle and build on the strong foundations of a newly empowered planning system, however, the challenges remained considerable. Bill was involved in the drafting of a new Urban Area Plan, a document published in the late 1980s and widely criticised at the time. By Bill's own admission Belfast needed "projects, not plans" by this stage.¹¹ One such project began as a branding exercise.

"It fitted into this concept of putting names on areas. We got this idea of the southside, which was becoming a Conservation Area, and then the northside was going to have

to be redeveloped, and then Laganside seemed to be the way to go. I personally wasn't involved in any hands-on way, so I'm not going to take any credit for the Laganside masterplan, but I met with the permanent secretary of the DOE, and we explained at some length the concept of the boulevard of tree-lined avenues at the side of the river. He agreed with the ideas but stated that he had the agreement to spend money on a cross harbour bridge ringing in his ears and he wasn't going to be the one who stops that. That is fundamentally at the core of the problem of the York Street interchange, which persists to this day."

Despite yet another set of problems caused by driving roads through the city centre, the entire Laganside development was the high-profile project that Belfast needed. At the same time and throughout the nineties, Bill championed the Quality Initiative.

"I was in the fortunate position to be able to advance some thoughts that were quite progressive at the time, and the Quality Initiative was one thing that emerged in later years when I was manager of Belfast Planning office. The pursuit of quality in housing layout was one thing that I was able to influence, and that resulted in the publication of Creating Places the year before my retirement."

As Bill relays stories from his time in planning and playing a key part in some of the most significant shifts in the developments of the region, one would be forgiven in thinking that he was a passive spectator throughout it all. A cursory glance at his CV reveals otherwise. He served as Principal Planning officer for Northern Ireland's first New Town a mere 3 years after graduation and as Director of Planning for St Lucia where he developed an influential national plan. He was Principal Planning officer for Belfast, rising to Divisional Planning officer and serving with the DOE for over 23 years until his retirement in 2001, serving through the crushing lows of the seventies and eighties and the soaring highs (with the occasional crushing low) of the nineties.

1. Planning Commission. 'Planning Proposals for the Belfast Area: Interim Report of the Planning Commission.' HMSO, 1945.
 2. Planning Commission. 'Planning Proposals for the Belfast Area: Second Report of the Planning Commission.' HMSO, 1952.
 3. Matthew, Robert Hogg. 'Belfast Regional Survey and Plan: Recommendations and Conclusions: Presented to Parliament by Command of His Excellency the Governor of Northern Ireland'. H.M.S.O., February 1963.
 4. 'Report on Belfast Urban Motorway'. R. Travers Morgan & Partners, 1967.
 5. 'Belfast Urban Area Plan'. Building Design Partnership, 1969.
 6. The event was originally to be held in the town of Woodstock but was moved to the town of Bethel some 60 miles away due to issues with permits. The coinciding of the dates of the festival with the burning of Bombay Street, as well as the fact that the town of Woodstock is located in Ulster County, is an interesting moment of synchronicity.
 7. The song was 'Dedicated to the One I Love,' originally recorded by the Mamas & the Papas.
 8. - Bill Morrison. 'Chips 1970,' 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZHeF9D0hAo>.
 9. There is some artistic license being used here. Bill in fact worked as a planning officer in Belfast from 1969 until taking his position in Craigavon in

Immediately following retirement, he was engaged by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister to develop planning strategies for the Holy Cross dispute, and in the years that followed he served as Chairman of both the Environmental and Planning Law Association, the National Trust's Northern Ireland Planning Commission and President of the Town and Country Planning School. He was made a Fellow of the Irish Academy of Engineering and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. An astonishing list of achievements belied by his humility but hinted at through the obvious affection he has for his work.

In one his last roles before completely retiring from the sphere of the built environment, Bill acted as Chairman of PLACE – the Architecture Centre for Northern Ireland – from 2008 until 2012. The final thing he did for PLACE was to give a presentation to the Venice Biennale outlining the development of Belfast throughout the 20th century and hinting at the exciting developments which lay ahead in the 21st. I had the privilege of hearing a version of the lecture delivered one-on-one in Bill's kitchen, complete with commentary and many an amusing aside. What came through was the real affection the former planner had for the city, and a sense of the honour he felt in playing his part in its slow but steady upwards trajectory.

"I feel very fortunate that my professional career took me through such changing circumstances. There was vast difference between planning pre and post Troubles, and we had to deal with that. It was quite difficult.

"I want it to be known that I'm not saying this from the point of view that I am proud what I have done or that I made a difference, but I am extremely proud of the enduring city of Belfast." ○

Dr Andrew Molloy

1972. As Bill quotes in his own book on Belfast's Rock 'n' Roll years 'Big Hand for the Band' "The important thing is to not let the facts get in the way of a good story," and the idea of Bill leaving the world of rock and roll for fortune in Craigavon was too good to miss. Please accept this footnote as both an apology and as a means of setting the record straight.
 9. Morrison, Bill. 'Big Hand for the Band: Tales from Belfast's Rock 'n' Roll Years.' Motelands Publishing, 2015.
 10. The Irish Times. 'Bob Strang Obituary: Planner Who Improved Belfast Living Conditions'. Accessed 17 July 2022. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/planner-who-improved-belfast-living-conditions-1.761660>.
 11. Molloy, Andrew. 'A Pronounced Character: Sir Charles Edward Bainbridge Brett (1928-2005)'. Perspective 31, no. 2 (April 2022): 80-84.
 12. Morrison, Bill. 'Planning the City: Planning the Region'. In Enduring City: Belfast in the Twentieth Century, 141-54. Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd, 2006.
 13. Great Britain. Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland. Town and Country Planning Service. 'Belfast Urban Area Plan - 2001: Preliminary Proposals.' H.M.S.O., 1987.
 14. - Mooney, Sam, and Frank Gaffigan. Reshaping Space and Society: A Critical Review of the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001. Belfast Centre for the Unemployed, 1988.