



# Revival in the square

NICK CORBETT ARGUES THAT THE LEVEL OF INVESTMENT IN SOME OF OUR TOWNS AND CITIES IS NOW COMPARABLE TO THE VICTORIAN URBAN RENAISSANCE WHICH TRANSFORMED THE HEART OF BRITAIN'S INDUSTRIAL CITIES AND LED TO GREATER CIVIC PRIDE

It is one of Britain's most inspiring achievements – but it is also a harrowing story. The industrial urbanisation of its land has involved merchant princes and municipal palaces but also the exploited means of production – including rickety children and their slum dwellings. It is a story of visionaries building for a better tomorrow, of migrant workers getting a foothold in a civilisation, of risk taking, overcoming fears, individual responsibility and caring for others.

As the 19th century progressed, educated people became increasingly well informed, not only about the dark corners of the Empire, but also about the dark recesses of Britain's booming industrial cities. Many were horrified by the suffering and the squalor. Perhaps surprisingly, large numbers of the better-off did not retreat from the city but formed an active citizenry – joining improvement boards, friendly societies, mechanics institutes and missionary societies. Some were inspired by the stirring words in Isaiah 58 that they will be called rebuilders, repairers and restorers of streets.

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF VISION

After the Napoleonic Wars the well-to-do took advantage of new opportunities to travel across Europe and a romantic attachment was formed with Paris and the Italian city states. A different kind of vision began to be shared for the cities back home in Britain, for something that could be beautiful, independent, and a safe haven for its people. The result on the ground was a growing interest in the possibilities for city government. This was followed through with urban improvements that included civic piazzas, boulevards, and town-hall palaces to rival anything in Venice. Towns and cities competed with each other – desperate to prove their intellectual and artistic credentials. The Victorian urban renaissance

transformed the heart of Britain's industrial cities and we continue to enjoy its legacy.

## SPECIALIST BOXES AND POWER VACUUMS

There were many attacks on this civic pride during the 20th century. Town-hall talent was lost in the wars and survivors were attracted into business or central Government where power was increasingly centralised. Decisions about individual cities and about the design and management of public space were increasingly made by strangers – by people who might never have visited the place they were changing. With the rise of the different environmental professions, including architects, planners, engineers, surveyors and landscape architects, decision-makers increasingly withdrew into their own specialist boxes and the gaps between the boxes left power vacuums. Neglect and anti-social behaviour crept into the gaps on our streets and squares. The problems were exacerbated by the economic slumps in the 20th century that hit the industrial cities hardest. The lack of local leaders, the fragmentation of expertise, the complex and fragmented decision-making structures, and greater legal complexity, all conspired to make it impossible to prevent urban decline. Urban public space was increasingly controlled by utility companies and by advertisers.

## NOTIONS OF CIVIC IDENTITY

In the 20th century, no active citizenry advanced to defend the city streets, civic piazzas, and urban parks – at least nothing comparable to the direct action shown by the Victorians; instead there was a retreat. People felt increasingly powerless to change where they lived. People were now more mobile and the rise of individualism left many feeling free to relocate wherever they wished. The better-off returned to the garden – to the countryside, which was to be

swamped with unprecedented suburbanisation.

Curiously, the vision for a better city, a place of beauty that brings people together, did not die but found favour again at the end of the 20th century. There are some enduring characteristics of city life that people will not let go of. If people are to be aware of the complexity and variety of the society they are a part of, and if they are to appreciate notions of civic identity and respect for others, there must be a place they can occasionally see and experience a diverse cross-section of that society – and this is one of the functions of the city and its public spaces. People have clung on to the ideal of participating in public life. By simply standing in a lively urban square, where different members of society are gathered together, there is a sense of a shared experience that evokes a positive sense of participation.

## A NEW ARMY OF REGENERATION AND URBAN-DESIGN PRACTITIONERS

In recent years, national leaders have identified that sustainable urban communities are an essential part of Britain's future. New governance structures have empowered political leaders at a local level – encouraging a new trickle of town-hall talent. These leaders can now draw upon a new army of better equipped, multi-skilled regeneration and urban-design practitioners. The practitioners can bridge the divides created by the fragmented professions and legalistic bureaucracy. This army networks effectively and gathers at events like the Delivering Sustainable Communities Urban Summit to discuss tactics and strategy.

The artistic principles that were ingrained in the thinking of the builders of the Italian city states is being rediscovered. The culture of fear and risk avoidance that took control of town halls in the 20th century and which allowed highway engineers to erect guard railings to fence people in, and to apply ►



► crazy-paving schemes, and to plant a plethora of warning signs on urban streets, is all being challenged.

### INCREASINGLY MEDIA SAVVY

Proposals to improve streets and squares are appearing on the front pages of the strong provincial newspapers — just as they did in Victorian times. Public-space practitioners are becoming increasingly media savvy. There is debate in the national papers with *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* all discussing Kensington and Chelsea's proposals to improve Exhibition Road. This radical project has proposed the removal of some pavements and the sharing of space between motorists and pedestrians. The project has generated so much media interest because it touches upon key issues facing British society in the 21st century — not least the issue of trust. When we look at the way that some people behave in public space, and the way that decision makers have mismanaged public space, there are plenty of reasons why we should not trust people, but without some level of trust there is a bleak future for public space. The problem of guard railing and other highway-safety measures is that it reinforces a negative message that people are not to be trusted.

The improvements to Kensington High Street have shown how Highway Regulations can be reinterpreted to eliminate clutter and obstacles to pedestrian freedom. An evidence-based approach with effective video monitoring has shown that removing guard rails and excessive signage does not make a street more dangerous but makes people more aware of each other, reduces obstacles for disabled people, and creates a better setting for buildings and street life. Similar improvements to Trafalgar Square, the nation's marketplace, have integrated the space back into the everyday lives of Londoners, as well as tourists. This is all significant for civil renewal and building up trust.

### BIRMINGHAM — EMBARKING UPON AN URBAN RENAISSANCE

The regeneration of Birmingham city centre was recently awarded a global award from the prestigious Urban Land Institute at a ceremony in New York. Birmingham provides a useful case study demonstrating the importance of public space in urban regeneration. In the 19th century, Birmingham had benefited from a visionary mayor, Joseph Chamberlain, who was elected to

the Council in 1869 and went on to implement municipal improvements on a grand scale. Much of the city had been in a squalid condition prior to his administration. Chamberlain's legacy has survived to an extent, but Birmingham suffered greatly through war damage, poor-quality post-war planning and highway engineering, and loss of wealth and talent to new suburbs and county towns. Much of the post-war redevelopment of the city contrasted with the earlier irregular grid pattern, and was primarily designed for motor vehicle accessibility in the 1960s. This resulted in the construction of a number of ring roads, including the inner ring road, soon recognised as being a 'concrete collar' around the city centre.

At the end of the 1990s, the sparks of municipal leadership began to ignite again in Birmingham — and slowly but surely the neglected city centre has been turned around. Through implementing an urban-design strategy, Birmingham is now well-embarked upon an urban renaissance of a scale unrecognised since the time of Chamberlain. The process began when Birmingham City Council and its partners organised an international design symposium — the Highbury Initiative — to address the city's problems in 1988. This brought together local interests and international design and regeneration talent to create a new City Centre Design Strategy.

### DELIVERING THE NEW VISION

Strong Council leadership helped to direct public- and private-sector investment to deliver the new vision. Five public squares have been created or improved along a new strategic link from the New Street railway station to Brindley Place, and the interconnecting streets have been pedestrianised. These improvements provide the pedestrian with a sequential experience of interconnected public spaces. Before Brindley Place was built there had been no private-sector post-war housing in Birmingham city centre. Brindley Place proved there was a demand for a range of city-living accommodation within the city centre, and many new residential schemes are now being developed above commercial premises elsewhere in the city centre. These developments, located around attractive public spaces, are helping to create a livelier, safer, and

more sustainable city.

Producing an urban-design strategy, which includes the vision for city squares and interconnected streets, has helped to put Birmingham firmly on the world map. Following the successful development of Birmingham's new quarters to the west side of the city centre, the City Council produced a new urban-design framework to develop the 'Eastside' in a way that builds upon the City Centre Design Strategy. New interconnected squares, public spaces, vistas, and malls have been created in the flagship Bullring redevelopment. The landmark of Saint Martin's church has been renovated as part of the new Bullring and a new square has been provided around it. The church has engaged with its adventurous new surroundings and has a growing congregation.

### A SHARED VISION FOR AN URBAN RENAISSANCE

Birmingham can now compete in the global marketplace in attracting new creative industries. Elsewhere in the old industrial towns and cities, new Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) have been set up. Through partnership working they are helping local authorities to tackle the complexity of the development process, bringing key players together under the banner of a shared vision for an urban renaissance. Master plans are being produced to serve as powerful and coherent vision documents for urban centres and the URCs are co-ordinating action to implement them. Derby Cityscape URC has produced a masterplan which will guide an investment programme worth £1.3bn for the creation of new urban quarters, streets and squares in Derby city centre — over the next 15 years. Derby Cityscape has also recently announced a £2M design competition for an affordability-led city-centre housing scheme that will promote social inclusion and attract the best design talent to Derby.

The level of investment in some of our towns and cities is now comparable to the Victorian urban renaissance — we must ensure that the legacy we leave behind is also of enduring quality and that people from all walks of life feel at home in our new urban spaces.

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