

EXHIBIT MO

**A STUDY IN RECONSTRUCTIVE
RESILIANCE**

BY

POSTRATIONAL.

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*An unnamed, half finished/barely started street
on the outskirts of Middling-Overton
©James Pockson/PR*

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DEFINITIONS / ABBREVIATIONS

Absorbism

A system of social organisation first defined by PR in FBSH in which all members (at individual, community, and regional level) are able to withstand shock through the quality of relationships they form with each other.

MAOANB

Modern Area Of Augmented Natural Beauty.

FBSH

Fatberg and the Sinkholes (a PR Report) [postrational.net/fatsink].

London

Former capital of the United Kingdom, expelled from what became the URE.

M25

Formerly motorway, currently border between city-state London and the URE.

URE

United Regions of England, post-secession, newly constituted federation previously UK.

NDHL

Network Diverse Hyper-Localism, defining feature of regional coexistence in the URE.

Synthcast

Tool for micro-reporting, combining synthesis documentation with podcast medium, effective in low bandwidth areas.

PR

PostRational, [a fiction consultancy], authors of this report.

AN UNINTENTIONAL OUTLIER

PostRational has suited up and deep-dived back into the United Regions of England. Here, we examine a recently built “super-village” and its self-reconception post-secession.

This time we have been commissioned to ask a simpler (more complex) question:

“HOW DO THEY LIVE?”

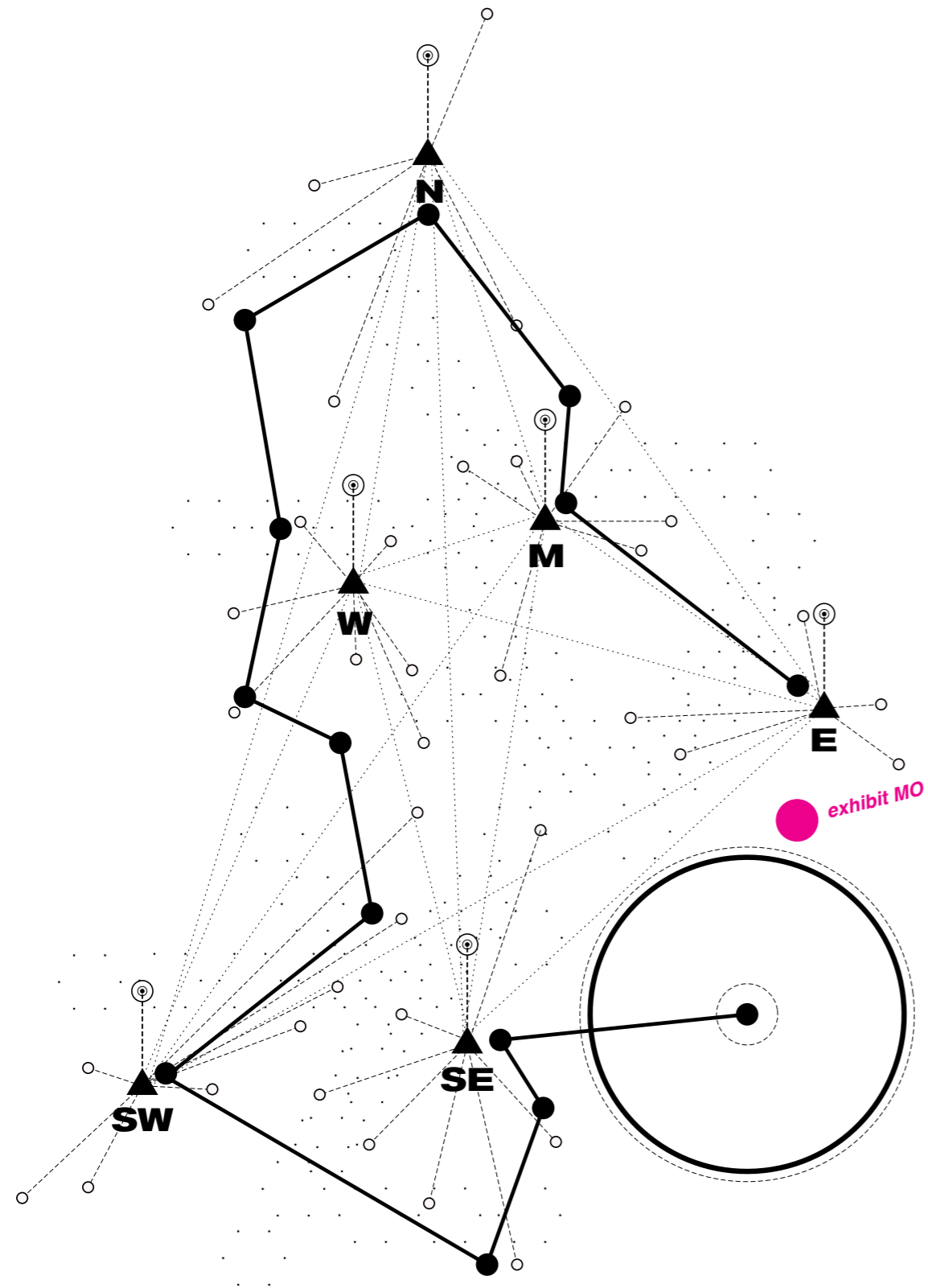
London, the big smoke, has been seceded by the United Regions of England and boy it’s drifted, in all but tectonic terms, feeling even further from the regions that rejected it — socially, politically, culturally. Economically.

From fear, confusion, and interest in our neighbours we went on a journey back into the landscapes and towns we once referred to as “home” – beyond M25.

Out there, we discovered an incipient economic model that PR have called **Absorbism**.

Absorbism is squidgy, not spiky; fuzzy not smooth. The phenomenon, based not on growth and competition, but resilience and reciprocity, was first documented by **PR** in the report, Fatberg & the Sinkholes [postrational.net/fatsink].

This is one of a series of **PR** “exhibits” from the URE, collating synthcasts compiled by **PR** researchers on field work. The aim? To put forward the **PR** perspective, enliven the research with some more detailed illustrations of the URE – a place that to many in the big city – will forever remain “out there”.



Network map of URE showing regional super arbiters and the location of MO ©Mike Lim/PR



The Simplistic Life, Middling-Overton, circa 2021 ©James Pockson/PR

WHERE IS MO?

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[Synthcast begin]

Middling-Overton was characterised by bland design, poor construction, lack of amenity and relative inaccessibility by any means other than the car. The 'super village' was constructed over a protracted contract in the mid 2010s as part of a Conservative Party plan to solve the London housing crisis through the production of a series of dormitory towns in the home counties of Kent, Essex, and Hertfordshire.

This cookie-cutter mega-suburbia was enabled through a joint venture between a large supermarket and a volume house builder under the promise of significant tax incentives, wrapped in pacifying hedgerow pledges and bland, amiable corporate visions.

On completion, Middling-Overton was shot to unfortunate fame through a series of cases published in the media in which residents pursued the Developer over poor or unfinished construction. Renders of the "simple life" lay in an oversaturated state on collapsed hoardings at the outskirts of the super village. In actuality, before secession, it was the simplistic life to be found in MO. Unfit for the average homeowner, only half of MO was sold when the URE broke, despite the best efforts of the sales agents and a very lavish and prominent marketing suite. By that point a significant portion of the other half, of no material value and impossible to sell on, had been abandoned by the commuters, flocking back to the city they had quit for hopes of a quieter life.

MO is not an important place, well hierarchies of "importance" don't really work out here. It is neither grand nor romantic. It is not relied upon by anyone, and though it imports more resources than it can offer, it does not lean heavily on anywhere. Within the network of the URE, Middling-Overton is an example of a node that can absorb more but doesn't: it has never ran on empty, exhausted, nor thrived and flourished.

The nearest large city to Middling-Overton, curiously, is London, granting it the dubious theoretical status of a border satellite. However, due to poor transport links, it is not used as a trading post, but sits with its back to the action, an Essex outlier, neither coastal nor metropolitan contact within easy reach. Within the URE, it is precisely illiminal places like Middling-Overton that have cultivated atypical yet pronounced exemplars of co-operative behaviour.

[Synthcast end]



Jonas and Him
©PostRational/Mike Lim

JONAS & HIM
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[Synthcast begin]

At first glance the rows and rows of identikit houses looked blandly familiar. MO comprised a fanning array of closes, cul-de-sacs, and crescents. The design was anchored around a town square and a mill pond. It is bounded to its prettier edge by a canal. The architecture was cherry picked from the Hamptons, the Cotswolds, the Weald, but diluted through the spreadsheet sieve of the quantities surveyor to leverage maximum Return on Investment. The square was a car park with a clock to serve a supermarket disguised as a town hall. The mill concealed the substation. A strange essay in brass coach lanterns and tiny dormers, Middling-Overton was designed to look like it was from a different, though unspecified, time. Professional and lazy branding adorned the hoardings around former construction sites, proclaiming MO as a place “where bucolic meets next”; now neglected, rusted and serene, the promises almost ring true. A short sighted snake of a place having consumed half of its own tail.

We drove on in the megabus, unease creeping in.

We saw a mish mash of architectural signifiers, rendered oddly graphic in modern impermeable brick and laminates. In semiotic terms, the speculative development comprised all the components of a “happy place”, but a clutch of houses scattered about the ordering geometry of a Volvo XC90 is not quite enough. Intoxicated by the kaleidoscopes of asphalt, verge and brick, our hearts had already sunk as we drove through the sparsely populated outskirts of the town to our meeting point. We turned off the engine at the agreed spot, a decaying park and ride.

“This! an exemplar?” we asked ourselves. It felt like we were driving through fudge; the place was so unwelcoming.

A silence unique to a recently parked vehicle pervaded.

Shuffling of pages, we looked back at the hypothesis:

NDHL Exemplar 1. – Middling-Overton

The super village plainly describes the urban phenomena – network-diverse hyper-localism (NDHL). NDHL has grown from absorbist practice to negotiate the typical problems brought about the the isolating forces of suburban [capitalist] geography. An oscillation between the close and the far, where the infrastructure of the URE network creates public spaces for the gathering of absorbists to enact close-bonding and the withstanding from external shocks (mostly environmental these days). NDHL manifests physically at a number of scales, a patchwork held together by the operation of simple communication interfaces.

TAP TAP..TAP TAP

We were pulled from our 'burban stupor by heavy knocking on the windshield.

At first glance It was hard to see if what/who we were looking as was intimidating or not.

Wound the window down.

The taller of the pair lifted her headdress. Emerald eyes that had peeped through holes in that funny hat materialised into an elderly woman's face.

"Jonas," she said, with a smile, cocked headdress filling the full-frame of the side window.

"Sorry?"

"I'm Jonas, I've been waiting for you. Gonna show you 'round."

"Oh, er great," we said, with a quiver, brains trying to bridge the gap between Jonas' folkish outfit and the drab context.

"That's Him," said Jonas gesturing to the small man in a frock standing next to her. "Don't worry about Him, he's just here for the craic, doesn't say much, if anything, nice fella though, dont worry about him." The costumed pensioner stretched long and tall in a very unpensionly manner and gestured at the semi-detached houses that populated the edge of the park and ride like bashful teens around a dance floor. "Dull hey?!?"

"Er... well."

"Don't worry. It's OK yer face says it all." Jonas stepped back from the window and plopped her hat back on and spoke up, over the muffling mask, "We've left this bit, too far for us, we live denser now, makes more sense, mostly just foxes and the sparrows here; the odd roe and the otters. Nah – we're headed over there – towards the big pond."

"Oh, interesting – so this bit's just left?"

"Yeah – informed neglect we call it – don't need it – leave it... er... "unproductive" in the London parlance. C'mon, out yer get – follow me." Our guide and her mute friend bounded for the pond.

Three of these four large-scale car parks, behind the endless rows of housing stock on the outskirts of the super village centre have been subject to deliberate decay and surface attacks, giving fault lines for the cultivation of moss and lichen, nothing to the



untrained eye like ours. Aerial photography of these car parks reveal a stunning marbling effect, with one unpredicted outcome of this new ecology the promotion of Outer Middling-Overton to a Modern Area Of Augmented Natural Beauty (MAOANB). Botanists come from far and wide to witness this colourful, semi-conscious co-operation between concrete and cultivation.

PR

As elaborated in FBSH, the absorbist system is predicated on the formation of bonds. A bond can be earned (for want of a better word) through multiple expressions of collaboration. It appears that the primary currency, social currency at least, is conceived and realised through local participation. This might be peer-to-peer connections through, say, the expansion of roles and job sharing:

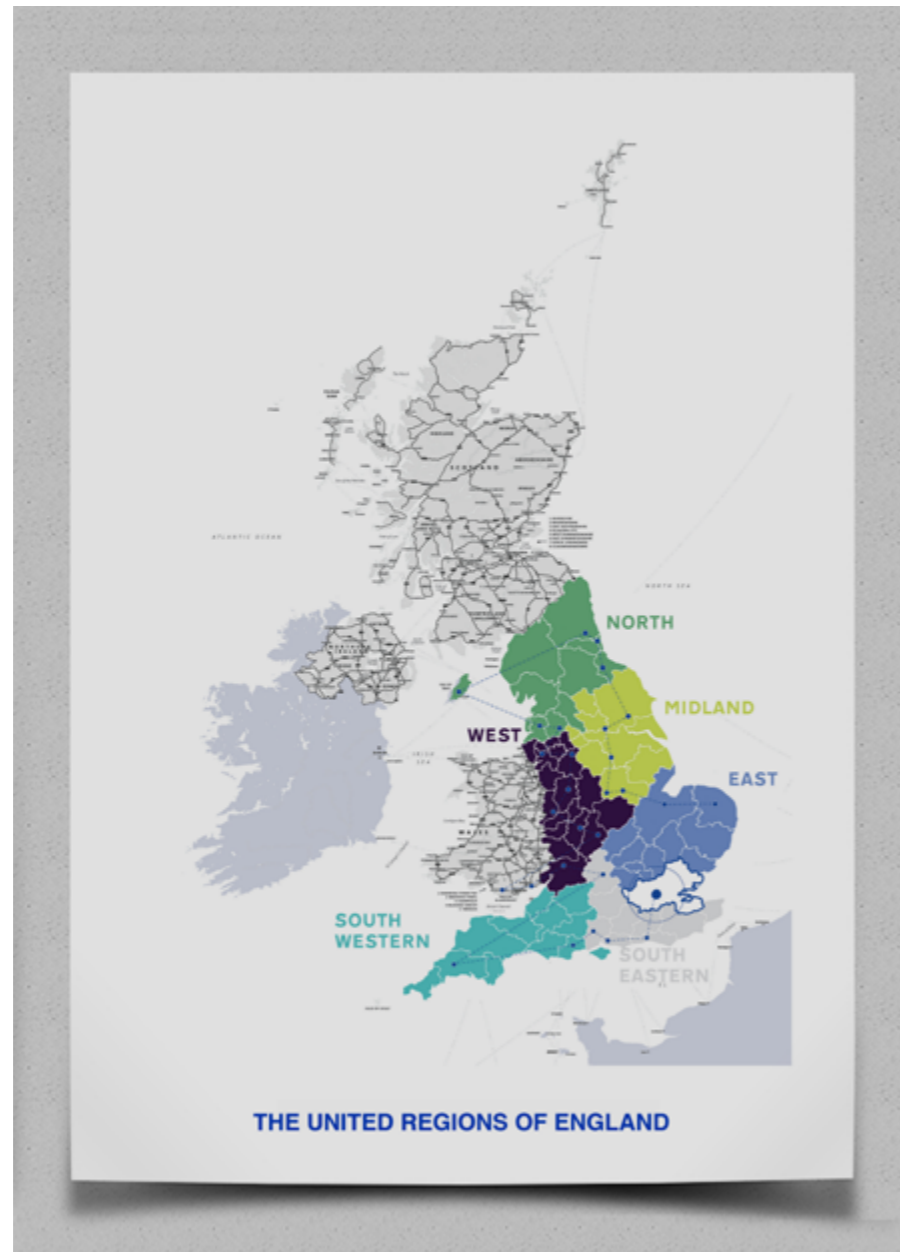
Role	London	MO
<i>Tour Guide</i>	<i>Jonas (worker to enact a contracted service)</i>	<i>Jonas + Him (members create bond through shared experience)</i>

En route we asked Jonas about Him. She told us that in this far-out community, task-sharing and role-swapping are abundant. People wear many hats, trading services and knowledge to maintain a basic level of municipal continuity. All able townspeople work four day weeks, with one day spent on MO-time; that is, civic tasks of repair, rebuilding, and rejuvenating. Lots are drawn on a monthly basis for rotas and, with no burning agenda for efficiency, growth or time, task-literates and task-apprentices are grouped together. This has led to permutations and pairings of people that yield unexpected ideas and results.

For a recent example, a glassblower and a school nurse were grouped alongside a telecommunications engineer to lead a team to look at and repair the slow broadband speed in the town. Rather than simply buy and boost server capacity (there is talk of a new URE-funded collective provider but to date, tethering or held to ransom from international suppliers has been the norm), the trio hatched upon a plan to replace stretches of knackered fibre cables running through the town with coloured glass casing. Making the internet visible and physical has brought a new consciousness to digital expectations, with a small reduction in usage and impatience (the speed has remained slow...nobody seems to care). This is a direct outcome of diverse local participation; different folks for different strokes brings something different.

The numbing dullness of the MO's outskirts was replaced by an electric fascination as we hurried off the bus in pursuit of Jonas and Him; our sartorially subversive guides.

ISynthcast endI



URE MAP
©PostRational/Mike Lim

THE WHEREWITHAL

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[Synthcast begin]

We have been put up in a Hollow Terrace for the past few nights by Jonas and her perpetually mute friend. A few things are becoming clearer to us about how MO residents live. MO is not a project of grand designs, but a flat playing field where members make anew with existing material.

Walk through the front door of a hollowed terrace and the uninspiring facades of a super-typical street give way to a long-galleried hall. With the deconstruction of party walls at street level the builders have created a sheltered and vast covered public space open to a verdant expanse at the rear, bounded on all sides by similarly reconstituted terraces.

Ecologically mute turf rolled back to worked ground and new growth. Shed and bench constructed from fence, barbecue from boundary wall, raised bed from abundant blockwork. Hollow gardens are a sight to behold, something between the tranquility of an Abbots cloister and the festivity of Glastonbury.

The residents of MO are engaging with the town through a state of perpetual reconstruction. A culture of remix and repair pervades. There's a looseness to the town's production, authorship is vague. Through these processes, bonds are fused with things as well as people. Call it a spirit, or call it something else, the member's deep connection with the stuff of MO makes the mineral impossible to discard and vested with limitless potential incarnations:

Condition	Before	MO Today
Dwelling	Person buys house, lives in house, sells house for profit.	Members find house(s), demolish parts of houses, e.g. party walls, use material for other means. Create connections and openings.
Memory	That's the house that I grew up in. My parents have downsized now.	This pizza oven is the bit of the house I grew up in. My parents have downsized now.

The house becomes as much of a participant in the process of dwelling as its rebuilders. There is a fluidity between the person and the capacity with which they dwell with their neighbours. By extension, material is vested with a new form of spirit, in the reframing of its capacity to be useful in perpetuity.

The absorbists are reworking boundary conditions and in MO, bounded as it is by myriad road, wall and fence, there is almost unlimited material to reframe. It's tempting to think of this new communality as "the Commune", but it's not, privacy and personal space is still of importance and words like revolution invoke the tabula rasa, pointless in MO where the all economies are circular. No, MO's members are involved in a perpetual reframing of property and the material world. Out of the need to form bonds – compared to many places where a house is sold – in MO a house is re-imagined, with neighbours, to make new things.

[synthcast end]



*Canal, Middelburg Overton
©PostRational/Mike Lim*

THE WHEREWITH-ALL

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[Synthcast begin]

In terms of its status, MO is not a typical exemplar of a URE success story. Not big enough to pick up remnants of London's hegemony, nor to own its own independent geographical or regional identity. Devoid of its own historic mythology, the town occupies a space that is politically, socially, and geographically unglamorous. Built to service a metropolis that was subsequently removed, MO never got the chance to grow up into a real place, to develop into its designed destiny. Its psychology is best described, however, not as embittered and lost but sanguine, driven, and skeptical.

Isolated and forgotten has given way to self-sufficient, yet deeply connected and above all, proud. Fiercely unforgiving and brutally scathing of the empty jargon-heavy promises upon which the super village was conceived, townspeople of MO are no-nonsense, practical, and collaborative by circumstance. The town centre, intended as a 'landed marina', was never completed, leaving a vacuum for civic space and for traffic flow throughout the area. It has been rebuilt as a car park and town square. The town is small enough to accommodate an amount of public participatory decision-making: municipal decisions and meetings are open to all and the council activity happens out in the open.

Infrastructural Ombudsmen are the one staple of the rest of the URE that have a significant presence in MO. Because of the uniquely inauspicious circumstances surrounding MO's development (abandoned, half-complete, stripped of local connection) and because of the ingenuity of rethinking and reworking based on what is there already, word has travelled to the other regions. Infrastructural Ombudsmen, installed to broker better communications and relations between regions, have taken up semi-permanent residence in an immobile home next to the supermarket town hall, there for continual reciprocal reconnaissance. From North East through to South West, regions are learning from MO about how to build anew from a relative wreckage. Deployment of members into different roles have given practical ways to organise post-industrial, post-service, centre-laden communities bereft of singular employment. MO members are seconded out to other regions to bring back ideas and offer suggestions on repurposing of residential and commercial zones according to what's already there.

PR

Early results suggest that the mixed allocation of resources improves social relations and mutual understanding across populations. It's not happy-clappy, but there's a slow swell of collective understanding and – if not identity – then vernacular or 'house style' that is emerging among the people of MO, an unlikely poster child for reconstructive resilience.

[Synthcast end]

OBSERVATIONS ON MO'S RECONSTRUCTIVE RESILIENCE

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[Synthcast begin]

Middling-Overton demonstrates several key features of absorbism, including:

- A belief that out of difficult events, people can rebuild into something superior than what preceded them
- An approach to built environment and design that starts from what is there and reworks it
- A familiarity with the past that is nevertheless an eerie and often uneasy rejection of it
- A psychology that is inherently resilient, proud, and self-sufficient
- A structural and cultural perspective that is porous, but not always outward-looking, open but not always welcoming, networked but not always connected

Further study would investigate the nuts and bolts of economic and cultural activity:

- When does this project and programme of rebuilding cease, and if so, what then?
- How will the emergent technologies seen elsewhere in the URE be deployed in MO and how will they need to be adapted to sustain the town?
- How will MO maintain its sturdy recalcitrance towards the rest of the URE and also to London given the increasing popularity of its civic reputation and unlikely tourist attractions?
- How will MO retain its ability to repurpose and reimagine its own space as more and more people are drawn to the way it organises its time, space, and members?

[Synthcast end]

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