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The enduring importance of strategic vision in planning: the case of the West Midlands Green Belt

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ABSTRACT

The Green Belt is one of the most widely known and popular regional growth management policies having been adopted around the world. Drawing upon the regional spatial imaginary and historical institutionalist literature alongside a case study of the West Midlands, this paper conceptualizes the Green Belt as an enduring, regionalizing concept in the spatial vision of planners and professional campaigners. It underscores the continuing importance of planning history and critical junctures in 'framing' the perspectives and aspirations of practicing planners regarding strategic planning. The paper charts the emergence, embedding, and adaptability of the Green Belt as an institution before exploring how strategic vision has continued to be vitally important to planners and campaigners despite the abolition of statutory strategic planning in England in 2010.

Introduction

The Green Belt is a regional growth management policy which aims to prevent urban sprawl.[1] The power for local authorities to designate Green Belt in England was granted in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, but the policy is globally influential having been introduced in cities such as Seoul, Christchurch, Tokyo, and Sydney.[2] Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs), which are a similar concept to the Green Belt, exist in some states and cities in the US and Australia, like Melbourne and Portland.[3] There is growing interest in Green Belts from a sustainability perspective, especially in the Global South, with cities, like Durban and Medellin, introducing Green Belts.[4] This relates to the broader, increasing international interest in 'smart' growth, compact cities alongside popular alarm with climate and environmental change.[5] However, several concerns about deepening housing affordability problems and development of pressure at the rural–urban fringe of many cities are perplexing policymakers as to how often competing objectives for land and the environment can be reconciled in the planning system.[6]

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[1]Mace, "Institution".
[2]Freestone, *Green Belts in Planning*.
[3]Amati and Yokohari, "London Green Belt".
[4]Freestone, *Green Belts in Planning*; Chu et al., "Climate Adaptation".
[5]Harris, *Settlement Patterns*.
[6]Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries".

Drawing upon a longitudinal case study of the West Midlands Green Belt (WMGB), this paper explores the enduring importance of strategic vision in planning and how key historical 'junctures' shape the conceptual framework and perspectives of contemporary planners.[7] The West Midlands historically was an exemplar in strategic planning, but there has been a power vacuum in strategic planning since the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies by national Government in 2010. The paper therefore explores the historic and contemporary relationship between the Green Belt's prominence in policy terms as regional growth management policy and the governance challenge of managing it in practice, especially given the waxing and waning of statutory strategic planning in England.[8] Drawing upon the literature on historical institutionalism and regional spatial imaginaries, it argues that the Green Belt can be theorized as a coordinating, regionalizing concept which underscores the enduring, broader importance of strategic planning in the vision of planners. Moreover, whilst the dismantling of strategic planning has been deeper in England than other countries where there is sometimes a measure of statutory federal protection for regional planning, such as Germany,[9] the paper highlights that vital, wider historic lessons regarding the longevity and durability of strategic planning can be drawn. This underscores the wider, continuing importance of planning history to contemporary practice, especially when the future of strategic planning is at the forefront of the current policy debate with the repeatedly delayed Devolution White Paper in England and potential for local government reorganization.[10]

However, despite growing scholarly interest in 'city-regions' generally and the Green Belt commanding widespread popular and political support in England as well as international significance, the policy and broader rural–urban fringe have been the objects of limited theorization.[11] The broader literature has drawn attention to how certain policies or actors/actants can become institutionally embedded and acquire institutional characteristics which then 'frame' future trajectories or path dependencies.[12] Arguably the national Green Belt policy can be characterized as an 'institution' having 'staying power' as a policy spanning over 70 years, a lobby group in its favour (Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)), whilst it is popularly perceived as the guardian of the English countryside.[13] Moreover, the broader importance of vision and imagination in regional/sub-regional constructs and plans has been underlined historically as associated with key figures in the development of planning training and practice, especially Patrick Geddes and Patrick Abercrombie.[14] The paper explores how strategic vision and imaginaion continue to be vitally important in 'framing' strategic planning futures, thereby building on Valler et al.'s work on the regional spatial imaginary of the Oxford–Cambridge Arc and institutional planning cultures in Oxfordshire.[15] It focuses on the significant and enduring challenge facing planners of reconciling central Government housing targets and demands of housebuilders for development at the rural–urban fringe with the strategic aim of the Green Belt being to prevent urban sprawl.[16]

The literature has demonstrated the importance of geographical context in shaping spatial imaginaries, so this paper offers a geographically grounded theorization of the WMGB as a spatial

[7]Inch and Shepherd, "Thinking Conjuncturally," 64.
[8]Wannop and Cherry, "Regional Planning".
[9]Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, "Post-politics"; Colomb and Tomaney, "Territorial Politics".
[10]Riddell, "Strategic Planning".
[11]Dühr, "Petites Europes"; Scott et al., "Rural-Urban Fringe".
[12]Valler and Phelps, "Future," 1; Sorensen, "Historical Institutionalism," 17; Martin, "Roepke Lecture in Economic Geography".
[13]Mace, "Institution," 5.
[14]Hall et al., *Containment*; Harrison et al., "Regional Planning".
[15]Valler and Phelps, "Future"; Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries".
[16]Elson, *Green Belt*; Amati and Yokohari, "London Green Belt".

imaginary of a UGB in post-industrial cities. The paper focuses upon housing which is at the forefront of political debate in many countries and has historically been the most controversial aspect of strategic planning.[17] Indeed, post-industrial cities often have tightly drawn administrative boundaries, diminishing supplies of brownfield to meet Central Government housing targets and limited options for urban growth at the rural–urban fringe.[18] Moreover, the West Midlands currently lacks a strategic planning body and has experienced a political conflict over the governance of the WMGB historically, so it is an exemplifying case of the challenges of managing the Green Belt in the English regions in an era of localism.[19] Indeed, the paper explores how the Green Belt is often an inherently political issue with the competing theorizations of it as a regionalizing concept *and* a territorial one converging and competing in its governance. It demonstrates how the Industrial Revolution fashioned territorial anxieties and concerns in many counties about 'industrial' cities, especially Manchester and Birmingham, encroaching into 'their' countryside resulting in enduring territoriality by the counties in resisting the housing growth of conurbations.[20] However, strategic mechanisms were in place *alongside* the Green Belt to accommodate housing targets, and the paper then analyses how the contestation between the Green Belt as a regional conceptualization among planners and campaigners and a more territorial, political issue has been exacerbated since the removal of statutory strategic planning in 2010.

The paper draws upon the analysis of key historical regional documents, especially the 1948 Study, *Conurbation,* and 73 interviews with planning stakeholders, planners, and campaigners to both explore historical regimes of strategic planning and how planning history shapes contemporary planning perspectives. Forty-four of these interviews were with planners based in the West Midlands, particularly from a group of retired strategic planners who have formed a distinctive professional network called *West Midlands Futures*. Consequently, the paper draws upon a rich longitudinal dataset of qualitative experiences regarding different regimes of strategic planning which, alongside the national interviews, permit broader theorization about strategic vision in planning. The data were analysed and coded according to references to distinctive historical timeframes and integrated with the historical sources.

This paper, first, explores the theoretical framework of historical institutionalism and regional spatial imaginaries before explaining the methods used. Then, it explores the strategic governance of the WMGB under three distinctive, historical phases in governance terms, which have been developed from data analysis, including its conceptual origin and evolution, strategic governance in the post-war era until the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) in 2010, and the Green Belt under the era of localism from 2010 to present.[21] It focuses on how these previous regimes of strategic planning shape and frame the views of contemporary planners which have been underexplored in the literature. The paper concludes by briefly reflecting upon the broader lessons for strategic planning internationally. All over, the paper defines strategic planning as the planning of issues, which cover a wider-than-local geography, such as housing, flooding, or waste, at a higher spatial scale than the local.[22] Strategic planning therefore is a *process* or a *way* of planning whereas regional planning often relates to a particular geography.[23] Whilst

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[17]Riddell, "Strategic Planning".
[18]Valler and Phelps, "Future"; Wannop and Cherry, "Regional Planning".
[19]Goode, "Spatial Solution".
[20]Hall et al., *Containment.*
[21]Allmendinger and Haughton, "Challenging Localism," 314.
[22]Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries"; Harrison et al., "Regional Planning".
[23]Harrison et al., "Regional Planning".

acknowledging Harrison et al.'s argument that 'Regional Planning is dead',[24] the paper contends that the Green Belt continues to be a vitally important coordinating, regionalizing concept among planners and campaigners.

Historical institutionalism, spatial imaginaries, and the Green Belt

Historical institutionalism and the Green Belt

The degree to which the past shapes or 'frames' the present and future have been the source of plenteous academic debate with Martin, for example, highlighting the importance of 'path dependency' in Economic Geography as explaining the future trajectory of economic productivity in a place.[25] Likewise, Sorensen has argued for its importance in planning history as its theoretical scope includes researching path dependence, institutions, incremental change processes, and critical junctures, whilst it offers potentiality as a research agenda in terms of comparative study, the often-non-linear, bifurcated nature of historical process and theorization of space.[26] Indeed, Inch and Shepherd have explored the central importance of 'conjunctures' in planning history.[27] More broadly, Mace, drawing upon new institutional theory and focusing on the Metropolitan Green Belt, argued that institutions are characterized by 'staying power', a lobby group in their favour and popular support, including 'normative' and 'rationalistic' support.[28] Mace argued that normative support for the Green Belt derives from it being popularly seen as representing one of England's most treasured institution, the countryside, whilst rationalistic support relates to more material and pragmatic considerations, especially the perceived protection that it gives to a person's property value.[29] This paper underlines how this conceptual framing of historical institutionalism usefully elucidates both emergence and endurance of the WMGB as a regional spatial imaginary as well as a concrete entity, notwithstanding the demise of *statutory* regional planning in 2010.

Regional spatial imaginaries and the Green Belt

In the presence of territorial contestation, regional spatial imaginaries often relate to concrete geographical areas but have a more fluid, conceptual meaning, such as the Thames Gateway.[30] Valler et al., in a study on the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, developed six evaluative criteria for successful spatial imaginaries – 'discursive hegemony, material influence, durability, cogent spatial imaginary, collective ownership and supporting spatial tools'.[31] Valler and Phelps have also illustrated the enduring impact of institutional memory and planning culture in Oxfordshire's Green Belt and the accompanying 'county towns' policy.[32]

This paper uses the concept of a regional spatial imaginary in relation to the Green Belt in the popular mind, policy terms, and by planners/campaigners.[33] First, it explores the Green Belt as a

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[24]Ibid., 1.
[25]Martin, "Regional Path Dependence", 1.
[26]Sorensen, "Historical Institutionalism".
[27]Inch and Shepherd, "Thinking Conjuncturally," 64.
[28]Mace, "Institution," 5.
[29]Ibid., 15.
[30]Valler and Phelps, "Future".
[31]Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries," 6.
[32]Valler and Phelps, "Future".
[33]Bradley, "Combined Authorities"; Mace, "Institution"; Colomb and Tomaney, "Territorial Politics".

regionalizing concept in normative terms among planners and *professional* campaigners, often retired planners. The concepts of the 'region' and 'strategic' are firmly embedded in the vision and spatial imagination of planners through their importance in planning tradition and training, as associated with Geddes and then widely applied by Abercrombie.[34] Moreover, this training in strategic thinking has an international aspect with the reach of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) with over 25,000 members of Abercrombie travelling widely in the Commonwealth and the presence of statutory regional planning in many nations.[35] The Green Belt, as the preeminent *regional* growth management policy in England, is a prime example of this strategic thinking as historically associated with Abercrombie and other planning 'heroes', most notably Howard and Unwin.[36] Second, since its inception, the Green Belt has been an inherently regional issue in policy terms because of its strategic *purpose* of 'preventing urban sprawl' and vast *spatial extent* as an 'urban shaping device'.[37] Indeed, most Green Belts geographically cover city regions beyond the rural–urban fringe and cross numerous local authority boundaries.[38] Third, the Green Belt can be conceptualized as a regionalizing concept in the popular mind with Bradley's work on campaigners in Greater Manchester drawing attention to the Green Belt's 'capacity' to 'engage political publics'.[39] He highlighted the broader, regionalizing vision campaigners often have of it as an entity or object which connects regions together, like the M25 or M60.

This paper therefore uses both historical institutionalism and regional spatial imaginaries to 'frame' the conceptualization of the Green Belt as a regionalizing concept.

Materials and methods

Research design and rationale

The research strategy was qualitatively led because the nuances of the politics of planning, the governance of institutions, like the Green Belt, and normative concepts, such as 'strategic', are arguably best explored through interviews.[40] Indeed, interviews enable the critical probing of the attitudes of planners and campaigners which are very important to decision-making in planning.[41] The strategy was structured spatially around the national and regional levels. With the Green Belt being a national policy designation, the study was initially framed by exploring the views of planners and planning stakeholders nationally through 29 interviews.[42] However, this paper largely draws on empirical data from the case study, the WMGB, to explore Green Belts in a post-industrial region with the wider Green Belt debate that is currently being London-centric.[43] There were 33 interviews with planners and 'professional' campaigners and 2 focus groups with young planners – practising planners with less than 10 years of professional experience – to explore the importance of planning history to an emerging generation of professional planners (see Table 1 for full list of

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[34]Harrison et al., "Regional Planning". Professional' campaigners were typically retired, professional planners who work on a range of campaigns for an organization, like CPRE.

[35]Harris, *Settlement Patterns*, 2.

[36]Amati and Yokohari, "London Green Belt," 312.

[37]Elson, *Green Belt,* 126; Ministry of Housing (MHCLG), "Planning," 40.

[38]Mace, "Institution," 5. For example, the Metropolitan Green Belt is three times the size of the Greater London Authority area and encompasses 66 LPAs. The WMGB covers 23 LPAs (Author's own calculation).

[39]Bradley, "Combined Authorities," 181.

[40]Squires and Heurkens, *Real Estate*.

[41]Peck and Tickell, "Manchester Men."

[42]The "national level" is defined in this research as planners and planning stakeholders working in a national organization, i.e. the RTPI, CPRE or the Home Builders Federation (HBF).

[43]Mace, "Institution".

Table 1. Participants geographical scale.

		Month of interview
National		
1.	National Conservative Politician	June 2019
2.	Senior Civil Servant in Ministry of Housing	November 2018
3.	Leading Private Sector Planner	February 2019
4.	Financial journalist	December 2018
5.	Campaigner for environmental charity	November 2018
6.	Planner from the RTPI	November 2018
7.	Leading national planner with private sector experience	November 2018
8.	Planner from the TCPA	December 2018
9.	Planner from the Home Builders Federation	March 2019
10.	Academic housing market economist	November 2018
11.	Planning academic	November 2018
12.	Planning academic	December 2018
13.	Labour Advisor on Housing Policy	November 2018
14.	Retired planner with private and public sector experience.	February 2019
15.	Planning academic with a range of planning experience	February 2019
16.	Strategic Planner with extensive experience, South East	February 2019
17.	Former Civil Servant Planner with extensive experience	May 2019
18.	Planner from a body representing property interests	December 2018
19.	Planner from a body representing property interests	December 2018
20.	Planner representing housebuilders	December 2018
21.	Private sector planning director	February 2019
22.	Researcher from the Centre for Cities	February 2019
23.	Planner from the Countryside Land and Business Association	April 2019
24.	Private Sector Planning Director (South West)	May 2019
25.	Public Sector Planner (West Midlands)	April 2019
26.	Principal planner at private sector built environment consultancy	February 2019
27.	West Midlands Planner with extensive voluntary, public and private sector experience	October 2018
28.	Former West Midlands Conservative MP	December 2018
Regional		
29.	Private Sector Young Planner (West Midlands) (1)	February 2019
30.	Planner from national housebuilder	March 2019
31.	Strategic Planner from public sector, West Midlands	May 2019
32.	Local politician from Staffordshire	March 2019
33.	Private Sector Young Planner (West Midlands) (2)	February 2019
34.	Private Sector Planning Director (West Midlands)	March 2019
35.	Private Sector Planning Director	March 2019
36.	Local councillor in Solihull giving individual views	November 2018
37.	Private Sector Young Planner (West Midlands) (3)	March 2019
38.	Retired Civil Servant; Planner at CPRE West Midlands (1)	March 2019
39.	Policy and Campaign Advisor	April 2019
40.	Planner (2) at CPRE West Midlands	April 2019
41.	Retired Planning Consultant; now Planner (3) at CPRE West Midlands	April 2019
42.	Former Planning Director at West Midlands local authority	January 2019
43.	Retired Strategic Planner, West Midlands Regional Assembly	November 2018
44.	Planner (1) from West Midlands Housebuilder	December 2018
45.	Planner (2) from West Midlands Housebuilder	December 2018
46.	Policy Planner (1) in a West Midlands local authority	November 2018
47.	Policy Planner (2) in a West Midlands local authority	November 2018
48.	Planner in a West Midlands local authority	May 2019
49.	Planner from public sector, West Midlands	April 2019
50.	Retired Regional Strategic Planner	April 2019
51.	Retired Structure Planner	April 2019
52.	Planning Director in West Midlands Local Authority	April 2019
53.	Policy Planner (3) in West Midlands local authority	June 2019
54.	Local Politician, Sutton Coldfield	March 2020
55.	Retired LPA Director (West Midlands)	April 2019
56.	Retired Planner, West Midlands LPA	May 2019
57.	Private Sector Planning Director (West Midlands)	December 2018
58.	Regional policy expert	May 2019
59.	Retired Structure Planner	May 2019

Table 1. Continued.

		Month of interview
60.	Retired Planner local government planner	May 2019
61.	Public Sector Planner (West Midlands)	May 2019
62.	Retired Civil Servant	June 2019
63.	Retired Longstanding West Midlands MP	June 2019
64.	Planning academic	January 2019
Other Regions		
65.	Retired private sector planner with public sector experience	March 2019
66.	Retired private sector planner with public sector experience	February 2019
67.	Retired Planner (South West)	April 2019
68.	Young planner from a private sector environmental planning consultancy	May 2019
69.	Private Sector Planning Director (South East) (1)	January 2019
70.	Private Sector Planning Director (Bristol) (1)	April 2019
71.	Private Sector Planning Director (Bristol) (2)	April 2019
72.	Young planner from a national housebuilder	December 2018
73.	National Private Sector Planning Director (3)	January 2019
74.	Private Sector Planning Director (South East) (2)	June 2019
75.	Local authority planner (South East)	June 2019

interviewees). The participants were selected from what Adams and Tiesdell identify as the 'triangle' of interests in the development process nationally and regionally – political, housebuilder, and conservationist – and broader 'interested' and influential groups, like the RTPI/think tanks/legal profession.[44] Participants whose planning practice related to the Green Belt, who had written on the Green Belt, or who were recommended by other interviewees ('snowballing') were selected.[45] Snowball sampling was particularly important in gaining access to the *West Midlands Futures Network* (see section on 'Case Study Characteristics'). All the interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts coded to analyse key historical periods in the literature. This was complemented by analysis of 'grey' material on the Green Belt and governance, particularly commentary by regional planning experts (i.e. Best[46]) and the broader planning press, especially *The Planner* and *Planning Resource*.

Case study approach taken and case selection

The region is arguably an appropriate spatial scale for a case study compared to focusing on a single Local Planning Authority (LPA) as it is a *regional* growth management policy.[47] Notwithstanding Peck's contention that an (over)focus on the 'particular' of place-based case studies has undermined generalizable theory – building in geography/planning and qualitative critiques of the generalizability of particular case studies, and arguably important *similarities* exist between regions and key 'lesson learning' can be drawn regarding strategic planning.[48]

The West Midlands shares characteristics with other post-industrial regions, like the North West around Greater Manchester and Yorkshire surrounding Leeds, with there being sharp disparities between areas with significant amounts of brownfield land and high levels of socio-economic deprivation, like the Black Country, contrasting with areas of high economic growth and housebuilding pressure on the WMGB, like the M42 Corridor/Meriden Gap[49] (Figure 1). Moreover, focusing on

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[44]Adams and Tiesdell, *Shaping Places*, 77.
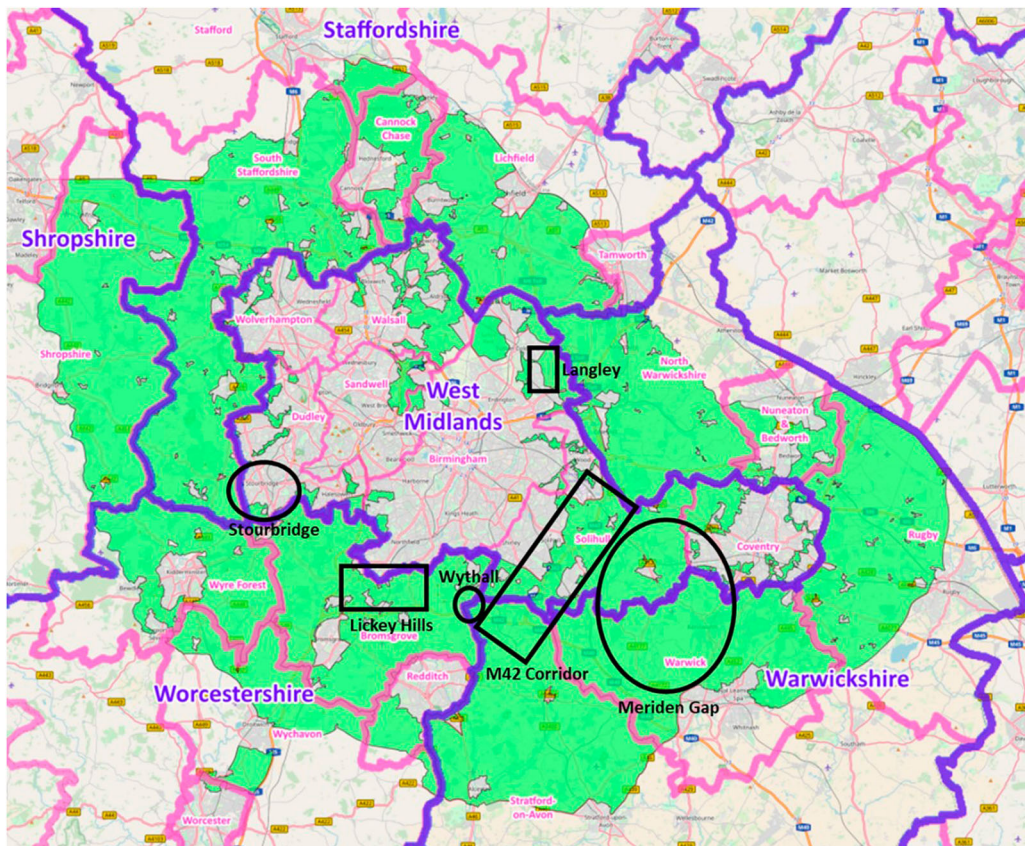[45]Peck and Tickell, "Manchester Men".
[46]I.e. Best, "Neighbours".
[47]Mace, "Institution"; Bradley, "Combined Authorities".
[48]Peck, "Cities", 15; Squires and Heurkens, *Real Estate*, 7.
[49]O'Farrell, *Governance*.

Figure 1. Key locations in the West Midlands (definitions of places were based on discussions with interviewees and GL Hearn's work).[140]

non-Metropolitan regional Green Belts is vital given the dominance of the Greater South East in debates about the Green Belt despite it having a distinctive housing market and economy.[50]

Case study characteristics: West Midlands Green Belt (WMGB)

The WMGB covers nearly 225,000 ha forming a continuous 'ring', ranging between 8 and 13-km wide around the conurbation which is home to nearly 2.9 million people[51] (Figure 1). The West Midlands was selected as a case study, most importantly, due to the challenges of managing the Green Belt without a strategic body with planning powers, like Greater Manchester and London. Moreover, the conurbation is tightly constrained by the WMGB resulting in significantly more incidences of Green Belt release for housing and campaigning compared to other regions since the abolition of RSSs in 2010.[52] This has resulted in widespread critical consideration among planners and campaigners regionally about the history of regional planning, its current state, and reflections on its revival.[53] Moreover, the West Midlands exemplifies the governance challenges that many

[50]Mace, "Institution"; Goode, "Spatial Solution".
[51]CPRE and Natural England, "Green Belts," 29.
[52]Goode, "Spatial Solution".
[53]Best, "Neighbours".

post-industrial regions face around the world of managing peripheral housing growth within the context of geographical, planning, or administrative restrictions, thereby having wider relevance to strategic planning.[54]

As the paper explores, historically there was statutory regional planning, including the RSS alongside voluntary strategic coordination, like the West Midlands Forum, in the 1970s/80s.[55] Indeed, retired regional planners have formed a distinctive, professional network called *West Midlands Futures*. This Network advocates for a return to strategic planning regionally given the current situation and forms a rich reservoir of knowledge and experience regarding strategic planning.[56] Interviewing planners from this network gives the paper a valuable longitudinal dimension and enables critical exploration of different 'regimes' of regional planning. Consequently, in the West Midlands, 79% of planners and campaigners interviewed were/are at either managerial level or director level, 30% were retired, and 60% were/are public sector planners. Analysis and coding of this qualitative material alongside analysis of historical documents provides the empirical basis of this paper.

The origin and evolution of the West Midlands Green Belt

The origins of the WMGB, like the national Green Belt policy, can be located conceptually in the Industrial Revolution, the popular romanticization of the countryside, and the rapid growth of greenfield housing development in the inter-war period. In many ways, the Industrial Revolution was particularly intense in the West Midlands both in terms of the 'heavy' nature of its industry, like iron foundries and coal mining, and the rapidity of urban encroachment into the surrounding countryside. For example, between 1801 and 1911, London experienced 550% population growth, Manchester 852%, and Birmingham 1084%.[57] Indeed, a visitor to Birmingham in 1902 observed that it consisted of:

> Continuous roads and houses from Aston on the east to Wolverhampton in the west … it is quite as much entitled to a single name as is Greater London.[58]

This helped to fashion the enduring feature of the West Midlands being a contiguous, well-defined conurbation surrounded by, and juxtaposed against, the well-known, rural counties of 'leafy' Warwickshire and 'fruitful' Worcestershire.[59] For example, the West Midland Group Study, *Conurbation*, which was very influential in the creation of the WMGB,[60] had striking images of the industrial nature of the Black Country, such as a railway journey from Birmingham to Wolverhampton, and photos of poor living conditions (Figures 2–4)[61]:

In strong but enduring language, it described the Industrial Revolution in such terms:

> *Rural communities … were broken up and flung into the mould of industrial society … [it] pitted the countryside with mines … the widespread industrial sprawl … survives in the Black Country today … one of the chief iron-producing centres in Britain … Birmingham … the foremost centre of light*

[54]Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries".
[55]Roberts et al., *Metropolitan Planning*, 99.
[56]Goode, "Spatial Solution".
[57]Hall et al., *Containment*, 78.
[58]Ibid., 287.
[59]Cherry, *Town Planning*, 152.
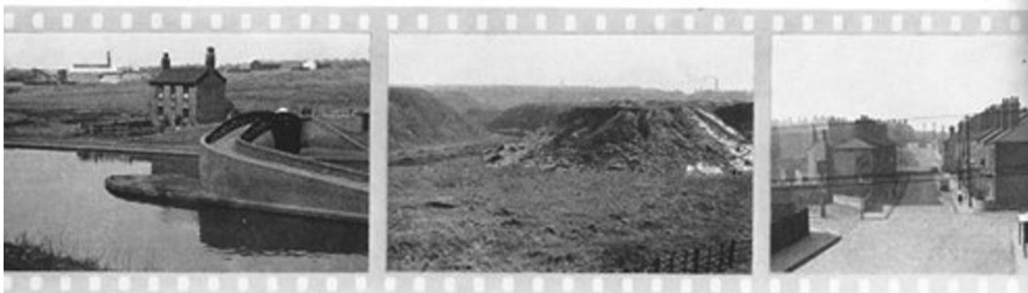[60]Wannop and Cherry, "Regional Planning," 52.
[61]West Midlands Group, *Conurbation*.

Figure 2. Part of the journey from New Street to Wolverhampton.[141]

Figure 3. A picture of poor-quality housing in Nechells.[142]

> engineering … the present design [of the West Midlands] is disorderly … seemliness and even beauty … should be imposed upon our inheritance of the past.[62]

However, it was arguably the rapid, peripheral housing growth into the countryside in the inter-war period that catalysed popular desires for urban containment and brought about conditions necessary for the Green Belt's introduction as an institution.[63] Again, these changes were particularly profound in the West Midlands with the buoyant growth of factories in the rural–urban fringe due to the rise of 'new' industries, like General Electric and car-making, as well as the growing threat of aerial bombardment. Indeed, in Birmingham, over 113,000 new houses were built during the inter-war years.[64] The current Birmingham Development Plan proposes a housing target of 150,000 homes over the next 20 years, but much of this is high-rise as the city is currently being densified with 81% of new houses built being apartments in 2018 but, in the 19 inter-war years, 90% of new council-built homes were on greenfield land.[65] Given that a similar proportion of homes were built by the private sector on greenfield land, and this marked an unprecedented outward expansion of the city into the countryside.[66] In response to this, Birmingham City Council was the only local authority outside of the South East to purchase land for a Green Belt, primarily the Lickey Hills from the Cadbury Family in 1923. However, ribbon development continued beyond this Green
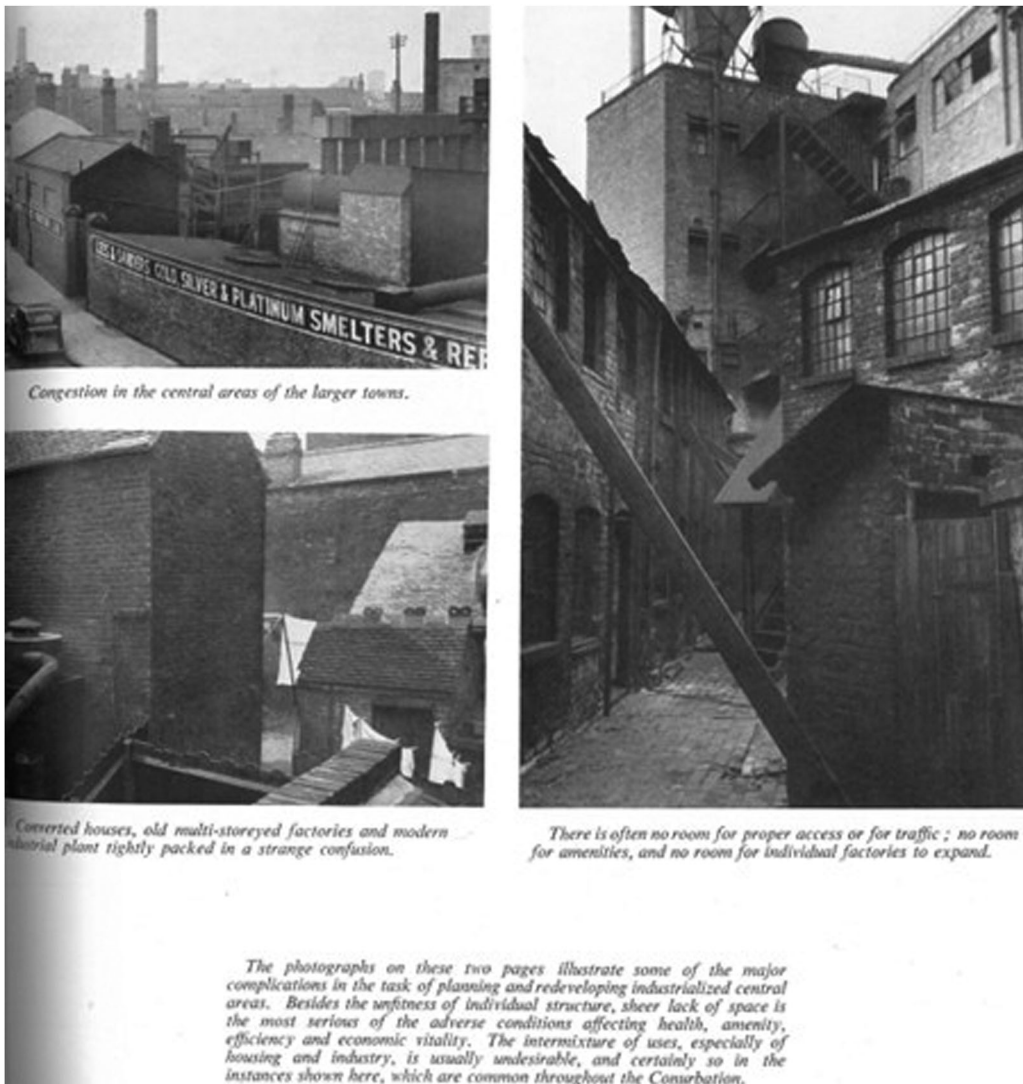
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[62]Ibid., 24.
[63]Amati and Yokohari, "London Green Belt".
[64]Hall et al., *Containment*, 84; West Midlands Group, *Conurbation*, 38.
[65]Best, "Lost Decade," 3; Hall et al., *Containment*, 84; Birmingham City Council, "Birmingham Plan," 6.
[66]Hall et al., *Containment*, 84.

Congestion in the central areas of the larger towns.

Converted houses, old multi-storeyed factories and modern industrial plant tightly packed in a strange confusion.

There is often no room for proper access or for traffic ; no room for amenities, and no room for individual factories to expand.

The photographs on these two pages illustrate some of the major complications in the task of planning and redeveloping industrialized central areas. Besides the unfitness of individual structure, sheer lack of space is the most serious of the adverse conditions affecting health, amenity, efficiency and economic vitality. The intermixture of uses, especially of housing and industry, is usually undesirable, and certainly so in the instances shown here, which are common throughout the Conurbation.

Figure 4. Pictures of the 'congestion' of factories and housing in the conurbation.[143]

Belt at Barnt Green and along the A38 as *Conurbation* underlined.[67] Indeed, *Conurbation* argued that the lack of a comprehensive Green Belt around the West Midlands meant that a much wider, regional 'Green Setting' was needed.[68] This was a critical juncture in creating popular demand for the Green Belt as an institutional strategic growth management policy to contain the West Midlands conurbation as opposed to the unplanned pattern of development by the free market.[69] Among plenteous examples of highly charged but enduring language, *Conurbation* referred to the:

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[67]West Midlands Group, *Conurbation*, 210.
[68]Ibid., 203.
[69]Prior and Raemaekers, "Post-Fordist Landscape".

Serious danger of sprawling development … it renders a large area of land 'untidy' … it robs urban areas of cohesion.[70]

It also featured aerial photos which illustrated and criticized inter-war sprawl and other photos of idyllic countryside in the future WMGB (Figures 5–8).

The Industrial Revolution did not feature so prominently in the historical conceptual frame of reference of contemporary planners as the ribbon development of the inter-war period. Arguably, this reflects the centrality of the introduction of the statutory planning system in the 1947 Planning Act in the frame of reference and professional identity of planners alongside the importance of the conditions in the inter-war period that brought this about.[71] For example:

> *There was a worry* [in the inter-war period] *that the conurbation would spread so much that Coventry would actually become part of the conurbation. So, I think if you just think about it* [the Green Belt] *in terms of the overall aim to prevent the conurbation sprawl, it has been an effective tool for the region.* (Young Planner from Focus Group I)

> *I think it has been very successful … Green Belt was set up after the War in order to check the urban sprawl and the rest of it. You will see quite a lot of ribbon development that has happened over the pre-war period and the purpose of the Green Belt was actually to get some sort of control in that. I think it's been successful in that aim and has widespread support.* (Local councillor, Solihull (individual views))

These quotes therefore underscore how planning history and critical junctures play a central role in framing how planners and planning stakeholders perceive and conceptualize policy. Although the word 'myth' can be heavily critiqued, this nonetheless reflects Amati and Yokohari's point about how the Green Belt draws upon 'myths about the past to justify the present'.[72]

The Containment of the conurbation: the West Midlands Green Belt in the post-war era (1945–2010)

This section charts the embedding of the WMGB as an institutional, territorial conflict between the conurbation and surrounding counties over the WMGB in relation to meeting Birmingham's housing need and how these conflicts were resolved through strategic mechanisms, like new towns and urban regeneration.

The introduction of the WMGB

The *popular conditions* necessary for the Green Belt's development as an institution were arguably fashioned by the Industrial Revolution and inter-war years.[73] However, World War II created the *critical juncture* necessary for the post-War Labour Government to intervene in private property rights in the 1947 Planning Act, whereas inter-war Conservative-led governments had been reluctant to do so.[74] Although outline Green Belt sketches produced by local authorities had to be approved by the Ministry of Housing as it is a national planning policy, this Act allowed local authorities to legally designate land as 'Green Belt'.[75] Having passed this critical juncture, the policy

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[70]West Midlands Group, *Conurbation*, 64.
[71]Amati and Yokohari, "London Green Belt".
[72]Ibid., 312.
[73]Elson, *Green Belt*.
[74]Prior and Raemaekers, "Post-Fordist Landscape".
[75]Elson, *Green Belt*, 19.

The South-west Birmingham Green Belt at the point where it is crossed by the main road to Bristol, which can be seen in the middle distance.

Hopwood Dingle, Forhill, in the South-west Birmingham Green Belt.
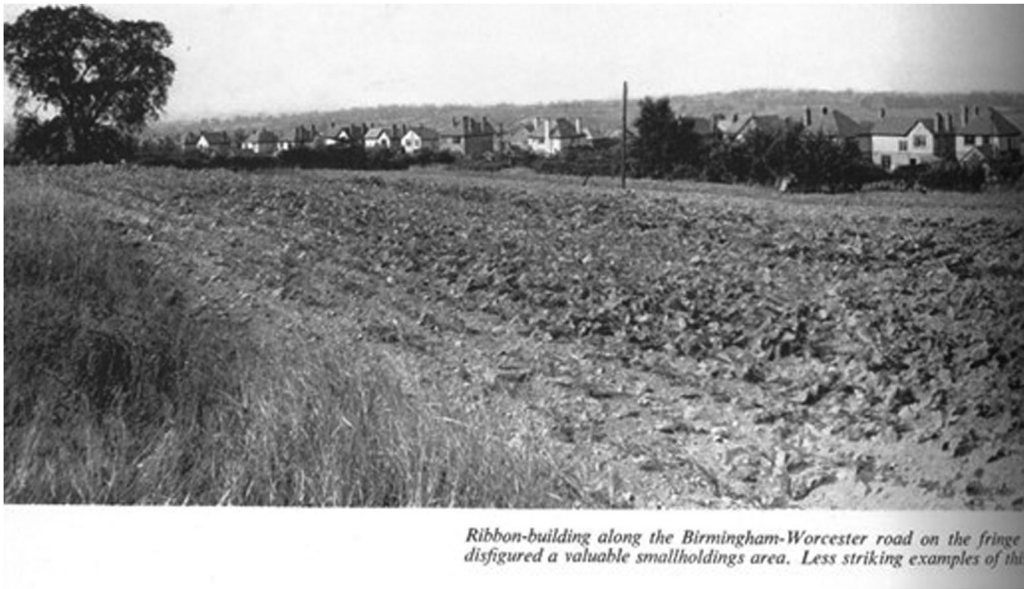

Figure 5. Pictures of the future WMGB.[144]

Figure 6. Aerial photos of housing development on the edge of Wolverhampton.[145]

Figure 7. Photo of ribbon development.[146]

Ribbon-building along the Birmingham-Worcester road on the fringe disfigured a valuable smallholdings area. Less striking examples of this

Figure 8. Photo of sprawl on the A38 and text critiquing it for 'disfiguring' valuable farmland.[147]

arguably then acquired a 'life of its own' in terms of popular support and longevity.[76] In a broader perspective, Prior and Raemaekers have helpfully conceptualized the Green Belt as the product of the post-war 'command-and-control', Fordist economy.[77]

There were initial problems with designating Green Belt in non-Metropolitan areas, because whilst the Government accepted Abercrombie Plan's for the Metropolitan Green Belt in 1946, the WMGB was not tentatively agreed by the Government until 1955 and formally approved until 1976.[78] However, the situation was equally pressing in the West Midlands with the scale of post-war redevelopment and buoyancy of its economy, so the West Midlands Group, mainly business leaders and partly funded by the Cadbury Family, took the initiative of publishing a spatial blueprint for the region in the form of *Conurbation* in 1948.[79] This was a crucial juncture in the development of the WMGB as an institution for both articulating a strong regional vision and mapping the potential spatial extent of a 'Green Setting' (Figure 9).[80]

Conurbation also partly explains why the WMGB was drawn tightly around the conurbation and formed a continuous 'belt' compared to the more incremental, 'moth eaten' North West and West Riding Green Belts.[81] Moreover, the Conservative Government, which agreed the WMGB in the 1950s, was more favourably disposed towards designating tightly drawn Green Belts than the 1960s Labour Government. For example, a retired planner interviewed from Avon County Council highlighted 'pink areas' in an original Avon Green Belt (AGB) map which were 'safeguarded for future use', but he was unsure when the AGB was initially approved. The Diaries of Richard Crossman MP, one of Wilson's Housing Ministers, show that the ABG
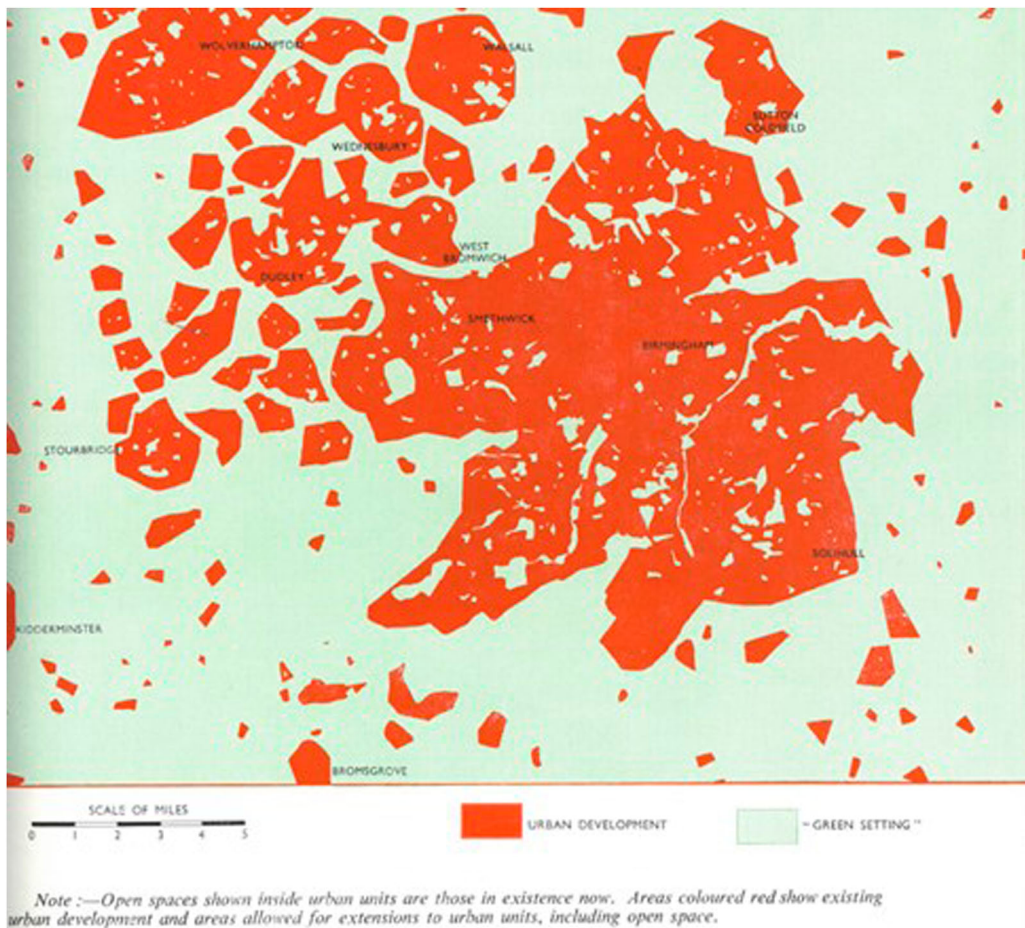
[76]Mace, "Institution," 5.
[77]Prior and Raemaekers, "Post-Fordist Landscape," 581.
[78]Hall et al., *Containment*, 584.
[79]West Midlands Group, *Conurbation*, 39.
[80]Ibid., 199.
[81]Elson, *Green Belt*, 44.

Figure 9. *Conurbation's* vision for the Green Setting.[148]

was approved in February 1965, 10 years after the WMGB, with the entry describing it as 'the first really controversial decision I have taken'.[82] Again, this underlines that the historical context in which institutions develop are vitally important to shaping their subsequent trajectory and flexibility.[83] The historical specificity of when the WMGB was introduced was referred extensively by planners, again underlining planning history as a key conceptual frame of reference to understand current policy. For example:

> When the Green Belt was first drawn up, it was back at a time when the conurbation was expanding and there was a lot of concern about what that would mean for the kind of countryside around the conurbation. But it was also tied in with the policy on the regional policy at the time, which was to disperse economic activity. So, when you look back to the 50s and 60s, the West Midlands conurbation was a significantly expanding area. The average earnings were actually above the national average, largely because of car manufacturing and engineering, and the result was that it was felt that continued expansion of Birmingham shouldn't be allowed on the same terms. (Planner (2), CPRE West Midlands)

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[82]Crossman, *Diaries*, 65.
[83]Sorensen, "*Historical Institutionalism*".

The WMGB in the fordist economy (1945–1979)

Although the post-war Labour Government introduced the 'triptych' of post-war planning – the Green Belt, regional policy and new towns – the county system of local government in England largely remained.[84] Conflicts over the WMGB quickly emerged regarding housing in the 1950s with the Labour controlled Birmingham City Council struggling to house its residents following the comprehensive post-war housing clearance programme and the continued buoyancy of its post-war economy centred on the automotive industry.[85] Nonetheless, there was very little land within its administrative boundary in the WMGB which could be used for peripherical housing growth; no first wave new towns were designated in the West Midlands and Birmingham wanted any overspill population to be near to the city due to the population's familial links and requirements of its labour market.[86] Consequently, in 1958, Birmingham applied to the Government to build an overspill satellite settlement on its urban edge, just outside its administrative boundary in the WMGB on the boundary between Worcestershire and Warwickshire.[87] The subsequent Wythall Inquiry, in which there was widespread popular opposition to the proposed settlement, especially from Worcestershire and Warwickshire, was a key test in the infancy of both the WMGB and wider Green Belt as institution. The refusal of the application by the Minister thereby affirmed the strength of the policy. Territorial conflict over the WMGB and wider Green Belt was highlighted by contemporary commentators as the planning academic Peter Self reflected on the Inquiry:

> The Government warmly recommended the implementation of restrictive Green Belts but held aloof from the complex problems of urban dispersal which must be solved if Green Belts are workable.[88]

However, in general terms, strategic mechanisms were in place to meet the housing requirements *alongside* the Green Belt. First, in recognition of the conurbation's housing pressures, new towns were designated at Dawley (Telford) 1963 and Redditch in 1964, whilst towns such as Droitwich, Tamworth, and Daventry agreed to accommodate some of Birmingham's housing need. Second, Richard Crossman approved Birmingham's application for an overspill estate at Chelmsley Wood, Warwickshire, for 52,000 people in 1964, although this was very controversial as the land incorporated part of the ancient Forest of Arden and was administratively transferred from Warwickshire to Birmingham.[89] Third, there were both 'hard' and 'soft' spaces of regional governance to manage housing need including Government-commissioned growth studies.[90] The most famous and ambitious was the *South East Study* (1964) which allocated broad locations of growth and restraint.[91] However, in the West Midlands, there were several studies steered by local authorities including the *West Midlands Study* (1965), *West Midlands: Patterns of Growth* (1967), *Coventry – Solihull – Warwickshire Sub-Regional Planning Study* (1971), and *A Developing Strategy for the West Midlands* (1971).[92] There were also standing conferences of West Midlands planning authorities from the 1960s onwards, which were vital in developing collaborative relationships and coordinating structure planning.[93] Fourth, between 1974 and 1986, the West Midlands County

[84]Hall et al., *Containment*; Mace, "Institution," 5.
[85]Cherry, *Town Planning*.
[86]Hall et al., *Containment*.
[87]Cherry, *Town Planning*, 152.
[88]Self, "Introduction," XX.
[89]Cherry, *Town Planning*, 152.
[90]Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries," 6.
[91]Wannop and Cherry, "Regional Planning," 57.
[92]Ibid., 57–8.
[93]'Structure plans' were overarching plans produced by the counties to which local plans had to accord – Ibid., 39.

Council was in existence which provided a strategic planning mechanism for the urban area of the region.[94] Planners underlined these strategic governance mechanisms as vital in the success of the WMGB through strategically orchestrating and directing housing growth in contrast to the current lack of strategic planning:

> For most of its existence [the Green Belt], there were no satisfactorily strategic mechanisms in place so **it's only since 2010 there has been no strategic planning mechanism … if there is a need to recon-sider Green Belt boundaries, it must happen at the level of the entire Green Belt, whether it is London or the West Midlands**. (Planner working at the RTPI)

> If you look back, Birmingham's overspill has always been met by its neighbours through the Regional Spatial Strategy and its predecessors. All had to accept that housing overspill and now we are in a situation where that can't g – o anywhere because it was somebody's idea to remove that layer of planning so it's quite difficult to resolve. (Policy Planner, West Midlands Council)

> So we have Redditch, Tamworth and Telford – none of those would be the size they are now were they not deliberately targeted as overspill from Birmingham. Maybe if you think of that happening 50 years ago, it's a case of do we need that sort of enlightenment now? (Leading West Midlands Planner)

A planner from the Home Builders Federation referred to the *South East Study* as a frame of reference juxtaposed to the current lack of strategic planning in the West Midlands:

> In an old, old Plan [South East Study] … They split the hinterland of London into areas and had … massive growth areas … because we knew that London was going to continue to grow economically and therefore we wanted to provide houses for people who had to move out because we were con-strained [with the Green Belt]. There is [now] no regional planning … a strategic, (blanket) policy, like Green Belt, should surely be sorted out at a strategic level and yet we don't have a strategic level of planning with which to do it. So, it is left to people, like Birmingham City, to talk to Solihull, Broms-grove and all the other surrounding authorities saying – 'Would you like to take some of our housing needs?' rather than saying – 'We have got a 60,000 figure to distribute, you are going to take 10,000 in a coherent sub-national plan.'

Again, this shows how historical precedents of regional planning are very important in how plan-ners 'frame' the current discussions around the lack of strategic planning.

The WMGB and primacy of urban regeneration (1979–2010)

The 1970s were a key era of transition for the West Midlands with the OPEC Oil Crisis contributing to the sudden decline of the motor industry which had tremendous economic and social ramifica-tions.[95] Coupled with growing awareness of the urban 'problem', this led to a shift in emphasis both in policy and the preeminent regional spatial imaginary to urban regeneration and brownfield first supported by a strong Green Belt.[96] Throughout the period, there was a strong political commit-ment nationally to urban regeneration from Thatcher's Development Corporations to New Labour's Urban Renaissance and a significant amount of public money was available for remediat-ing brownfield land for housing. Although the release of land in the Green Belt for economic devel-opment was limited, except for along the M42 corridor for business parks following the approval of the National Exhibition Centre in 1972, this period was crucial in the further embedding of the Green Belt as an institution. It was widely seen as the vital bulwark in supporting national and

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[94]Ibid., 52.
[95]O'Farrell, *Governance.*
[96]Ibid., 13.

regional government priorities of sustainable development and brownfield first for housing. It featured prominently in the views of planners and planning stakeholders who, firstly, underlined the importance of public investment in brownfield remediation and the quality of urban renewal in upholding a strong Green Belt. Second, the potentiality of brownfield land in this period, both in terms of its location and quantity, was highlighted and juxtaposed to the diminishing supplies of brownfield land currently. For example:

> In the West Midlands, previously there was the policy called Urban Renaissance and it was directed towards making sure we direct development first towards the urban areas. I think that has been successful. In the end, of course, there is a limit to how far you can keep doing that urban renaissance because you run out of land [but] it's been very worthwhile … the West Midlands is a very diverse region … you need a firm commitment to protect the Green Belt and ensure that, before you allow greenfields and Green Belt to go, you have tackled as many brownfields as you can. (Local councillor, Solihull (individual views))

> The land price is high because Green Belt is usually very attractive greenspace and it's at a premium … some of the most expensive land … so I think you continue to need Green Belt protection but **we probably need more resources to make it possible to regenerate the brownfield sites**. (Former West Midlands Conservative MP)

> During the nineties and early noughties, a lot of brownfield was regenerated. So, all the stuff that is readily doable, for the most part, has been done … brownfield isn't always situated in the most sustainable location. If you look in Birmingham, there is an awful lot in Digbeth that has been done and the fringes but that is very high density or flats essentially. And, whilst that suits certain people and a certain demographic, it is not going to suit everybody … And I think it is naïve to say that urban living is the solution and over-densification. (Planning Director, Housebuilder, West Midlands)

Moreover, notwithstanding the Thatcher Government's hostility towards planning resulted in the lack of regional growth studies, strategic planning mechanisms were still in place, such as Regional Planning Guidance, issued by the Department of the Environment, and the standing conferences of planning authorities continued to play a key role in regional cooperation.[97] Moreover, regional planning briefly had a statutory underpinning during New Labour with Regional Assemblies and Development Agencies introduced in 1998 and RSSs, which covered the statistically defined regions, was presented in 2004.[98] Again, both these soft and hard spaces of strategic planning were vital in strategically coordinating housebuilding into the conurbation or beyond the Green Belt to self-sufficient 'county towns' with a key objective of the West Midlands RSS, like other post-industrial regions, being to:

> Retain the Green Belt … but allow an adjustment of boundaries where this is necessary to support urban regeneration.[99]

Whilst planners were sometimes sceptical about the scope and scale of RSSs, this period of strategic planning was again juxtaposed to the current state of planning. For example:

> The Green Belt actually helped to determine that the new Regional Planning Guidance and Regional Spatial Strategy should have a focus on urban regeneration as a priority and that the Green Belt was a means of stopping investment taking place outside and round the boundaries. (Planner (2), CPRE West Midlands)

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[97]Wannop and Cherry, "Regional Planning," 52.
[98]Mace, "Institution," 12.
[99]Government Office, *West Midlands*, 14.

> The West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy was very credible. And as I say and would keep saying, it is madness that we haven't got a regional plan. (Retired LPA Director, West Midlands)

> Local authorities don't come together anymore … [like] the West Midlands Forum and this is before Regional Assemblies. The Forum actually came out of quite an early form of regional planning in the late 60s, early 70s and it was a non-statutory body, so it was a voluntary grouping, but they felt this was a way of mutually discussing the region's planning issues. (Retired Chief Structure Planner, West Midlands)

The RSSs as the most recent form of (statutory) strategic planning in England were therefore another crucial frame of reference for planners as regularly contrasted with the current lack of strategic planning and prompting deep soul searching as to why they were abolished and what key lessons can be learnt.

The Green Belt in the era of localism (2010–present)

The election of the Conservative-led Government in 2010 in Britain can therefore be conceptualized as a critical juncture in the trajectory of strategic planning.[100] There was the conjunction of the abolition of statutory strategic planning (RSSs) and failure to develop alternative forms of governance, like reviving structure planning, with the deepening housing affordability problem. Moreover, there are diminishing supplies of brownfield land in many urban areas, especially the West Midlands, an austerity programme which weakened the capacity of many Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and continuous planning reform and deregulation by the central government. Whilst questions can be raised about the quality of urban renewal and overspill development since WW2, this era can be viewed as a critical juncture in that there has nominally been a strong central Government Green Belt policy but no strategic mechanism to meet housing need. Indeed, the pro-growth National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), introduced in 2012, placed a weak 'Duty to Cooperate (DtC)' on local planning authorities (LPAs) in strategic matters like the Green Belt and housing numbers.[101] However, successive Conservative Governments have increasingly pursued a 'muscular' neoliberal approach to localism through putting pressure on councils to meet housing targets, especially for the requirement to maintain a 5-year supply of land deliverable for development (5YHLS).[102] This requirement of LPAs to meet their *own* housing 'need' and the unmet need of neighbours without a strategic planning framework has led many LPAs to release land from the Green Belt.[103] In many ways, it shows how the ability to plan strategically is very limited in an era of localism. It has brought local and national tiers of planning much closer together leaving 'fuzzy' spaces in terms of strategic governance with Boddy and Hickman exploring how the Planning Inspectorate, the quasi-judicial body charged with implementing national Government policy, is struggling to fill the governance 'gap' or strategic power 'vacuum'.[104]

However, reflecting its historic challenges regarding strategic planning, these issues have been particularly compounded and intense in the West Midlands by the lack of strategic governance. For example, a Combined Authority was not established in the region (WMCA) until 2016 compared to 2010 in Greater Manchester, whilst WMCA lacks strategic planning powers in contrast to

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[100]Allmendinger and Haughton, "Post-Political".
[101]McGuinness and Mawson, "Localism"; MHCLG, "National Policy," 10.
[102]Tait and Inch, "Localism in Place," 187; Inch and Shepherd, "Thinking Conjuncturally," 64.
[103]Allmendinger and Haughton, "Challenging Localism," 314.
[104]Boddy and Hickman, "New Political Governance," 25.

the Greater Manchester or West of England Combined Authorities.[105] This has brought the tightness of the WMGB around Birmingham into sharp relief again as the city has a fast-growing and diverse population with growth of 150–200,000 people by 2031 from 2016 predicted in the Birmingham Development Plan (BDP) and a consequent need for 89,000 new homes.[106] However, Birmingham City Council (BCC) only claims to have 'room' on brownfield land for 39,000 homes, so it released land for 6000 homes in the WMGB at Langley.[107] Nonetheless, these governance issues are compounded because BCC still claims to have a shortfall of 38,000 homes to be met by the neighbouring authorities, many of which are also constrained by the WMGB, like Solihull and Bromsgrove.[108]

This is producing a very complicated situation and 'soft' spaces of governance have emerged, whereby some LPAs around Birmingham are negotiating 'deals' on meeting its unmet housing need, so that, for example, North Warwickshire agreed to take nearly 3800 extra houses whilst Solihull agreed to take 2000 homes.[109] Moreover, as being symptomatic of the wider privatization of the planning system,[110] the private sector is taking an increasing role in strategic planning; first, in conducting Green Belt reviews for local authorities whereby parcels of land are 'ranked' against its five purposes.[111] Second, in the absence of public sector-led growth studies due to the demise of statutory strategic planning, the private sector has been commissioned to conduct strategic housing studies which have recommended locations in the Green Belt for housing development, such as the BCC commissioned *Strategic Housing Needs Study* (2014) by Peter Brett Associates.[112] Likewise, the *Greater Birmingham Housing Market Area Growth Study* (2018), undertaken by the real estate consultancy G L Hearn, was jointly commissioned by the local authorities in the Birmingham Housing Market Area and funded by the legacy funds of the Regional Assembly.[113] Third, the development industry is playing a 'softer' role in seeking to influence regional political debate to revive strategic planning, especially advocating for WMCA to take on statutory planning powers, alongside urging the Planning Inspectorate to take a stronger role in making local authorities work together.[114]

Indeed, notwithstanding often profound differences in perspective on how far land needs to be released from the WMGB to meet Birmingham's housing need, the lack of strategic planning has united professional campaigners and planners in calling for a strategic approach towards the WMGB. Again, this underlines the enduring importance of strategic vision in planning and, in particular, of the Green Belt as a regional growth management policy. Campaigners argued that the current, locally-led approach to planning is undermining the Green Belt's temporal permanence, which is nominally still enshrined in the Government policy, and its strategic spatial integrity.[115]

[105]A Combined Authority is a voluntary agreement of local councils in a region to work together and be responsible for delegated functions from central Government – Colomb and Tomaney, "Territorial Politics," 1.
[106]BCC, "Birmingham Plan," 6.
[107]Brown, "Birmingham Green Belt".
[108]Best, "Neighbours".
[109]Ibid., 2.
[110]Parker et al., "Public-Private Entanglements".
[111]Preventing 'the unrestricted sprawl of large urban areas' has been referenced as a purpose. The other purposes are: 'To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another; assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land' – MHCLG, "National Policy," 40.
[112]Brett, "Needs Study".
[113]Hearn, "Growth Study," 4.
[114]Best, "Neighbours," 2.
[115]The NPPF explains that the Green Belt's core purpose is preventing 'urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open'. MHCLG, "National Policy," 40.

Indeed, the requirement to review local plans for every 5 years and requirements of the 5YHLS,[116] fuelled campaigners' concerns about the Green Belt release becoming the 'norm' and driven by short-termism. For example,

> The original policy has become seriously undermined … really government policy now, is driving a coach and horses through the definition of what are exceptional circumstances … It is not supposed to be ossified and to last forever, which is not to say you should go to the other extreme and feel you can change it at the drop of a hat, any time you choose. There is a middle way which says, 'Let's have a strong Green Belt policy but be prepared to review the extent of the Green Belt every, I don't like to put a figure on it, but say every thirty years'. But we are so far away from that now. (Planner (3) from CPRE)

> There should be a **whole strategic** review of it [the WMGB] and not by these consultants employed by individual councils to review it and rank bits or parcels of land. They never consult the public and just bung it on a website! If you are going to have a strategic review … it needs to be a really major public participation exercise and consultants wouldn't like that because they are getting away with it. (Planner (1) from CPRE)

As outlined above, planners in the development industry also argued that strategic planning needs to be revived in the West Midlands to address the currently fragmented, politicized approach to addressing housing need:

> Larger than local planning in the West Midlands is atrocious … there is a shortage in Birmingham of 38,000 homes and I see absolutely no evidence whatsoever of them [LPAs] resolving the problem … it is very political and, when you had the regional agencies (RSSs), **the councils would say 'Well, you know, the figure has been imposed on us' and that is why they were dissolved** … But having now got a bottom-up system, we find that it is very politically uncomfortable for the local councillors … you are now in a situation of trying to deal with issues that are bigger than local, **but there is not necessarily any organisation to do it** … reviewing Green Belt is difficult because you are starting to see reviews come through but, again, **they are doing it in a very bitty, piecemeal way so it might be just one local authority looking at the Green Belt that is in their administrative area and, again, the whole thing is very political. So, there should be an overview of Green Belt and that might need to be done on a national scale or a regionalist scale, it can't necessarily be done locally**. (Planner from the house-building industry)

The Green Belt can therefore be conceptualized as a regionalizing, coordinating concept by planners and professional campaigners, thereby underscoring the broader, enduring importance of strategic vision in planning. This also underscores the significance of critical junctures and conjunction in planning history, especially the demise of RSSs in 2010, in shaping and framing contemporary planning practice.

Key lessons for strategic planning

The paper now briefly reflects on the broader lessons regarding strategic planning which can be learnt from the planning history of the West Midlands. This debate is critically important with the restructuring of municipal governance in many cities internationally, such as Paris, and the repeatedly delayed Devolution White Paper in England.[117] First, there are the political challenges of 'hard' spaces of strategic planning, like the RSS, in terms of democratic legitimacy and the potential rigidity of a fixed spatial blueprint, such as Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* or *Conurbation*,

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[116]Ibid., 40.
[117]Riddell, "Strategic Planning".

at a time of tremendous economic and social change.[118] However, the profound governance challenges since 2010, especially in the West Midlands, also demonstrate the complexity of, and limitations to, 'softer', voluntaristic, or more 'fuzzy' forms of governance.[119] Based upon the findings of this paper about the limitations to both 'hard' and 'soft' spaces of strategic planning, there is arguably more of a role for 'intermediate', fluid spaces of strategic planning moving forwards learning from networks like the West Midlands Forum and Standing Conferences. The standing Conferences brought planning officers together to discuss key strategic issues. As was done before Structure Planning was abolished in 2004, national government could play a role in setting the overall structure and process of mandating key actors to work together strategically with overall Regional Planning Guidance, but there could be less prescription as to *modes* of governance or the amount of detail which strategic plans cover. This would learn from the key lesson of RSSs being critiqued as too detailed and 'unwieldy'.[120] This seems to be the direction of travel of practitioner debate in England with the RTPI advocating for strategic Green Growth Boards to bring together key actors, whilst the County Councils Network has argued for Integrated Strategic Frameworks (non-statutory, sub-regional strategic plans) and Strategic Planning Advisory Boards (to facilitate ongoing strategic discussions among key sub-regional actors).[121] Indeed, after WWII, county councils played a crucial role in strategic planning in England through structure planning which allocated strategic allocations for housing and drew Green Belt boundaries, but, since 2004, they have not been playing a significant role in strategic planning. The Devolution White Paper is reportedly considering the unitarization of district councils into county councils, which could lead to a return to a measure of strategic planning for the Green Belt in England.[122]

Reviving 'intermediate' spaces of governance also addresses Harrison et al.'s central challenge of how planning for 'regional *futures*' can be revived without the resurrection of statutory or formal 'Regional Planning'.[123] Intermediate spaces of governance have wider potential, given the challenges of strategic planning in many countries, especially the reluctance of multi-scalar actors to cooperate and complex constellation of actors involved.[124] Second, this paper has underlined the importance of the *process* of planning because public confidence is vital to the effective functioning of strategic planning.[125] Finally, most retired planners in the West Midlands highlighted the importance of professional *forums* and *networks* in which controversial issues, like housing and Green Belt issues, can be discussed and seen *by the public* to be discussed, such as Planning Committees or Regional Assemblies.[126]

Discussion and conclusion: historical institutionalism, the Green Belt and strategic vision

There has been much discussion in the literature about the increasingly fragmented, technocratic, and 'tick-box' nature of planning systems in many countries, especially the English planning system which has experienced austerity, growing privatization, and continuous reforms by the central

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[118]Harrison et al., "Regional Planning".
[119]Boddy and Hickman, "New Political Governance", 25.
[120]Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries"; Allmendinger and Haughton, "Post-Political," 89.
[121]Harris, "World"; Riddell, "Strategic Planning".
[122]Riddell, "Strategic Planning".
[123]Harrison et al., "Regional Planning," 1.
[124]Dühr, "Petites Europes," 560.
[125]Parker et al., "Public-Private Entanglements".
[126]Goode, "Spatial Solution".

government.[127] It has been argued that this has led to many planners, especially those acculturated in the era of 'growth dependent planning' since the 1980s, lacking the necessary time and space for critical reflection upon how effectively the system is operating and how it could be improved.[128] This paper does not dispute these longer-term changes in planning, but it has underlined the enduring importance of planning history and critical junctures in the conceptual frame of reference of contemporary planners. In particular, it has highlighted the continuing importance of strategic vision which unites planners and professional campaigners in their conceptualization of the Green Belt as a regionalizing concept. This suggests a latent critical creativity and imagination among many planners – in this case, in relation to a regional spatial imaginary – with this creativity playing a central role in the development of the planning profession. However, strategic planning has been constrained in recent years by a neoliberal political context and the current locally-led system with its overwhelming focus on housing numbers.[129] This relates to the broader literature on the importance of regional spatial imaginaries in planning, especially for reimagining strategic planning futures.[130] Indeed, the potential of regional spatial imaginaries needs greater acknowledgement in research as reflecting the importance of the 'region' and strategic consideration in planning tradition and training around the world.[131] More research is also needed internationally on how far non-professional, 'everyday' campaigners and the public take a strategic view of UGBs and planning, whilst more longitudinal research is required on the broader attitudes of planners towards planning history. However, the case study of the West Midlands in this paper strongly suggests that strategic vision and critical junctures in planning history, like the abolition of RSSs in 2010, continue to be vitally important in the frame of reference of contemporary planners.

This relates to the wider significance of institutions in the historical development of the planning profession and policy.[132] There are important questions over the Green Belt's exceptionalism and survivalism as an institution at a time when the rest of the planning system in England is being overhauled.[133] In many ways, the longevity of the Green Belt as an institution can be related to it being popularly personified as representing the English countryside and a bastion protecting it against the background of the scale and rapidity of the Industrial Revolution. This explains why the policy has survived despite the profound economic and social changes in post-war society related to car ownership, income levels, occupations, home ownership, and the role of women in the workforce.[134] Indeed, the post-war Green Belt often is juxtaposed to the critical juncture of the inter-war period with its deeply unpopular pattern of ribbon development by the free market in England. This is particularly important in the West Midlands with the intensity of the Industrial Revolution there, the rapidity of inter-war ribbon development and the compact, contiguous, and industrial nature of the conurbation.[135] This highlights the value of historical institutionalism in understanding and conceptualizing planning history with the subsequent political protection, given to the Green Belt in the immediate post-war years – a crucial time in its establishment as an institution, being strongly related to the desire to prevent the unplanned development of the inter-war years. The paper has also underlined the importance of adaptability and flexibility in

[127]Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, "Post-politics"; Parker et al., "Public-Private Entanglements," 192.
[128]Slade et al., "Public Interest," 31; Rydin, "Growth Dependence," 3.
[129]Valler and Phelps, "Future".
[130]Harrison et al., "Regional Planning"; Valler et al., "Spatial Imaginaries".
[131]Amati and Yokohari, "London Green Belt".
[132]Sorensen, "Historical Institutionalism".
[133]Riddell, "Strategic Planning".
[134]Prior and Raemaekers, "Post-Fordist Landscape".
[135]Goode, "Spatial Solution".

institutions in terms of maintaining their relevance in different historical periods. The primary importance of the Green Belt shifting from preventing urban sprawl to supporting the overarching policy of urban regeneration, brownfield first, and sustainable development in the 1970s is a prescient example of this. Indeed, the policy continues to have widespread value, meaning, and relevance at a time when there is an emphasis upon 'smart' growth and 'rewilding' the countryside to help mitigate climate change.[136]

The close relationship between the Green Belt and the countryside as institutions highlights the need for research to explore further how institutions overlap and intersect both in concrete concepts and spatial imaginaries which can then help to explain their subsequent path dependencies. The contrast between the continued protection of the Green Belt by Conservative-led Governments since 2010 and the vilification by the Conservatives of RSSs as a 'Stalinist' form of planning, which supposedly threatened the Green Belt with housing development, is a very poignant example of this.[137] Indeed, the power of the narrative around the supposed potentiality and inclusivity of the 'localism agenda' meant that not even structure planning was revived as a form of statutory strategic planning, whilst bureaucratic, 'European' regionalism was politically discredited compared to the supposed purity of 'English' localism.[138]

The paper therefore explored the central juxtaposition and arguably irreconcilable contradiction of the Green Belt as a regional growth management policy continuing in an era of localism. However, there is the profound broader question of whether a critical juncture will soon be reached whereby the Government realizes that some form of statutory strategic planning in England is necessary, especially to safeguard the Green Belt. Indeed, Wannop and Cherry, in charting the history of strategic planning in England, argued that the consensus underpinning it in the post-war era was that certain issues are inherently strategic, like the Green Belt and housing numbers, whilst local politicians needed to be able to deflect and redirect the 'blame' of difficult strategic decisions, especially around housing, to the strategic level.[139] The case for strategic planning has therefore endured in the spatial imagination and vision of planners and professional campaigners, but it remains to be seen in England whether politically the pragmatic governmental case for strategic planning will be accepted.

To conclude, the paper has underlined the central role of planning history and critical junctures regarding strategic planning in shaping and framing the perspectives of contemporary planners. Drawing upon the case study of the WMGB, it has highlighted the enduring importance of strategic vision and regional spatial imaginaries among planners and professional campaigners. It therefore has drawn broader, vital lessons from planning history on the longevity of strategic planning including the potentiality of 'intermediate' spaces of governance, the importance of process in planning and value of positive, and progressive strategic planning.

[136]Riddell, "Strategic Planning".
[137]Tait and Inch, "Localism in Place," 187.
[138]Inch and Shepherd, "Thinking Conjuncturally," 64.
[139]Wannop and Cherry, "Regional Planning".
[140]Adapted from Hayes, *Green Belt Map*, 1; GL Hearn, *Growth Study*.
[141]Ibid., 100.
[142]Ibid., 146.
[143]Ibid., 145.
[144]Ibid., 218.
[145]Ibid., 167.
[146]Ibid., 166
[147]Ibid., 242–3.
[148]Ibid., 203.

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