Book review

LEEDS: SHAPING THE CITY

Martin Wainwright. Royal Institute of British Architects and Leeds City Council, 2009. ISBN 978 1 8594 6244 7, £19.95, 220 pp.

The famous Leeds-born playwright Alan Bennett wrote in his biography *Untold Stories* 'in the sixties Leeds, like all the northern cities, was sacked by the property developers ... much of its nineteenth century inheritance was lost ...'.

This Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) publication celebrates a considerable recovery from that low point. The book is very well written – not surprisingly because *The Guardian's* Martin Wainwright is responsible for much of it – and there is a smooth narrative flow. However, this reviewer would have preferred more signposting to get a sense of where each section is heading and less layered detail – some of the story will only be of interest to the development profession in the city.

Nevertheless, there is lots to look at (it is an architecture book after all) and lots to admire. Yes, there are the inevitable pack-shots of the 'product': the new buildings that the last 2 decades of growth and investment in offices, apartments and shopping have brought to (mainly) central and inner Leeds.

But there are also some lovely expositions of locale. In particular, the Briggate yards and Alleys project is well described and illustrated, showing that this revival initiative was clearly well performed. The chapter on Contextual Leeds shows this interplay of building and place, of new and old, very well: a real extra in comparison with other books in this series.

Readers of this journal, however, will generally want more than is offered. Explanation of the area planning and place-making that opened up The Calls & Riverside to integrate it as a new and different city centre 'quarter' (p. 31) touches on this planned-but-organic process, but does not really get in behind the story enough. A lack of maps is a further drawback. Where are the places mentioned? How do they relate to one another? Maps would help the reader understand the real nature of the achievement.

To paraphrase BBC sports presenter Adrian Chiles, here are two bad things and two good things about the book. First, two bad:

- (a) *Leeds: Shaping The City* shows us a couple of really crude buildings that could be thought of as epitomising a sort of

'second city syndrome': bigger is better and never mind the quality. Bridgewater Place (pp. 42–45), just south of the rail station, and the Aire and Calder Navigation, which is big (32 storeys), clumsy, big, poorly detailed and – did I mention? – big. This represents a sort of 'keeping up with the Hiltons': Leeds looking wistfully west to Manchester. The National Health Service headquarters at Quarry House (p. 162 refers to 'mistakes, to some...') is a huge embarrassing lump of post-modernism, horribly prominent from the York railway line, surrounded by a sort of impact zone that makes it look as though it was dropped from a helicopter.

- (b) The reader is given (pp. 29–30) a panegyric to the vision of planner Thirlwall and leader Marshall in the 1960s and 1970s – a vision that produced traffic-free areas in the core. And, yes, Briggate is a victory for that approach. Sadly, the current regime in the Highways Department does not seem to have had this torch passed on. Leeds has some of the worst, most 1980s-tribute road layouts in urban Britain: try crossing the road outside City Station's lovingly restored north concourse (pp. 108–111) towards Park Row and admire how carefully it has been designed to encourage boy-racer behaviour right through this bit of the city centre. *Leeds: Shaping The City* is so keen to tell us the history that the actual present-day is let off the hook.

And two good:

- (a) *Partnership*. In the chapter *Shaping The Future* (p. 193), Wainwright rightly celebrates the 'friendly and productive' relationships that lie behind the 20-year achievement. I agree. Some years ago I wrote a paper entitled 'Why is the Leeds economy so successful?' and came up with far too many reasons, none of them crucial – a sure sign that a lot of things are being put together quietly and realistically.
- (b) *Vision*. Liz Minkin's pages (pp. 210–211) near the end of the book are a delight. This is a lively, committed, rooted view of how the city can change for the better from a lively, committed, rooted councillor who has been on the case for years.

This is a book for the (Leeds) cognoscenti, as these RIBA works tend to be. But they, and others who dip into it, will get some sense of the place and its places, and a good feel for both where Leeds is coming from and where it is heading.

MARTIN CROOKSTON