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URBAN SYSTEMS

Birmingham: Inventing a New Life for the 21st Century

Rod Duncan

During 1998–99 I was fortunate to participate in an international professional exchange to the United Kingdom, working in and researching innovation and best practice in urban design and regeneration. Across a nation now strongly focussed on addressing and managing change in its cities, perhaps the most dramatically successful example I observed was Birmingham, in particular the new sector of the inner city known as Brindleyplace. This may have been emphasised by negative impressions gained during a brief visit to the city 20 years earlier. The following account is based on detailed discussions with key officers involved in the process (particularly Geoff Wright), supported by wider research and recent updates.

There are valuable lessons to be drawn from the Birmingham experience, most obviously from identifying the factors influencing its successes, but also in how outcomes and processes might have been more effective. Many of these lessons will have applicability to cities throughout the world dealing with change.

Birmingham, with around a million residents, rivals some other contenders as England's second city. It has a rich history as a prosperous product of the Industrial Revolution that successfully made the transition into the twentieth century, maturing into a proud civic-minded community with a healthy manufacturing economy, large enough to be cosmopolitan, yet small enough to retain its own identity and ethos. However, turbulent economic change in recent decades has challenged the city's capacity to make the transition into the new millennium as smooth or comfortable.

Part of Birmingham's strength has been its diversity. Whilst dominant in some major industries (such as motor manufacturing and armaments – admitting to arming both sides in several conflicts) the city had a broad variety of industries, being known as 'the city of a thousand trades'. Some of these industries, such as metal-working and jewellery manufacture, are characterised by numerous small operations. These sustained a diversity of ethnic and religious sub-cultures within the city. It is one of the few places in Britain boasting of its 'multi-cultural' character in tourist literature. There is a culture of civic innovation, arts patronage and social benevolence, such as the Quaker Cadburys' initiatives in Bournville.

Birmingham suffered from the attentions of the Luftwaffe, but like many other cities much of its physical destruction was self-inflicted in the post-war period. Embracing modernism, by the 1960s central Birmingham was dominated by elevated motorways feeding duplicated ring roads with interminable roundabouts threading between – or through – concrete towers of offices and housing, whilst pedestrians were channelled into a disorientating network of vertigo-inducing aerial walkways or intimidating underpasses. Perhaps this reflected the city's readiness to embrace innovation, adopting what was 'best practice' for the era – and now a lesson in the risks of pursuing the latest fad. Perhaps it was structural: a large, prosperous municipality with high autonomy. Perhaps it was cultural: this was the city that spawned the Mini in a similar period.

My memories of briefly visiting Birmingham in 1977 have coalesced into a collage of this imagery, with the flicker of some grand Victorian civic survivors stranded in the centre. Shades of 'Clockwork Orange'. Retrieving my photo archive, I found that, tellingly, I had taken just one shot during that visit. This confirms the accuracy of my impression: the Bull Ring shopping centre straddling the Queensway inner ring road ... with an ironic pebble-paved compass point vainly offering some sense of orientation.

Birmingham's diversity of industries, particularly manufacturing in its inner areas, moderated the impacts of de-industrialisation relative to Britain's more northerly industrial cities, often vulnerably narrowly based on big industries like coal, steel and ship-building. However the economic changes during the 1980s, attributed to the policies of Margaret Thatcher, wrought devastatingly upon Birmingham. Employment in manufacturing in the inner ring of the city halved in a decade, falling from 60% to 30% of the workforce. This activated the 'stimulus of desperation' that can by-pass cities that either slowly decay or atrophy in the warmth of their comfort zone. Perhaps Birmingham got clever out of desperation.

The City of Birmingham could draw on a successful and lucrative edge in the new economy. It owns the National Exhibition Centre, a massive complex developed beyond the urban area in the 1970s on a motorway interchange adjacent to a railway station and airport. This venue hosts most major exhibitions and trade fairs, conveniently positioned to serve the national and European catchments. As well as convincingly illustrating the growing value of the service economy, it provided the City with established expertise and a handy cash-flow.

Municipal leaders and managers recognised that the service economy was a lifeline, perhaps the sole lifeline, to the city's future. Substantial investment has been made in the International Convention Centre and National Indoor Arena, both located in the inner west of the city complementing a growing hospitality precinct. The City's reputation for patronage of the arts was reflected in an impressive new Symphony Hall, providing a home for its famed orchestra whilst doubling as the plenary venue for the ICC. Hosting the G8 Summit in 1999 confirmed the venue's global perspective.

The City also elevated planning from a peripheral activity to a critical obligation. It adopted a philosophy that 'Good environment is good business.' A

search conference of high profile participants in 1987 (termed the Highbury Initiative, after its venue) set a course that had the resilience to weather political volatility, including change of Council control and a marginal national electorate. This initiative generated a City Centre Strategy and supportive structures and commitments.

In 1989–90 Francis Tibbalds undertook BUDS, the Birmingham Urban Design Strategy, that examined the form, function and spirit of central Birmingham. This report was an identification of opportunities, a prompt for self-examination, and insightful observations, rather than prescriptions. (He was invited to Melbourne to prepare a similar report at about this time.) This informed refinement of the strategy for the whole central area, policies and statements for each of its seven ‘quarters’, with subsequent elaboration for component sub-areas still continuing. This methodical hierarchy of increasingly specific and detailed strategies and action plans appears somewhat theoretical, but it is simple to follow and readily understood, linking the big picture to local relevance, and appearing to ensure focussed effort. The chain of linkage to the central objectives is also supported by sustained political commitment and resource allocation.

An early conclusion was that the tight inner ring road restricted the central core’s capacities, whilst stifling flow-ons that could fuel adaptation and revitalisation in the encircling inner ‘quarters’. The cry went out to ‘break the concrete collar’, lowering and downgrading vehicle routes, humanising the forms, providing at-grade and direct pedestrian links throughout the central area. The heavy engineering of the 1960s has now been largely re-engineered and a variety of destinations have become a comfortable and pleasant walk away, with more planned.

The most apparent changes to date are in the western and northern sectors of the inner city. The latter is the Jewellery Quarter, still housing large numbers of artisans and small businesses, and a trade and arts school in impressively restored buildings. Support extends to some simple but effective initiatives such as Council leasing a building then sub-letting small studio spaces to artisans and students, and nurturing a specialist tourist theme that complements jewellery production and prompts investment in restoration of an extensive but fragile stock of heritage buildings.

But it is the western axis from the city centre that has undergone the most dramatic transformation. An established pedestrian route from the civic focus of the impressively upgraded Victoria Square now extends via a broad walkway over the lowered ring road to Centennial Square. The Square has been paved in representation of an oriental carpet, celebrating one aspect of the city’s diversity and providing a large resilient space is capable of accommodating major public events. The Square forms a forecourt to Symphony Hall, the International Convention Centre, a regional theatre and war memorial, with major pieces of public art reflecting the city’s history and spirit.

The pedestrian axis follows through the atrium joining Symphony Hall and the ICC complex, emerging beside part of Birmingham’s extensive canal network, long ignored and hidden behind factories. Across a feature bridge is the redevelopment known, after a pioneering canal engineer, as Brindleyplace.

BRINDLEYPLACE

When completed soon, this seven hectare site will house about 10,000 workers in about 100,000 m² of offices and a mixture of other service and hospitality uses. (To reflect on the change between the millennia, this will exceed the number of workers at Rover's Longbridge car plant – if that is still in production.)

This was previously a decaying low-rise manufacturing area, assembled in the 1980s by the Council and sold for an approved development to a company that failed in the 1990 crash. By then, Council had spent the proceeds (26 million pounds) on building the adjacent indoor arena.

When a parent company sought to retrieve something from the asset, it brought the modest expectations that a former (Tory) Planning Minister termed 'the benefits of bankruptcy'. Having already spent its money, Council and senior management was also relaxed in its expectations. The Council officer that renegotiated the site approvals attributes the success to 'lots of unpressured thinking time' and a high level of autonomy to work at the professional level to articulate strategic objectives with a sympathetic developer. 'It was delivered because no-one believed it would be.'

Negotiations with Argent Properties centred around lifting the cap on office floor space and the capacity to pursue fresh 'planning gain' benefits that Council could have required for a new development proposal. The return negotiated was improved quality and certainty, with a lot more attention to detail than usual. This included upfront detailed master planning by John Chatwin with layout, circulation network, and enabling creation of self-contained lots that could be developed separately (providing flexibility for the developer).

A commitment to high standards of urban design and architecture was achieved, along with the early provision of substantial public infrastructure, including a feature pedestrian bridge, two major squares and rehabilitation of the canal-side. The first stage included establishment of active elements including waterside bars, restaurants and shops that cost substantially more to construct than their completed market value (a 'loss leader' in property parlance), but were seen as essential (and financially justifiable) to add vitality and profile to the wider area.

The City's detailed strategies, urban design analysis, and practical guidance for redevelopment equipped it to know what it wanted, and where, in great detail, and gave officers the confidence to demand it. The quality and clarity of this information also assisted the developer to recognise not just why Council wanted this, but how it complemented the private sector's interests. Having a developer with long-term commitment and deep pockets clearly helped, but it is now clear that going for top quality on this site will be a very lucrative investment.

The arrangements negotiated for Brindleyplace articulated the site with a fine grained network of routes, extending the strong pedestrian axis established from the central city across a feature bridge. Ground floors on main routes are generally active frontages with retail, hospitality and nightlife activities, and new public spaces of exceptional quality are required to be completed before the

stage each services. Key existing buildings were incorporated, including the Oozells school, converted to a contemporary art gallery.

A wide variety of uses have been achieved along with the dominant office function: a community theatre, gymnasium, aquarium, gallery, variety of restaurants, retail (principally tourist-focussed), and a 900 vehicle car park, along with a Novotel developed separately. The central focus of the early stages is Brindleyplace Square, featuring understated landscaping and a temple to the modern religion: a small but bold coffee kiosk that won Piers Gough/CZWG a national architecture award.

There is not a residential element in the principal development area, but an adjacent triangle of land separated by a canal was sold early and has been developed as Symphony Court, a 140 unit town house enclave. Gated private access and the intervening canal limit its contribution to Brindleyplace, and constrict circulation linkages with destinations to the north. The value of residences within this development are reported to have increased to 250% of their sale price in the first few years, reflecting the extent of re-imaging of the locality.

Office buildings comprise about 100,000 square metres total floor space in ten separate structures from 4,000 m² to 12,000 m² in floor area, with flexibility to respond to individual tenants in units down to 500 m², and serviced suites for smaller users. The development company builds and retains ownership with a variety of predominantly national tenants. Each building is architect designed with a high standard of finish, distinctive from its neighbours, but of a consistent height and bulk. Curiously, Argent utilises two major construction companies, who each opt for different construction technology nation-wide: one builds only in reinforced concrete, whilst the other prefers steel frame structures, apparently with comparable economics.

The dominant scale of office elements is around 7 storeys, subsidiary elements generally two or three levels. Individual office buildings have gained positive design reviews and architectural and office industry awards, enhancing the rapid uptake of prime occupants.

In later components, the developer has become more adventurous toward mixed use in a single structure. One recent building includes flexible office space (including hot-desks and short leases), a corporate restaurant, five levels of serviced apartments and the capacity for office conversion to more residential or even retail if the demand is shown. The developer sees the benefits of mixed use making an area that is a destination in itself, along with an attractive work environment that helps retain or attract skilled employees in a competitive environment.

LESSONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Birmingham's experience demonstrates some lessons for others. Hopefully these will be pursued more deeply than trying to copy the success through simply mimicking the built forms. Having a sound, agreed strategic basis helped it target key opportunities, and to provide incremental infrastructure improvements that maximised these opportunities coming to fruition. Having a clear logical

and publicised basis for negotiating quality, supported by Council's own investment, enhances prospects of developers responding positively, and treating their involvement as a positive alliance. None of this ensured that the essential spark would light, but it ensured that when an opportunity did come it generated the most positive outcomes and magnified the benefits.

The result has been spectacularly successful at several levels. A whole new urban locality has been inserted close to the centre of a major city without being monochromatic, monofunctional and quickly dated. It is also clearly a raging commercial success. (Hosting the British Council for Offices conference last year must rate as the top prize in the commercial world, with the hard-nosed financiers and property managers drooling over the complex.) In turn this private success has dramatically challenged Birmingham's image across Europe, and will doubtless stimulate increased inward investment.

There must have been moments since 1983 when questions were asked as to whether the efforts being put into strategic planning, and sensitive nurturing of the city's diversity and character was the way to go. Liberalising standards in a downward dutch auction is attractive to the short-term thinkers both near and far. Birmingham's nerve and backbone is now paying off, as lesser wills slide deeper into mediocrity.

On the downside, there are some shortfalls in the development. In the absence of a residential component (discounting the enclave across the canal) it falls short of the mixed use ideal. However it does contain a diversity of other uses, particularly at street level and along route frontages. It also lacks integration with the city's rail network for commuter access, with no lines close to this locality. However it does front the major commuter bus corridor in Broad Street. The site's large car park encourages commuting worker traffic that conflicts with sustainability objectives, (and, it would appear, national planning policy). There are plans for a light rail service, including a line to the north of the site, but timelines for this are unclear. Introduction of a new mode could further strain achievement of integration in the city's already fragmented transport system.

Pedestrian routes dissipate across the site from the strong city centre link to the east, avoiding servicing, commuter and client vehicular traffic that enters from the west and disperses, minimising conflicting paths like interleaved fingers of two hands. However, this would seem to terminate any future prospect of further extending west this successful pedestrian axis.

Brindleyplace also contains what is generally conceded as Norman Foster's worst building (apparently illustrating the pitfalls of design-built procurement), the Sea Life aquarium, an unconvincing scallop shell that aims to front a corner of the principal square expanding back to fill a dead corner site. Ironically, this aquatic experience does not embrace its extensive waterway frontage. It is unfortunate that rather than a feature, this is a fill-in between office buildings of greater architectural pretention. The offices are above average and generally achieve diversity with consistency that gives a comfortable variety. Whilst the anchor building (by Porphyrios Associates) linking the canal frontage to the new Square reflects a curious parentage in Neo-Venetian/Classical vein with Italianate cam-

panile clocktower in red brick and reconstituted stone, it brings a landmark presence that is also comfortable at street level and unoffensive.

CONCLUSIONS

With the success of the Brindleyplace site, and equipped with its clear, practical strategies for the rest of its central areas (and refreshed confidence in their effective application), Birmingham appears to be well-placed to succeed in the transition to another century. This success has jolted aside the image of Birmingham as a manufacturing dinosaur, being the envy of many European cities in attracting the service economy to its heart.

Whilst perhaps good luck, good fortune, fortuitous circumstances and location may have helped, there has clearly been a lot of clever work to ensure that when the opportunity arose it was seized, and then maximised. Birmingham's thorough forward-planning and focus on quality in design and urban environments ensured that redevelopment of the Brindleyplace site was elevated from just another office complex to a landmark development that has repositioned the city for the new millennium.



Figure 1 Central Birmingham (encircled by inner ring road at right).

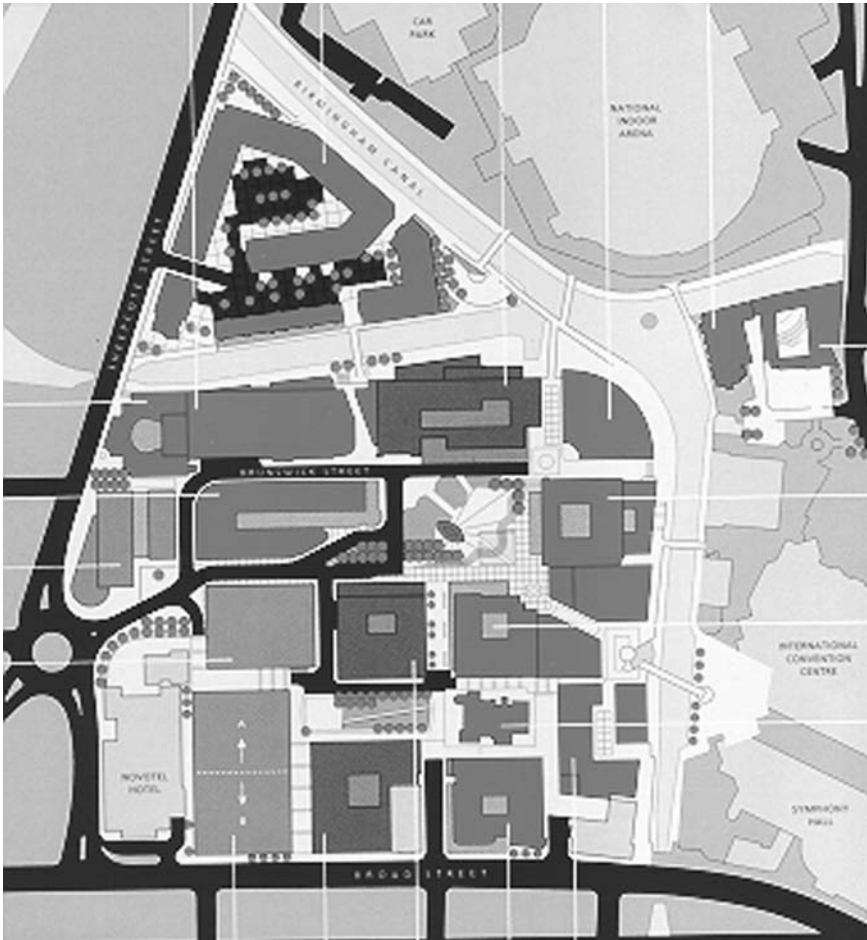


Figure 2 Layout of Brindleyplace (north is to the top), showing pedestrian axis from south-east to principal new public space. Triangle of housing to north is gated, separating it from the balance of the area. Vehicular access from the west disperses into the site (with most traffic to the parking structure beside the canal at the north), minimising conflict with pedestrian areas and routes. [Argent Properties]



Figure 4 Aerial view of Brindleyplace during construction (1998) facing east, showing relationship to central city area (central middle and rear ground) and Broad Street arterial on right. [Argent Properties]



Figure 5 Brindleyplace Square, featuring award-winning coffee shop by Piers Gough/CZWG and No. 3 Brindleyplace office building (with clocktower) by Porphyrios Associates, with pedestrian link (shaded) to footbridge, International Convention Centre and city centre via Centennial Square.
[Argent Properties]

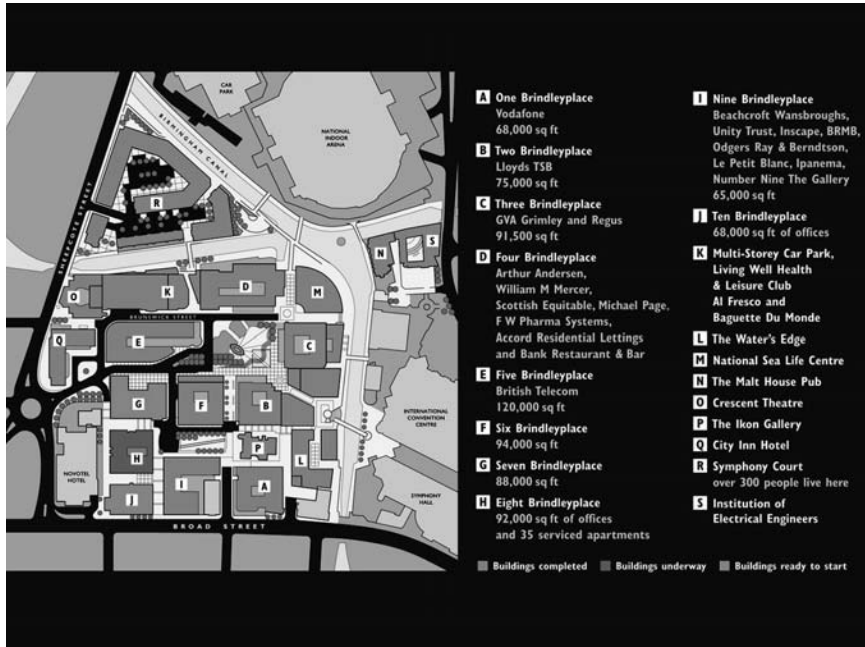


Figure 6 Site plan showing details of buildings, construction dates and architects.