

# Photographic Postcards as Research Tools: The ‘Postcards from the Cut’ Study

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*This paper discusses the development and outcomes of a research methodology employing photographic postcards as remote, performative-narrative research tools to elicit and record written responses to the regenerated central canal landscape in Birmingham, UK. The canal landscape was chosen as the research formed part of an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award between Birmingham Institute of Art and Design and British Waterways (renamed The Canal and River Trust since July 2012), entitled ‘Landscape Narratives and the Construction of Meaning in the Contemporary Urban Canal-scape’ (2012). A postcard featuring an instruction and six images of the canal landscape arranged in a grid format was produced, distributed and returned during 2010. The 160 responses from an ethnically, age and gender-diverse group highlight the multiplicity of meanings and landscape preferences converging on the contemporary canal-scape. The returned narratives include instances of emplaced memories and associations. Data suggest this is an effective means to elicit and record individuals’ landscape perceptions where the potential for researcher-participant interaction may be limited, for instance by a lack of time or accessibility.*

*Keywords: Landscape, Narratives, Perception, Canals, Photography*

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## Introduction

In 2010, while I was undertaking research for my PhD entitled ‘Landscape Narratives and the Construction of Meaning in the Contemporary Urban Canal-scape’ (2012)<sup>1</sup>, I produced a photographic postcard of the central Birmingham canal landscape for distribution amongst the city’s residents. The wider research was an exploration of the ways in which individuals

perceive, and construct personal meaning around, the canal landscape (which has undergone large-scale regeneration since the 1990s), using ethno-phenomenological<sup>2</sup> methods with individuals and small groups, and using the Grounded Theory<sup>3</sup> approach to simultaneous data collection and textual analysis (Pink 2009; Pink et al. 2010, Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). The wider research focused on the

performative act of walking with the elicitation of narratives collected in the canal landscape from lone individuals ('self-narrated walking'), researcher-participant interviews ('walking-and-talking') and small groups, all recorded using digital audio recorders (Tolia-Kelly 2007; Pink 2007). The resultant narratives were suggestive of the link between the construction of individuals' place identities, multi-modal sensory perception (i.e. holistic, involving all the senses) and the instigation of memory-recall and memory emplacement (Tuan 1974; Bender 1993; Pink 2009; Tolia-Kelly 2004; Thoma 2006; Bales 2001). The narratives my usual methodology produced were dense with personal meanings, landscape preferences, musings and significant memories of this and other 'associated' landscapes. The 'Postcards from the Cut' study was to be slightly different to the methods I usually employed: a remote study on a larger scale, providing a greater number of individual narratives than would be possible using my walking methodologies. If the types of narratives produced resembled the earlier walking narratives in terms of iconic landscape components, references to sensory perception, memories and musing, this would indicate that the instigation of these is not dependent on a physical experience of the landscape. This suggests that future research in landscape perceptions may be undertaken remotely, there-

fore accessing more participants.

The aim of the postcard was to elicit a written response by presenting respondents with a series of images, one of which they would choose, explaining their reasons (Fig. 1). I chose to present people with photographic images, rather than requesting they take their own as previous requests for open responses from research participants had resulted in low response rates and requests for clarification. Owing to the limitations of the postcard format (i.e. its limited space and the absence of a researcher to clarify instructions), the open response method was changed to a specific instruction to mitigate the effect of confusion on the response rate.

With the exception of one image, the photographs were my own, taken during walks to emphasise the common pedestrian experience of the canals.

The postcard method encourages a choice without demanding physical presence in the landscape, that is, respondents were not required to travel to the canal to make their photographic choice, which is contingent on the limitations of time, weather and comfort. Respondents were merely presented with a range of options and asked to make a choice, their rationales entirely dependent on their own experiences and imaginations. The results suggest that although image choices may be partially based on a subjective aesthetic, individuals' personal

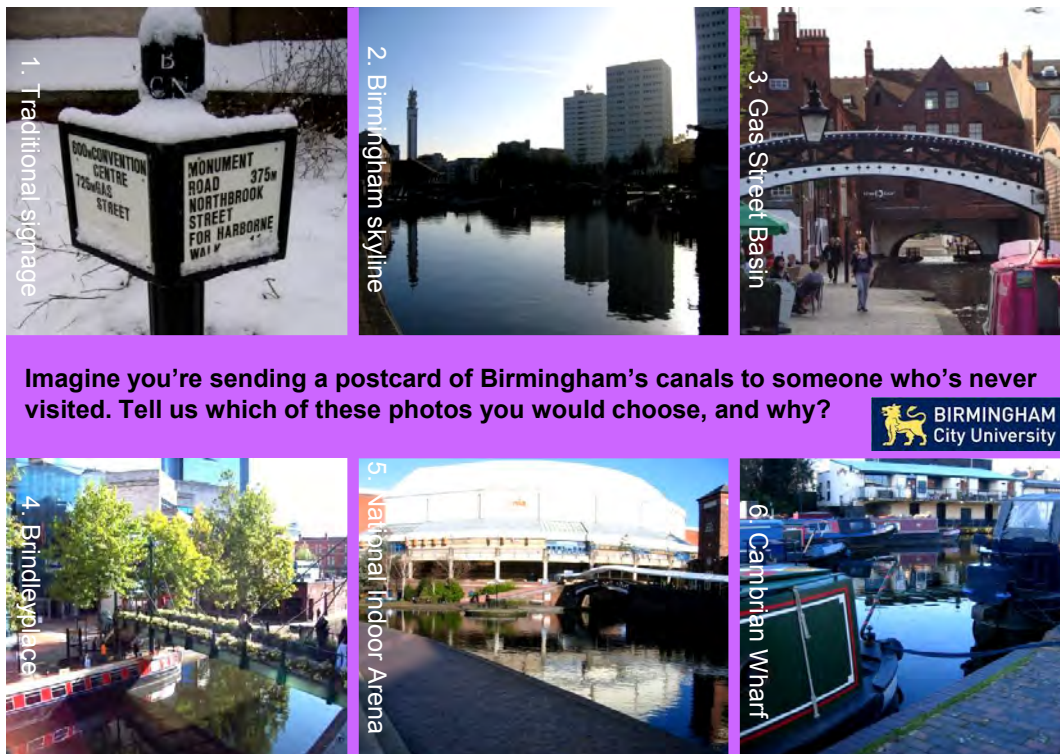


Fig. 1: The *Postcards from the Cut* postcard. Images 1, 2, 3,5 and 6 are the author's own. Image 4 courtesy of Ben Rose. Images are referred to within this paper as below:

- 'Image 1' or '(1)' = 'Traditional signage'
- 'Image 2' or '(2)' = 'Birmingham skyline'
- 'Image 3' or '(3)' = 'Gas Street Basin'
- 'Image 4' or '(4)' = 'Brindleyplace'
- 'Image 5' or '(5)' = 'National Indoor Arena'
- 'Image 6' or '(6)' = 'Cambrian Wharf'

associations and memories instigated through viewing are also implicated in their choice, evidenced in the responses referring to the recollection of memories as part of the rationalisation process.

The study was developed as a method of obtaining a large number of written landscape responses to visual stimuli, without the use of the questionnaire format. The postcard, measuring 10.4 x 14.7 cm, features six photographic images

of Birmingham's central canal landscape arranged in a grid. The postcard also included the instruction: *'Imagine you're sending a postcard of Birmingham's canals to someone who's never visited. Tell us which of these photos you would choose, and why?'* Participants were invited to respond to the instruction anonymously and also provide their age, gender and ethnicity. The study yielded 160 written responses over a two-month study period showing

individuals' preferences for certain views and the reasons for their choices. The limitations were chiefly logistical, relating to dissemination and return, but by taking a network-based approach the postcards reached, and were returned by, an ethnically diverse audience of male and female city residents, ranging in age from 11 to 83.

This study was based on the notion that landscape identity is subjective, personal, open to bias and multiple understandings, and supplemented by memories and associations. '[The landscape] is neither something seen, nor a way of seeing, but rather the materialities and sensibilities with which we see' (Wylie 2005, 243), that is, the landscape is not immutable or universal, rather it is the result of the way we each see, informed by our individual experiences and identities. In short, there are as many landscape identities as there are individuals to construct them, making the act of meaning-making a producer-oriented one by placing the onus on the perceiving individual rather than in the intrinsic characteristics of the landscape. The findings suggest that the landscape is not perceived in a common universal way, but rather in terms of multiplicities of meanings which are the result of multi-modal sensory experiences, often including memories (Pink 2009; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). This means that the canal landscape, as with any other landscape, is polysemic, with different

meanings projected onto it by its inhabitants. The polysemic nature of the landscape is evidenced through the sheer volume of different meanings attributed to the landscape by different people; if landscapes are universally experienced and understood, then each of the respondents would have expressed the same responses.

### **Methodology**

'Postcards from the Cut' was inspired by two other landscape postcard studies; Ian Biggs and Sarah Blowen's 2009 study<sup>4</sup> and Red Kite Environment's consultation of children regarding the regeneration of Stourport-on-Severn Basins<sup>5</sup>. At Stourport children were asked to draw a picture of Stourport's canal landscape in order to uncover the landscape components they regarded as most iconic of their experiences of the town. The resulting images of nearby Shipley's Amusement Park – the water, boats and trees – are, for the children, Stourport's iconic landscape components, and it was this aspect of the consultation's objective that was borrowed for this research. Understanding the specific landscape components participants consider iconic is one aspect in uncovering the myriad perceptions of the canal-scape, as the meanings and associations linked to those iconic components become the meanings and associations linked with participants' understanding of the landscape itself.

The original idea for the 'Postcards from the Cut' study was to allow respondents to reflect on their perceptions of the landscape by extending an invitation for open responses to the images in any format; people were to 'tell me something' in the form of a story, an opinion, or an image. However, I changed my approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was thought appropriate to mitigate the possible effects of participants' confusion, or embarrassment at their creative abilities, by setting a question with a series of visual options. Thus, I chose to place parameters on the exercise by asking participants to choose an image because previous requests for open responses (including drawings, photography and text) had resulted in low response rates and requests for clarification. Secondly, it was important that participants shared a written rationale, and I anticipated that some would let their own images 'speak for themselves' in an open response, thereby removing the written narratives that I was keen to access. Finally, making an open response is more demanding of participants' time and energy, so they are less likely to participate.

By providing respondents with a common scenario – choosing a postcard – they are encouraged to perform a familiar and hopefully enjoyable action, as the likelihood is that respondents will have experience of choosing and sending postcards to represent their holiday landscapes. The scenario of send-

ing the postcard to '*someone who's never visited*' Birmingham's canals is also familiar as many respondents will have visited holiday destinations which their families and friends have not. On the reverse of the postcard respondents were asked to provide three additional pieces of personal information: their age, gender and ethnicity. The small size of the postcard and the desire to allow respondents to express their individuality negated the use of a 'tick-box' method. Rather than placing themselves within imposed categories of gender, ethnicity and age, space was provided for respondents to choose their own identifiers, although without further interaction with the anonymous respondents, any additional data comparisons were impossible (Spivak and Gunew 1994; Peach 2006; Gauntlett and Holzworth 2006; Charmaz 2006).

The postcard method is narrative in that respondents share written responses based on personal experience and opinion. Many respondents included stories about their experiences of the canal landscape, while others used the postcard's instructional scenario to incorporate characters and their motives (e.g. '... would cause a lot of attraction to the people who receive this postcard' (British Pakistani Male, 17, (2)) and 'anyone seeing it for the first time would be intrigued to study it more carefully' (English Male, 73, (3)).

The methodology is also performative in that respondents take part in a one-time-only event, incor-

porating the ritual actions of choosing and writing, then returning the postcard (Dirksmeier & Helbrecht 2008). It is hoped that these actions mimic some of the familiar feelings of sending a postcard, such as the sharing of information, experiences and observations with an absent friend or relative, but also the desire to write something succinct and meaningful. The postcard's design intentionally mimics the commonly seen postcards of canal views showing four or six annotated images of an area. The commemorative aspect of the methodology is intrinsic in the souvenir status of postcards, the photographic images they portray and the messages they hold; postcards are evidence of an individual's presence in a place in the same way that photographs are (Kuhn 2007). Postcards are a complex form of memento because they are not kept by the individual as a holiday photograph might be, but are imbued with memories of noteworthy experiences and sent to an absent other who can only imagine the experiences written about. Postcards, then, are used to recall and record memories which are then shared through the sending of the postcard. They are discursive tools in that they allow the sender to recall experiences, thereby instigating a type of conversation between the past and present self as all memories do (Kuhn 2007; Thoma 2006), but the unsolicited and unanswered nature of postcards renders any dialogue with the recipi-

ent unlikely. Research postcards are a remote method for eliciting landscape responses, but they are no less performative and successful than methods which involve a physical presence in the landscape. For example, respondents used the postcards to share their narratives, demonstrate diversity of perception, muse and recall memories as they did in response to the physical landscape during my other walking narrative studies. Performative acts need not be constrained to movement through physical landscapes; photography and 'photographic memories [are part of] a performative oral tradition' (Kuhn 2007, 285). Annette Kuhn uses photographs to elicit biographical narratives, highlighting the 'discursive' nature of memories, in that we are compelled to share our memories with others upon viewing a photograph (Kuhn 2007, 283).

### **Timing and Distribution**

The postcards were distributed between March and May 2010, with a return deadline of mid-June 2010. I explored the potential of various methods for disseminating and returning postcards, but concluded that to take a 'contingent' approach and use existing networks of contacts would remove any complications such as the payment of postage and nominating a secure post-box. The postcards were distributed to potential respondents via existing contacts from groups and organisations, and on one occasion,

via a mail-drop through post-boxes in a canal-side residential building. Completed postcards were returned via contacts or, as in the case of the residential building, through the researcher's post-box. Postcards were also distributed amongst family, friends and colleagues to distribute amongst their own networks. This method is reliant on others' cooperation and dependent on existing networks for dissemination. By using the method of distribution via contacts, the postcards reached a diverse range of people resident or working in the Birmingham area.

### **Ethical issues**

The postcards were completed anonymously to prevent identification of the participants. To further prevent identification of participants, the majority of postcards were given to a series of contacts for distribution via their own networks. The contacts themselves were not required to complete postcards; however, in the event that any contact did complete a postcard, the anonymous nature of the process would prevent identification. Other postcards were hand-delivered to anonymous post-boxes in a residential canal-side building, and returned to the researcher's post-box.

### **Image Rationale**

Choosing images for the final postcard design necessitated rationalisation of the available images and required an understanding of the di-

versity of the local canal landscape. As this study formed part of PhD research on pedestrian experiences and perceptions of the canal landscape, the postcard needed to portray the views commonly seen from towpaths and bridges – places that are accessible to pedestrians and consequently views that are likely to be experienced by visitors. It was important that the images conveyed a sense of the diversity of the canal landscape in terms of geographical location, viewpoint and content to appeal to a wide range of individuals' 'landscape identities', that is, the identities which individuals attribute to the landscape, imbued with personal significance. The images represent six places along the canal corridor and some of the images are potentially more recognisable than others e.g. Gas Street Basin and the National Indoor Arena. Including unusual views of some of the (locally) well-known places was a conscious choice, made with respondents' comments in mind. Indeed, some respondents commented on the 'poor' views represented in the images of Gas Street Basin (3) and Brindleyplace (4), on the basis that they did not portray the full potential of the area.

The postcard images included a diversity of viewpoints within the confines of pedestrian experience, including a view from an elevated position, views along and across towpaths and water, expansive views of the horizon and intimate views of

canal details. Ensuring diversity of content was partly achieved through including a range of geographical locations and some unusual views of well-known places; however, the constant of the water and the common canal landscape components of boats, bridges and tunnels made representing diversity of content more challenging. Some images portray modern components, others convey a sense of 'heritage', and some include identifiable local landmarks, while others are less easily locatable. In order to limit the recurrence of common canal components, boats and bridges each appear in three of the six images, water in five images and tunnels in only one image. It was anticipated that the universality of those common canal components would be evident in the respondents' choices and comments, and divergences from these components would highlight the diversity of landscape identities converging on the canal landscape.

The arrangement of the images on the postcard was as much the result of necessity as aesthetic choice. My intention was to produce a series of linked but diverse images, none of which jarred but rather invited further consideration. I endeavoured to present the images fairly, making them equally sized and placed to avoid competition with each other. To avoid jarring, the 'sunnier' images and those with deep shadows and reflections were evenly dispersed.

Images with similar depths of horizon were separated to avoid continuation of sightlines. The need to keep printing costs low necessitated a small, but reasonably sized format with which respondents would be familiar from previous experiences of using postcards (10.4 x 14.7 cm). Some images were cropped and borders were placed around each image to distinguish them. During the process of cropping and arranging images on the postcard, some compositional compromises were made, so that photographs which were initially striking when fully-framed were cropped to portray only their most salient components. For example, the image of the towpath signpost (image 1) was a portrait-format photograph depicting the entire signpost surrounded with snow and winter twigs and far more of the brick wall than can be seen in the final postcard image. The resulting compromise may have altered the outcome of respondents' choices, but their choices despite the compromise are entirely valid, their comments evidence of their rationales and the diversity of meaning surrounding the canal landscape.

## **The Responses**

### **The Diversity of the Respondents**

I asked respondents to include their age on the reverse of the postcard, rather than create potentially arbitrary age-range groupings. The majority of postcard respondents



included their exact age, while only twenty individuals (12.5%) chose not to share that information. The recorded age range of respondents was 11 to 83, and respondents were later grouped by decade during analysis (e.g. 20+). Response rates were low amongst those who recorded their age as over 60; however 15 of the 20 respondents who did not record their age were sourced through a contact at the local canal society. If the recorded ages of the remaining canal society respondents are indicative of a commonality in age, the ages of those 15 respondents were likely to be between 50 and 70 years of age.

The postcards asked respondents to include their 'gender', as opposed to their 'sex', since 'gender' refers to a more inclusive socio-cultural understanding of roles, therefore allowing individuals to identify themselves using their own terminology. Over half (56.25%/90 individuals) of respondents listed themselves as 'female', 42.5% (68 individuals) listed themselves as 'male' and 1.25% (2 individuals) did not answer.

Respondents were asked to self-describe their ethnicity to enable them to use terms they felt were representative of how they perceived themselves, rather than choosing a potentially reductive category from a list (Holzworth and Gauntlett 2006). The resulting information highlights the diversity and individuality of the minds that conceived and shared it. Responses included such terms as

'Black'; 'Arab/Yemen mixed'; 'White Anglo Saxon'; and 'British'. These responses make comparisons and categorisations problematic within a quantitative study, but for the purposes of the wider qualitative PhD research such individualistic responses support the research outcomes: namely that there are diverse landscape identities converging on the contemporary urban canal landscape. This diversity is attributable to myriad influences and not merely ethnic identity. Owing to the limitations of the information, the additional information provided by respondents must be taken at face value (Gauntlett and Holzworth 2006). 45% of respondents consider themselves 'British', which gives no indication of ethnic background, and may include those born in Britain and those who were born elsewhere but who are British citizens. Over 21% of respondents consider themselves in terms of other location-related ethnicities for example 'Indian', 'African' and 'Latvian', which have been termed 'non-British', although these respondents may have been born in Britain. Almost 17% of respondents consider themselves in terms of colour, making grouping with the other respondents difficult e.g. some used 'White', 'Black' and 'Mixed'. Almost 17% of respondents did not record their ethnicity.

### **The Diversity of the Responses**

The postcard images elicited a variety of anticipated and unanticipated responses suggestive of the

diversity of landscape identities converging on the canal. Many of the respondents' comments fall into themes despite the inevitable differences between respondents' vocabularies. Therefore certain responses are grouped together, as with 'sunshine' and 'summer' or 'cafe culture' and 'continental', since they are indicative of related ideas. By examining the themes, it is possible to gain both an overview of the perceptions relating to each postcard image and the commonality of these perceptions amongst respondents, as some themes are more frequently recognised than others. For example, the most popular theme relating to the image of Gas Street Basin was that of 'heritage' which was highlighted in 24 responses, while the theme 'modernity' was highlighted only once in relation to this image.

Many respondents included storytelling, or narrative scenarios, in their responses as evidence of their reasoning. These narrative scenarios tended to be presented in the form of memories and musings. Musings tended to be either speculative, where the respondent may suggest that an area would provide tourist attractions or activities, or historical, where a respondent may muse on how the canal would have functioned in the past. As with memories, musings are influenced by the respondent's personal experiences and outlook in the same way that any response would be.

Memories are evidence of personal experiences and the inclusion

of these indicates a deep engagement with the visual stimulus of an image as they highlight the power of an image to trigger a recollection of physical experiences of a place. Memory-based narratives can be divided into those relating specifically to the canal landscape, and those relating to other landscape experiences. In both instances the visual stimulus of the postcard image is strong enough to elicit associations which the respondent feels are important enough to share in writing. For example, two respondents wrote: 'I remember these canals when they were rubbish tips' (White British Female, 82 (3)), and 'Born in Hockley, Birmingham and knew Gas Street before it was modernised. It is much better now ...' (Female, 70 (3)).

Musings are statements or questions indicative of a combination of knowledge and deduction based on previous experiences. Speculative musings relate to anticipations or expectations of the landscape i.e. things that a person could do or see such as: 'an inviting scene where you can enjoy the tranquillity of the canal within close proximity of the buzz of the city' (English White Female, 59 (4)). Historical musings relate to ideas about the landscape of the past i.e. things that a person would have done or seen in the past such as: 'it conjures up the atmosphere of the canals when they were first used more than a 100 years ago' (Female, (3)). In both cases the narrative relates to the 'not-present'.

Some narrative scenarios combined both memories and musing as with this response: '[I] regularly walk along. Inner city living, not tourism' (White Female, 30 (3)). This statement suggests a memory of walking along the canal and also implies future walking – evidence of current landscape usage. Similarly, this response – 'Because the thing I like the most is sitting by the canal with a drink in the sunshine' (White British Female, 25 (4)) – indicates past landscape usage combined with the intention to continue the activity.

### Image Preferences

The six postcard images elicited a variety of responses indicative of the diversity of the perceptions relating to these images, and by extension, to the canal landscape they represent. It was anticipated some images would be chosen more often than others; however, the overwhelming majority choice in favour of two of the images was unanticipated. The majority of respondents followed the instruction to choose one image, but 14 individuals chose two or more images from the postcard, generally on the basis that a single image alone was an insufficient representation of the canal landscape. For the respondents who made a single image choice (as opposed to those who chose numerous images), the images of Gas Street Basin and Brindleyplace were by far the most preferred im-

ages on the postcard and received a combined value of almost 80% of the vote. The respondents who chose multiple images favoured these two images equally. 10 of these 14 respondents considered the images of Brindleyplace and Gas Street Basin inseparable representations of the canal landscape in Birmingham: '... show two very different aspects of the present canal. 3 shows the old more original site ... 4 shows the modern aspect of the canal' (White British Female, 60 (3) and (4))

The common themes and instances of storytelling returned by respondents in relation to the images of Gas Street Basin and Brindleyplace suggest a tendency towards the perception of the canal landscape as a complex and multi-functional urban green-space that offers opportunities for leisure, entertainment and the consideration of heritage in the form of buildings and towpath furniture. In light of the overwhelming response in favour of these images, it would be tempting to overlook the validity of the respondents who favoured the other images on the postcard. Over 20% of the respondents did not choose either of these two images; approximately one in five people perceive the canal landscape differently to the majority view, a potentially substantial number of individuals across the wider population. The most common themes taken from the responses to the four least

popular images on the postcard focused on the ideas of traditionalism (1), the city (2), the presence and effects of water (5), and boating (6). While these themes are not unusual in terms of the canal landscape, they suggest the absence of perceptions of heritage value, leisure and green-space, which are all important aspects of the current branding of Brindleyplace and the surrounding area by organisations such as Marketing Birmingham, Birmingham City Council, Argent and British Waterways.

### **Preferences by Gender, Age and Ethnicity**

The three pieces of additional data requested on the reverse of the postcard were included on the basis that they may uncover significant trends; however the focus of the study remained on the content of the written responses. The results suggest that males and females were fairly evenly represented in their preference for the image of Gas Street Basin; approximately two in every five respondents preferred this image, regardless of gender. The image of Brindleyplace was almost as popular with a preference ratio of around 1.5 in every five people.

The available data show that the images of Gas Street Basin and Brindleyplace were the most popular across all the age groups, except for the 10+ age group who preferred the images of Brindleyplace (for its

greenery, general attractiveness and sunshine) and the National Indoor Arena (for the quality of light and reflections). The data suggest that images 3 and 4 are universally popular, with only slight variations in popularity between the groupings assigned post-facto; however, the variety of self-identified ethnic groupings recorded on the postcards renders comparisons and trending impossible within the confines of this relatively small-scale study.

### **Discussion**

Certain visual components within the urban canal-scape were commonly highlighted by the respondents in the 'Postcards from the Cut' study. These included images of water, which was the most commonly cited, followed by narrow boats and bridges or tunnels, and these common components are generally supported in the narratives taken from the wider PhD research. The scenario was complicated by the knowledge of the respondents' residency in Birmingham. As residents, respondents may have wanted to portray a positive representation of their city, and for some respondents this caused a dichotomy; they personally preferred one image, but chose another as the best representation of the area. This would support the notion that respondents do not necessarily choose the image they prefer aesthetically, but rather consider the images' components and poten-

tial connotations before making a rationalised choice and explaining that choice. The instruction on the postcard was carefully worded not to suggest who the recipient might be, other than '*someone who's never visited*'. Some respondents created an imagined narrative around the postcard by assuming a recipient (for instance, one individual chose an American pen friend), and by making image choices either on the basis that the recipient will be visiting or that the postcard should be sent to encourage a visit. In such cases, the image chosen was generally done so for the inclusion of certain visual components: components which then become the iconic images of the canal landscape for both the respondent and the (imaginary) recipient.

Some respondents' narratives were purely personal recollections of their own experiences of using the canal landscape, generally for leisure purposes, with outdoor dining during the summer months being a popular memory. This suggests that in addition to iconic visual components, there are common themes of interaction with leisure and the pleasure of a beautiful scene being particularly important. Some responses suggest an inability or unwillingness to consider the potential for other perceptions relating to a place, for example by referring to the 'true' meaning of the canal landscape or a 'real' representation of the city e.g. 'truest and nicest rep-

resentation ... especially contrast of old barge and quite modern ICC' (White UK Female, 33 (4)). Some of the respondents shared their disappointment at the content of the images and some suggested other views available that included the aspects they most associate with the canal-scape in that location. As one respondent stated: 'It is not perfect in representing what it should but it is the only picture which shows that the canalway encourages "life"' (Black Caribbean Female, 44 (3)).

This made their responses and the method no less valid, but it would be interesting to attempt a similar investigation using respondents' own photographs in an 'open response'; as discussed earlier, this was considered but rejected for this study, on the basis of the low response rate experienced in calls for open responses in previous studies within the wider research. Whilst choosing the images for the postcard, I made a number of hypotheses derived from data from earlier studies within the PhD research and interviews with research participants. From previous interaction with participants, I hypothesised that respondents would find image 1 of traditional signage pleasing because of the presence of snow, but that owing to the lack of water, i.e. the main focal point of a canal landscape, it would not be a popular choice. Around 5%, or 8 respondents, chose this image, making it one of the least popular images on the postcard.

Respondents referred to this image in terms of its 'beauty' and this was chiefly related to the presence of the snow. Contrary to my hypothesis, respondents did not mention the lack of water and they found the lack of buildings positive. The notion of 'tradition' was commonly elicited by this image, but respondents did not make the cause of this clear, suggesting that the printed title of the image prompted some respondents to make the association with 'tradition'. Rather than invalidating their responses, this outcome suggests that for these respondents, the idea of traditionalism is a fundamental aspect of the canal landscape, whether or not components which signify traditionalism were visible in the image.

Image 2 entitled '*Birmingham skyline*' was chosen by around 7%, or 10 respondents, and a further two respondents included this image in a multiple-choice response. I hypothesised that respondents would respond positively to the presence of water, blue sky and reflections owing to their connotations of sunny days, but the negative connotations of tower block housing were thought likely to diminish the popularity of this image. I anticipated that respondents would strongly associate this image with Birmingham owing to the presence of the local landmark British Telecom building (or the 'BT Tower'), leading them to identify this as their preferred choice. Respondents chose this image for

its composition, connotations of 'the city' and its beauty, which was chiefly related to the presence of the water and the reflections therein. The perception of 'beautiful natural scenery' (Iraqi male, 18 (2)) in this image was surprising since it lacked components such as trees, plants and animals, suggesting that the water itself elicited these associations.

I anticipated that image 3 of Gas Street Basin would be popular amongst older respondents in particular, based on previous interactions with participants: that they would positively associate this image with the heritage value of the area, would comment on the presence of the iron bridge, and would share heritage-based memories and musings of the associated landscape. As the image chosen by almost 45% of respondents, this image was the most popular on the postcard. Respondents favoured this image for its associations with heritage, including the bridge, but also for its associations with leisure and the 'balance' between modernity and tradition; many of the memories and musings elicited by this image were complex, supporting the common idea of the juxtaposition between the pre-development and post-development canal. Contrary to my hypothesis this image was preferred by a wider range of age-groups; it was most popular with respondents over the age of thirty.

I hypothesised that the image entitled '*Brindleyplace*' (4) would be

favoured for its composition, sunny aspect, and specific landscape components such as greenery and the narrow boat, as these components were often identified as iconic of the canal landscape by participants in my previous studies. I anticipated that the title of the image would elicit recollections of summer dining in the nearby restaurants, but that this connotation, combined with that of modern architecture within an historic landscape, would be viewed negatively. This image was the second most popular as it was preferred by around 35% of respondents. Responses commonly referred to the leisure aspects of the area and although it elicited as many recollections as *'Gas Street Basin'*, the majority of the narrative musings it elicited were speculative, relating to the opportunities for leisure and relaxation in the area.

Favoured by around 5% of respondents, the image of the National Indoor Arena (NIA) (5) was one of the least popular images, as I anticipated owing to the architecture of the building which is generally disliked locally. I anticipated that respondents' comments would focus on the juxtaposition between the NIA building and the adjacent older pub, set against the still water, but this was not the case; rather, those who favoured this image generally did so on the basis of the modernity of the iconic NIA. Respondents also favoured this image for the reflectivity of the water and they liked the

juxtaposition between the 'soothing' (Indian female, 21 (5)) water and associations with 'the city'.

As anticipated, image 6 of Cambrian Wharf was the least popular image on the postcard (around 4%, or 6 respondents). I hypothesised that this image would be unpopular owing to the presence of deep shadows, because a prior study suggested participants perceived canal water in shade as 'polluted' and the same water in sunlight as 'clean'. The few respondents who reacted positively to this image referred to boating and the canal water, as with 'the best canal-themed picture' (White British male, 50 (6)), suggesting that for these respondents the historic functionalism of the canal is important.

The popularity of the images of Gas Street Basin (3) and Brindleyplace (4) above all other images is a striking result of this study; around 80% of respondents chose one or the other, with some respondents finding these images so inseparable that they chose both. The common perceptions and instances of storytelling returned by respondents identify a tendency to regard the canal landscape as a complex, multi-functional urban green-space which supports leisure and the consideration of heritage. These images were favoured for their complexity and for portraying a balanced vision of the city: 'Nice combination of items – trees/boat/canal/ the town. The others don't

have this sort of balance' (Female, 30 (4)), and 'people sitting having lunch/dinner or drinks; I am kind of person who likes coffee shops/restaurant out door' (Kuwaiti female, 27 (3)).

Despite the overwhelming preference for the images of Gas Street Basin and Brindleyplace, over 20% of respondents chose images 1, 2, 5 and 6. Approximately one in five respondents perceived the canal landscape differently to the majority view: evidence of a diversity of perceptions and suggestive of a potentially substantial number of individuals across the wider population. As discussed earlier, the most common themes relating to the least popular images (1, 2, 5 and 6) focused on the ideas of traditionalism, proximity to or escape from the city, the presence and effects of water, and boating respectively. These themes are not unusual perceptions of the canal landscape, but they do suggest an absence of perceptions relating to the juxtaposition of modernity and heritage, (retail and dining) leisure, and green-space - all of which were common positive perceptions of the most popular images.

The inclusion of narrative scenarios indicates the presence of associations and recollections, and a deep engagement with the visual stimulus of the postcard methodology as they highlight the power of an image to trigger a recollection of physical experiences of a place (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989):

Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought ... It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining ... Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories (Diaz-Moore 2006, 35).

The two most popular images on the postcard each elicited five instances of memory-recall whereby respondents shared a memory instigated by seeing the postcard image. These two images include different landscape components, for instance '*Gas Street Basin*' (Image 3) shows older canal buildings, a tunnel, a cast-iron bridge, tow-path, people dining and walking, a modern pink boat, a little greenery and a Victorian-style lantern. '*Brindleyplace*' (Image 4) shows a narrow boat, the canal, a modern bridge with people walking across it, some trees and the modern (1990s) International Convention Centre. Despite their visual differences, the images elicited the sharing of similar memories relating to walking the towpaths, enjoying canal-side dining during the summer and the visual appearance of the canals pre-development. For example, two respondents shared similar recollections of these areas: 'So nice in the summer; eating lunch outside [...] a pleasant way to walk through the city' (White female, 26 (3)), and 'Hidden just behind is All Bar One



where I spent quite a few hours with great friends. A beautiful walk along the canal was always enjoyable / memorable' (White female, 30 (4)).

'*Gas Street Basin*' (3) was slightly more conducive to recollections of the area prior to its redevelopment ('it truly was Dickensian back in the 60s/70s' (Male (3)); however, pre-development memories of both areas were often juxtaposed with how the areas have improved. For example, these respondents remembered the areas' pasts, but prefer the post-development sites for their leisure potential: 'Born in Hockley, Birmingham and knew Gas Street before it was modernised. It is much better now with a cosmopolitan atmosphere' (Female, 70 (3)) and 'I remember these canals when they were rubbish tips. I pick number four because last year my family enjoyed a 60th birthday party on the barges it was a wonderful day out. After these years it's wonderful to see all the changes that's happening' (White British female, 83 (4)). A second study requesting open responses would enable comparisons between the types of images and narratives participants return when they are given complete freedom, and may result in more instances of memory-sharing than were observed in this study.

The places represented in images 3 and 4 may both be regarded as memory/musing 'hotspots' in the canal landscape as they both elicited relatively high numbers of memory

recall and musings in respondents. As each image shows a recognisable visitor attraction (*Gas Street Basin* and *Brindleyplace*), the popularity of the images and the types of recollections they instigated were anticipated. Recollections chiefly related to leisure and 'memorable' instances of landscape engagement such as dining with friends and family on holidays and special occasions. As these two 'hotspots' are within a few minutes' walking distance of each other, it is conceivable that visitors would walk around both these places as part of a visit to the canal. The reasons for the concentration of emplaced memories and involuntary memories at these 'memory hotspots' is unclear, but one hypothesis is the idea that as a high-traffic destination area which has undergone regeneration, *Gas Street Basin* possesses the potential for attracting more visitors to emplace memories there.

Many respondents included narrative musings on the 'not-present'; historical musings of the canal landscape ('it conjures up the atmosphere of the canals when they were first used more than a 100 years ago' (Female (3)); and speculative musings ('you can enjoy the tranquillity of the canal within close proximity of the buzz of the city' (English White female, 59 (4)). The majority of responses take the form of reasoned statements, as with 'It has snow on it and is pretty' (White British male, 25 (1)), but some of the speculative

musings relate specifically to either real or imagined visitors, suggesting that these respondents specifically considered individual characters and the images they might like to receive. For example, ‘... these are the two that I would choose to send to my penfriend in the USA’ (Female, (3) and (4)) .

### Conclusions

Returning the ‘research postcard’ is a familiar performative act, redolent of choosing a holiday postcard based on its cover image(s) and sending it to a friend with a holiday story on the reverse. I hoped that the postcard would mimic the performative ritual of writing and sending a postcard, and would elicit the sharing of information in the form of experiences and observations. I anticipated that the commemorative aspect of postcards, as a complex form of souvenir that is not kept by the individual recording the memories, but is rather sent to an absent other imbued with association-laden narrative, would lead more respondents to share memories of the canal landscape than did. Certainly in the other studies which were based on walking in the canal landscape, the evocation of memories was a significant finding; generally participants in these studies recalled memories based on sensory ‘triggers’. In the ‘Postcards from the Cut’ study, the only sensory engagement is with the visual, which may explain the reduced number of memory-based

narratives returned by individuals; however, that respondents returned some of these types of narrative still highlights the power of images to elicit memories. The invitation to choose was an important aspect of the methodology, as we spend time on holiday choosing a postcard that represents our own perception of the holiday landscape, and crucially how we would want it to be perceived by the receiver. So the postcard mirrored this activity, in that respondents chose an image they felt representative of the city’s canal landscape and which they would like their imaginary receiver to see. The postcard method does not require presence in the landscape, but relies on respondents’ prior experiences of the landscape and their imaginations. Many responses referred to walking in the landscape, either through memories or musings, and the majority related to the Brindleyplace and Gas Street Basin areas, which are popular visitor attractions. In the same way that indoor conversations with participants can indicate the phenomenon of ‘locomotion-by-proxy’<sup>6</sup>, the prevalence of walking in the responses suggests that respondents recalled prior experiences of walking in the canal landscape, instigated by seeing images of places they had visited, hence the popularity of the images of Gas Street Basin and Brindleyplace.

The findings demonstrate that individuals each experience and

therefore perceive the landscape differently, and that although many respondents share similar general perceptions of the canal landscape or image preferences (relating to heritage or leisure for instance), their personal experiences of this and other landscapes result in different rationales, associations and memories linked to the sensory stimuli of the canal landscape. Evidence suggests that certain places in the Brindleyplace area are commonly linked with the expression of the evocation of memories, which supports the idea of the landscape as a 'repository of memory', and which was also observed in earlier walking narratives from the wider research (Tuan 1974, 97). The images of Gas Street Basin (3) and the central bridge at Brindleyplace (4) elicited far more memory-based responses than any other image on the postcard; this is attributable to those places' statuses as local tourist attractions with nearby leisure facilities, thus visitors are more likely to have visited there to be able to emplace memories. Commonalities do exist between participants' perceptions of the landscape e.g. heritage value, but the differences between responses become apparent when they are considered at an individual level. It is evident that although participants sometimes arrive at similar, general perceptions, their language, rationales and associations with the landscape are more complex and individual.

The narratives returned by respondents resemble those produced by participants in the walking studies which form the wider research; they included references to similar iconic landscape components (water, greenery, boats) and similar concepts (relaxation, heritage, modernity, and their juxtaposition); the sharing of memories (of previous visits or times); evidence of musing (wondering about the canal's past in particular); and some evidence of multi-modal sensory engagement, as with the respondent who wrote 'reminds me of the smell of beautiful summer days' (Female, 40 (4)). The findings suggest the postcard method is an effective technique for remotely eliciting individuals' landscape perceptions on a larger scale than would be possible using in-situ walking methodologies. This makes it potentially very useful in a number of scenarios where participation rates are lowered by physical constraints.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> My British Waterways organisational supervisor offered guidance on case study sites which had been recently regenerated; these were the sites they were interested in learning more about in terms of user perceptions. He also suggested I focus on a non-boating participant base, as a great deal of their existing data is taken from interviews with the leisure/residential boating communities.
- <sup>2</sup> Ethno-phenomenology combines ethnography and phenomenology. Ethnography is the description of the nature of peoples (ethnos) in writing (graphy) and primarily

involves the use of interviews and participant observation, or action research (Pink 2009, 10). The main difference between ethnography and this research methodology is the focus on the individual. This research does not seek to group people together to glean a shared response; rather it seeks to explore the multiplicity of responses. If shared responses occur they are an interesting phenomenon, but are not the aim. 'Classic' ethnography involves spending large portions of time observing and perhaps living with the peoples being studied; however this is impractical in this research context. Nonetheless, ethnography's focus on a range of narrative techniques ranging from small-talk to formal interviews provides scope for interaction and lends authenticity to the conversational aspects of qualitative studies. Phenomenology is the study of experience and appearances from a first-person narrative perspective, and 'calls for a heightened receptivity of all the senses' (Leach 1997, 83). The 'true' form of phenomenology is based on the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and is concerned with more than bodily, sensory experiences in that it 'studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity' (S.E.P. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

<sup>3</sup> Grounded Theory (GT) is a system whereby the researcher starts not with a hypothesis as with standard research methodologies, but with data collection. The data are then codified into categories upon which a theory can be formed. GT is the inverse of the traditional research method in which methodologies are aligned with a theoretical framework, a hypothesis is posited and data are collected accordingly to test that hypothesis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The joint originators of this method, Barney Glaser

and Anselm Strauss, later separated their approaches, creating the Glaserian and Straussian paradigms (Devadas et al. 2011). The Glaserian paradigm is based on the notion that 'all is data', while the Straussian paradigm takes a more scientific approach, by starting with a research problem followed by research questions (Devadas et al. 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Iain Biggs and Sarah Blowen, 'Borderland Postcards – Responding to Postcards from the Physical and Cultural Borders of Europe'. AHRC Living Landscapes conference, Aberystwyth, 18–21 June 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Red Kite Environment Ltd undertook a consultation of local children prior to the regeneration of Stourport-on-Severn Basins. Children were asked to draw a picture of Stourport on a blank postcard. Red Kite Environment also undertook consultation work at Fradley Junction where they prompted participants to produce hand-drawn postcards in order to discover locals' landscape preferences.

<sup>6</sup> 'Locomotion-by-proxy' was observed in indoor, seated conversations with participants. Participants drew maps and diagrams of landscapes they had visited. As they talked, they traced 'walking routes' around the images with their fingers and narrated their 'passage', recalling the landscape components they had experienced and in some cases triggering memories. In this way the physical act of moving their fingers around a representation of a place created an equivalent experience or 'locomotion-by-proxy'.

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