Book review

BIRMINGHAM: SHAPING THE CITY

B. Flatman, RIBA, 2008. ISBN 978-1-8594-6245-4, £19.95, 192pp.

Vanity publishing is a strange art-form, and the new Birmingham/ RIBA *Shaping the City* book falls into some of its traps.

Fortunately, there is quite a lot to be vain about—the city's record over the last two decades is undoubtedly impressive, and the story in Chapter 2 'From a City of Roundabouts to a City of Squares' is genuinely heartening and inspirational for anyone who cares about the great Victorian and Edwardian cities of the North and Midlands, and so is a visit to the reshaped and revived centre: the chain of linked spaces from New Street station via Victoria Square and the new public realm over the former Inner Ring, to the Symphony Hall, Arena, Brindleyplace and the canal basins is as good a sequence of city spaces as anywhere in the country. There are still mediocre buildings along it – but the buildings are not necessarily the key point: it is the linkages, the spaces, the interaction and the usefulness of the sequence that make it such a triumph.

It begins with an annoying and somewhat pretentious 13 pages of throat-clearing (Foreword, Preface, Acknowledgements, blurb from the ten sponsors and a timeline from 1156 to 2007, with the main point of interest being that Aston Villa was founded the same year as the Fever Hospital). Two short and well-written chapters then follow on the city's growth history ('City of Change') and the strategic change of the last 20 years (From a City of Roundabouts to a City of Squares). We then are into the buildings: 140 pages of the standard architecture-magazine treatment of 44 projects (five of them in Brindley-place alone), a sense-drench of colour photographs, 3D images, dense scheme descriptions and lists of everyone from the client to the architect to the 'project facilitator.'

A final section seeks to draw the themes together, and to give a one-page look forward from Clive Dutton, the city's dynamic head of regeneration, three of the city's leading architects and Birmingham-bred Ken Shuttleworth of Make Architects. This section works well: it is snappy, brief, quirky, personal, with a sense of the people who know their city and enjoy it. A particular delight is the quote from a local developer in Digbeth: 'The most pleasing thing is that all the people involved, the developers, the architects, the lawyers, the builders and the housing association, are from the city. It's like Birmingham rebuilding Birmingham and it gives tremendous

pride to be involved.' That is exactly what we need in provincial Britain: that is how Hamburg and Chicago and Lyon think about themselves, and about their (non-) relationship with Berlin or Washington or Paris.

One of the most important sentences in the book and the biggest omission are in (or in the latter case, *not* in) Chapter 2. The story of the move from 'roundabouts to squares' has as one of its seminal moments a symposium to rethink completely the city's planning strategy. As the text says, 'In March 1988 an event took place at Joseph Chamberlain's old house, Highbury Hall in Moseley, which would help change Birmingham for ever.' The story goes on: two major reports, identification of the inner ring as the collar that was strangling the centre, a major programme of public realm interventions, definition of and focus on the 'Quarters', and crucially, processes and political will to make this happen. This is a brilliant and fascinating tale, full of lessons for everywhere else in urban Britain – but it is rather buried in the slightly 'luvvie' feel of the whole publication. This reader thought it should have been what the book was *about*: with the rest as illustration of the achievement, and a look forward to yet more aspiration.

The extraordinary omission is that there are no maps or plans – none at all (unless you count a scan of a survey commissioned in 1553 by Henry VIII). Unless you are a Birmingham regular, it would be pretty well impossible to get a sense of the relationships, spaces and places that are being discussed; this really does underplay and devalue the extraordinary achievement that the 20 years since Highbury have been: where was, and is, the inner ring? How brave was it to put the Symphony Hall out on the centre's edge and work to connect it in? What are the prospects for using Digbeth as the key to link a burgeoning city centre to the struggling inner city areas nearby? And so on. A book that does not show this spatial dimension is only telling part of the story.

The devoted worship of 40-plus shiny new buildings and some striking new public spaces is of course part of that story too; but it is not actually the key narrative. And the architecture, while important in the story, is not perhaps as significant as *Shaping the City* implies. How and what the city did, is still waiting for the definitive record of a proud period in Birmingham's history.

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