



SURVEY AND SPECULATION

## R.J. Morris and public history

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### Abstract

R.J. (Bob) Morris' contribution to debates around the history of class, associational culture and urban governance have underpinned numerous publications across the decades. This article extends the appreciation of Bob's work to reflect on how his approach to documenting, demystifying and disseminating the history and heritage of cities and industrial places – including through his use of photography – made a notable impact at the interface between urban and public history and has had a lasting impact on future generations of urban historians' approach to understanding the historic built environment.

R.J. (Bob) Morris' significant contribution to historiographical debates in the history of class and associational culture, coupled with his meaningful engagement beyond academia in the heritage sector, has had a profound impact on scholars and wider communities across the decades. This has been particularly apparent in Morris' work at the interface between urban and public history as this short reflection will discuss.

Demystifying the complexities of urban governance and the ways that civil society shaped the town and city is at the heart of much recent urban history scholarship – Bob's work was key in influencing the wider sub-field, as other articles in this special section demonstrate. My first significant encounter with Bob's work was at the beginning of my own postgraduate research into the manufacturing town of Middlesbrough. As I prepared for a daunting interview for an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Collaborative Doctoral Award working on the British Steel Archive Project, I was relatively confident in my knowledge of the town's industrial history, but was less sure about how I would go about convincing the interviewers that I even understood – let alone could deconstruct – the role of Victorian steel magnates in the governance of the manufacturing town. It was at this point I turned to Bob Morris and Richard Trainor's edited book, *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750*. Sure enough, this collection of essays, including Bob's wide-ranging introductory essay, provided the foundation for understanding the wider historiographical and theoretical debates and ultimately

helped secure the doctoral award.<sup>1</sup> A year later, when meeting Bob at the Huddersfield–Limerick Colloquium organized by Barry Doyle and Tony McElligott, I had my first conversation with Bob following on from my paper on the Tees Newport Vertical Lift Bridge, during which he enthusiastically revealed that as a young man in Middlesbrough one of his jobs was to take the pay to the bridge staff. The encounter provided my first experience of Bob’s kindness and encouragement to explore and disseminate urban history to wider public audiences and in the following years we would draw on his own research on urban elites across various towns and cities.<sup>2</sup>

## Public history and demystifying Victorian cities

Beyond Morris’ array of academic publications, he recognized the close connections between the value and potential of operating at the interface between urban and public history and made an active contribution to facilitating this exchange. In 2014, I organized the ‘Victorian Cities Revisited’ conference in Middlesbrough, which brought together academics and heritage practitioners in an effort to share academic research with wider audiences and for urban historians to learn more about the processes associated with the heritage and history of Victorian cities out ‘in the wild’. I invited Bob to be a keynote speaker and he duly obliged by providing a memorable exploration of ‘Place and Memory in the Industrial City’ that entertained world-leading experts, emerging scholars, and attendees from the local community and heritage organizations. Alongside detailed, comparative statistical analysis of the manufacturing city, one of the standout features of his lecture was the use of photography – much his own work and other material collated from community groups, local history societies and heritage groups – as he set about exploring the changing relationship between place and memory in industrial towns and cities. This rich visual spectacle evidenced the built civic and industrial legacies in various conditions of renewal, decay and dereliction and brilliantly highlighted the value of an urban approach to public history.

Richard Rodger’s recent appreciation of his former Edinburgh colleague referenced both Bob’s propensity for comparative histories and taking his camera on urban walks around the towns and cities he visited; the value of this practice was evident to all who knew Bob.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Bob was aware of the different degrees to which audiences were familiar with urban history debates and concepts and the complexities of towns and cities. He thus deployed photography – both his own and that available in archival collections<sup>4</sup> – to make places accessible and relatable all whilst forensically analysing the ways in which the past was articulated in the present through the built environment and community voices.

Through his mixed methodology, Bob’s approach highlighted the relevance of challenges and opportunities faced across the sub-fields, placing the successful transformation of Saltaire alongside the (still ongoing) efforts to regenerate Sion

<sup>1</sup>R.J. Morris, ‘Governance: two centuries of urban growth’, in R.J. Morris and R. H. Trainor (eds.), *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750* (Aldershot, 2000), 1–14.

<sup>2</sup>R.J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution, 1780–1850* (London, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>R. Rodger, ‘Bob Morris: an appreciation’, *Urban History*, 50 (2023), 199–201.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, R.J. Morris, ‘Photography, environment and “improvements” in Scottish cities 1860–1900’, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome*, 116 (2004), 787–95.



**Figure 1.** A photograph by Bob Morris capturing a heritage walk in St Hilda's and the then derelict Captain Cook public house, Middlesbrough in 2014 (R.J. Morris).

Mills in County Tyrone. The photography of blast furnaces along the River Tees – somewhat prophetically given the closure of the Teesside Steelworks the following year – was juxtapositioned with snapshots of bicycle routes along the Ruhr Valley and blast furnace mediation schemes in Dortmund. Snapshots of seaside entertainment and lemon top ice creams at Redcar, sports clubs and religious associations featured in photographs and postcards revealed the practices and pursuits that continue today, as well as the commonalities and shared challenges faced across time and place.

In curating a diverse range of sources from community websites to local photographers' offerings all underpinned by Bob's academic expertise emphasized his ability to see the bigger, comparative picture and the often overlooked value created by urban history and heritage beyond the constraints of the academy.

### Urban history and the 'charisma of place'

Bob's ability to find 'a sense of place through urban walks' and his photography was evident on that return visit to Teesside as he added to his corpus of portraits of decaying buildings and industrial landmarks – in this instance the town's original heartland where the derelict Old Town Hall, decaying Captain Cook pub and landmark Transporter Bridge are situated (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> There was a foresight in this work as he captured a landscape that was changing amidst the most recent iteration of regeneration projects that has since seen the staggered building of homes and the slow

<sup>5</sup>Rodger, 'Bob Morris: an appreciation', 200.



**Figure 2.** Much of Bob's photography captured moments in between decline and regeneration, as shown in this photograph of the Tees Transporter Bridge and hoarding around a new urban park (R.J. Morris).

restoration of historic buildings, which now stand awkwardly next to the latest embodiment of today's architectural trends (Figure 2).

Those familiar with Bob's extensive array of photographic studies will be too aware of his plethora of images capturing everyday life in the city. In fact, his photography reveals a much greater complexity and meaning in the simplicity of the everyday through his recording and helping to make sense of the changing face of the city. His collection of photographs is a valuable historical resource that is worthy of preservation. A perusal of Bob's Facebook profile revealed his uncanny foresight in capturing buildings and practices that in less than a decade have been lost or transformed, from the Crown Fisheries in Leeds (since transformed into a vintage clothing company's city centre shop), to queues for COVID-19 tests in Sweden during winter.

In 2018, Shane Ewen and I convened the 'Urban History Beyond the Academy' workshop at Leeds Beckett University. The event's origins were in a roundtable discussion at the previous year's Urban History Group Annual Conference where speakers highlighted a desire and need for a forum for considering the benefits and challenges of urban historians working in the contemporary city. There was a heightened recognition of the importance of connecting with, and learning from, local communities and professionals central to the day-to-day management and shaping of the urban environment.<sup>6</sup> This embodied much of Bob's practice that he had been engaged in for decades and he happily accepted our invitation to return to Leeds – where he had previously resided and was a Patron of the Thoresby Society – to share his experience of practising urban history by exploring 'The Charisma of Place'.

The event led to a special section in *Urban History*, which brought together a selection of papers from Ph.D. researchers and early career academics that shared

<sup>6</sup>S. Ewen and T. Warwick, 'Introduction: urban history beyond the academy', *Urban History*, 48 (2021), 290–1.

experiences of doing urban history across a range of settings through studies of the Black Country Living Museum, Hull's Blitz trail, Leicester's Cultural Quarter and the host city of Leeds. Subsequent articles and activities in the sub-field have recognized this need for urban historians to engage more with the contemporary city.<sup>7</sup>

### Pedagogy and Bob's legacy: urban heritage and walks in (post-)industrial Yorkshire and beyond

Like so many other historians across the decades, my own work – particularly that beyond published academic outputs – has been strongly influenced by Bob's research and approach to visualizing urban and public history. One of the last times I communicated with Bob concerned my book of photographs of old Middlesbrough – he had himself turned his attention to the famed Valentine and Sons photographers – an exchange during which he duly volunteered his own favourite post-industrial photograph, shared screengrabs of a repurposed steelworks and signposted to the works of his friend Heinz Reif who had written on industrialization in Oberhausen, Middlesbrough's twin town.<sup>8</sup> It was Bob's willingness to share his knowledge, expertise and measured enthusiasm that is missed by so many of us.

In my work with colleagues at Sheffield, Leeds Beckett and across projects domestically and internationally, Bob's legacy lives on through embedding his pedagogy and practice in engaging students and publics with the historic built environment and encouraging them to interact with the city as a historical resource. This has included encouraging students to take photographs of the 'everyday', to consider how a 'sense of place' is embodied in functional objects (including sometimes the artistic symbolism of metallic drain covers that so often attracted the attention of Bob's camera lens), or highlighting the value of capturing urban decay, dereliction and failure alongside opulence, prosperity and splendour. Thus, twenty-first-century students are reinterpreting and deconstructing the nineteenth century's urban legacies by learning from the practice and research of one of the finest urban historians of his generation.

<sup>7</sup>For example, L. Faire, D. McHugh and C.A. Williams, 'Making manifestos for urban history: creative collaboration in a conference workshop', *Urban History*, FirstView (2024).

<sup>8</sup>R.J. Morris, *Scotland 1907: The Many Scotlands of Valentine and Sons, Photographers* (Edinburgh, 2007); T. Warwick, *Memories of Middlesbrough in the 1970s and 1980s* (Middlesbrough, 2020).