Otto Saumarez Smith, Boom Cities: Architect-Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain (Oxford, OUP: 2019). Hardback. £72. 208 pp.

It is a rare book about post-war urban planning that can fascinate and inform the reader with the panache of Otto Saumarez Smith’s ‘Boom Cities’. An academic monograph drawing on PhD research, ‘Boom Cities’ uses north-west English, placed in a wider national context to develop a comprehensive argument about the idealism and ambition that informed urban planning in the 1960s.

There is a pleasing consistency to the book, which can certainly be judged by its well-designed cover. Of particular interest to members will be chapters 3 and 4. The former explores the urban transformation of Blackburn, while Chapter 4 contextualises Graeme Shankland’s controversial and half-finished redevelopment of Liverpool. In many ways, they help us understand why plans were commissioned and perhaps why our north-western urban areas look as they do. It also ensures we see planners as people in their time, with their own agendas and ambitions, rather than as a fuzzy class to be blamed for an urban environment that did not measure up to their dynamic visions.

In the process, Saumarez Smith reclaims trends and terms like brutalism from lazy and superficial dismissal and locates these ambitious post-war urban planners within their historical context and intellectual milieu. This is a book for the admirer of ‘brutalism’, the interested urban resident, and the contemporary architect as much as the scholar of past planning. For those intrigued by how our cities entered ‘modernity’, and why they look the way they do, interested members could do much worse than read ‘Boom Cities’.

Dr Marc Collinson