

PHIL LUMBY

Station to Station

The 1960s' regeneration of Birmingham city centre has often been criticised for prioritising motor vehicles over pedestrians - effectively forcing the latter to navigate their way around the city via a network of subways. However, this utopian approach somewhat inevitably gave way to a stark reality - these subways were dark, dingy and unwelcoming - and came to be regarded by many as a 'muggers' paradise'.

Regeneration of the city centre from the 1990s onwards - including the Bull Ring redevelopment and changes to the road infrastructure - largely eliminated the necessity to go underground to move around. However, in doing so, a curious anomaly and contradiction was created. The majority of the most direct route between New Street and Moor Street railway stations is via a tunnel that (irrespective of lacking any aesthetic value or character) is dark and cold. At night time, in particular, it feels hostile.

This path has several functions - it provides the stated route between stations - and between each station and connecting bus services. It acts as an emergency service road both to and from the shopping centre and the road running through the tunnel is primarily used by buses and taxis. The adjacent pathway is also 'home' to rough sleepers; no matter how cold this tunnel becomes, it remains dry as it is fully covered.

This route is not pedestrian friendly and the tunnel itself has no designated (or safe) crossing points. However, this was possibly (and therefore naively) never intended to be the 'official' pedestrian route between the two stations in the first place. The colourfully painted handrails highlight the 'safer' foot route - which runs via steps or ramp from the base of the Rotunda, across the Bullring High Street entrance, dropping down again opposite Moor Street Station. A safer route, perhaps, but less direct, more time and energy consuming - and, for many, too much trouble. For a city that repeatedly reinvents itself, strives to learn lessons from its past and has achieved much success in recent decades, this path provides an unwelcome reminder of a less enlightened past.
