

## **RECONNECTING THE CITY – A CASE STUDY OF BIRMINGHAM AND THE NEW BULLRING**

Mike Taylor,  
Town Planner for the Birmingham City Council

My paper addresses how Birmingham has sought to improve accessibility and movement within its City Centre. To outline its overall strategy, to explain a series of positive interventions carried out by the City Council and finally to present a Case Study of the new Bullring shopping centre in the heart of Birmingham City Centre by way of illustrating how the private sector has recognised the importance of movement flows for their commercial success and how it is the private sector that is now implementing the City Council's visions and aspirations.

Before I do this however, I would like to set the context for the new Bullring because in Birmingham we did not set out merely to build an award winning shopping centre. We set out with a much wider brief relating to the economic future of Birmingham and the need to repair an aspiring City Centre. We needed a much more potent economic and cultural focus for the future of the city and region. But first, a few words by way of introduction to Birmingham itself.

Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK, it is the capital of the central region of England. It has a population of 1 million people within a wider region of 5 million people. Manufacturing activity played a large part in its early success and by the 18<sup>th</sup> century we were already known as the workshop of the world. Later Birmingham became associated with car making and the car component industry and with world famous names such as Jaguar, Rover and Dunlop all housed in the City.

Looking back it is important to appreciate the scale and suddenness of the decline in manufacturing in the city and West Midlands in the late 1970's and early 1980's which lead to an interest in regenerating the City Centre. Between 1972 and 1984 Birmingham lost half of its manufacturing jobs – employment declined from 295,000 to 130,000. Birmingham lost more jobs than Scotland and Wales put together during a comparable period. However, at the same period jobs in the service sector were maintained and have since become the largest source of employment. Given these circumstances it is not surprising that Birmingham had to adopt new strategies emphasising quality manufacturing based on high technology and maximising the potential of an established but patently under performing City Centre for service sector growth.

In the early 1980's Birmingham was particularly influenced by contact with the eastern seaboard of the United States where City's such as Baltimore were regenerating based upon the catalyst of flagship convention centres and the growth of business related tourism. We were well placed to initiate similar changes as we were already strongly exploiting Birmingham's unique location at the centre of the UK's communication network by developing the edge of town National Exhibition Centre which now provides over 2 million ft<sup>2</sup> of exhibition space alongside a rapidly growing Birmingham International Airport.

However, it was the brave decision made in 1983 to create a complimentary facility – the UK's first International Convention Centre complimented by a world class

concert hall in the heart of the City Centre that focussed the attention on the City Centre and the need to address issues of pedestrian movement and pedestrian flows.

In 1988 with the ICC well underway to being completed attention shifted to the need for a detailed vision of the future of the City Centre. Hitherto Birmingham City Centre was very much a legacy of comprehensive redevelopment that took place after major bombing during the Second World War and the adoption of American style planning principles of large scale urban motorways, pedestrian subways, inward looking shopping malls and a land use zoning approach. Such a legacy did not present a positive image with which to encourage investment in the new service sectors nor attract the visitors that our investment in the business tourism infrastructure was seeking.

Thus, in 1987 the City Centre Strategy was drafted. This offered a physical planning vision for an expanding and mixed use City Centre with new roles and clearer identity for the City Centre Quarters outside the inner urban motorway. Birmingham's traditional love of accessibility by the motorcar, which actually encouraged through traffic to use the City Centre Core was challenged and a new approach based on promoting pedestrian priority and environmental quality was born. A 'streets and squares' philosophy of promoting a network of quality spaces and links was established. The pedestrianisation of key shopping streets, the creation of new and enhanced public open spaces and piazzas, including Victoria Square and Centenary Square has since followed with complimentary works of attractive public art. The Inner Ring Road has been breached and motorists tamed. Public transport has been improved and a much more pedestrian friendly and welcoming City Centre created.

The strategy was debated at a series of brainstorming symposiums – the 'Highbury Initiatives' and all parties effectively signed up for the long-term implementation of the new strategy. The key theme of the strategy was the conversion of the inner urban motorway to a continental style attractive tree lined urban boulevard with convenient crossings for pedestrians alongside the development of a more peripheral ring road some 1½ miles from the city core to accommodate the needs of through traffic. Within the Core there would be an emphasis on traffic calming, including full pedestrianisation of selected streets. All party political support was forthcoming to implement the strategy and the City Council allocated substantial sums of money for the City Centre enhancement. This was further augmented by significant grants from the European Regional Development Fund. The outcome of the brainstorming was a strong endorsement of the City Centre Strategy and the conclusion was that a series of key points needed to be addressed, together with an urgency to facilitate positive change. Highbury was dominated by discussion of how to change the concrete collar of the Inner Ring Road and to remove the unpleasant and disorientating subways as a first step towards creating a quality environment that would attract new investment. The direct access to the City Centre given by years of extensive road building was seen as a real asset along with New Street Station located in the heart of the core area. Both the roads and station, however, brought with them a dominance of engineering structures – undermining the experience and image of Birmingham for those actually in the centre on foot. The balance between accessibility and environment around and within the Inner Ring Road was wrong. The road itself was so attractive to vehicles it positively attracted through traffic to access the City Centre Core. To reverse this priority needed to be given to upgrading the Middleway which formed the boundary of the enlarged City Centre planning area of 800 hectares (from the original 80 hectares). The Inner Ring Road was envisaged as changing to emphasise the local access role serving the core and adjacent Quarters. In a study commissioned immediately after Highbury, Don Hilderbrant of

LDR/HLN took these concepts forward with the Pedestrian Movement and Open Space Study. The Inner Ring Road was described under its more urban title of Queensway. It was seen as possible to convert this towards an attractive tree lined system with convenient and level surface crossings for pedestrians. Within the core there was scope to carry out a series of measures from traffic calming to full pedestrianisation. All of which was to create a city of flows – an initiative we termed a streets and squares philosophy of a network of quality places and links. The emphasis of the Strategy was that the City council should initially implement such works. However it was correctly anticipated that the growth in investment that would follow would ultimately allow the public sector to take a lesser role as the private sector effectively assumed control. Many projects were implemented over a period of 10 years and indeed several projects remain to be completed. In terms of significance the pedestrianisation of New Street and the creation of the award winning Victoria Square and lowering of Paradise Circus represent the most important achievements. But many other schemes including the lowering of Smallbrook Queensway and the remodelling of Old Square have contributed to the creation of a more pedestrian friendly and enlarged City Centre Core.

Elsewhere the emphasis on the needs of pedestrians and the need for connectivity was taken to its extreme level by the developers of Brindleyplace. Alongside the newly developed International Convention Centre the City Council assembled a large 17 acre site in order to help realise the catalytic effect of the Convention Centre. This site was to be the epitome of our new strategy. We put together a simple, but robust development requesting offers for the site for mixed use development but with a strong desire to reconnect and integrate this peripheral area of the City Centre Core and the surrounding environs. Using a Terry Farrell Masterplan and the analysis offered by a Space Syntax study the developers – Argent plc – have developed an exceptionally high quality scheme of privatised public streets and squares which have stimulated significant inward investment both within and adjacent to the site.

In terms of the benefits of such work, although it is clearly impossible to attribute cause and effect, the overall aims of our policy of a growing – both physically and functionally – City Centre by encouraging development along a series of improved pedestrian corridors has certainly worked. Our City Centre has now grown physically by a factor of 10. Offices have grown by a factor of 50%, leisure and tourism by 100% and possibly most interestingly residential activity has grown from virtually nothing in the early 1980's to over 8,000 units with many more apartments in the planning stage as people now recognise that the City Centre is an attractive and safe place to live as well as to work and to visit.

However, our strategy of using pedestrian flows and public transport improvements including an embryonic light rail network as a means of improving the quality of the environment and thereby stimulating investment did not have an immediate effect on the provision of retailing in the City Centre. Certainly, pedestrianising New Street helped to restore confidence in pedestrian flows by over 50% and refurbishment gradually followed. It was however, only the development of the new Bullring in 2003 that the missing ingredient was found. I would like to move on now to outline, as a case study, how the new Bullring shopping centre has taken advantage of the investment previously made by the City Council and extended the philosophy of using flows and improved pedestrian and public transport networks to create major commercial opportunities from which the public sector itself can in turn reap benefit.

The site of the Bullring beneath St Martins Church has always been the City's historic market centre. In the 1960's the market site became one of the country's most celebrated examples of revolutionary urban planning with the dramatic development of the old Bullring, at the time one of the worlds largest enclosed shopping centres, outside of the US at 32,000 sq.m., this opened in 1964. By the 1980's and despite its trading history Birmingham had little to offer in terms of the burgeoning growth of new generation retailers and department stores. The old Bullring shopping centre was tired and jaded and the City had only one department store, the access was poor – via subterranean subways and tunnels, it was encircled by major highways, and inward looking and it possessed brutalist architecture.

The redevelopment of the 26 acre site by Birmingham Alliance is a milestone in the city's history of renovation. The 110,000 sq.m. scheme is now a further catalyst for Birmingham's transformation into a world class retail capital by bringing modern retail floor space into the heart of the City Centre, through walkways and a safer environment and iconic architecture, including the new Selfridges store designed by Future Systems. The historic street pattern was a major influence on the new Bullring design. The scheme is comprised of three axis's, two of which form a natural extension of the city's principal shopping streets, of New Street and High Street. Between the two the third axis comprising St Martins Walk – a new pedestrian boulevard, restores the historic linkages to the city's traditional markets beyond St Martins Church. The vision was to provide Birmingham with the best of continental Europe. A streetscape atmosphere of boulevards, squares and spaces would promote an attractive street life. A key element of the Bullring design is its permeability and the way in which new open spaces and walkways throughout the three principal trading levels have been designed to link into the City Centre and form an extension of Birmingham's existing prime retail pitch. The natural gradient of the site falling some 19.5m from north to south has been integrated into the design so that each trading level has access to a ground floor entrance and allows the three retail levels to step down the slope each side of St Martins Walk. The scheme design revolves around knitting together new building blocks and to blend with the existing fabric, grain and scale of the city. The new Bullring connects seamlessly with the existing City Centre, creating a new forum for historic landmarks, such as St Martins Church which has regained its prominence through a new piazza setting at the heart of the Bullring. Some £2 million has been provided by the developers in a programme of public artworks for the new Bullrings public realm. These range from sculptured light wands and a water cascade to a bronze bull which has become a symbol and icon of civic pride. A further £1.9 million was provided by the developer as match funding to restore the historic St Martins Church.

The developers of the new Bullring were clearly determined to ensure maximum accessibility for all modes of transport to the new shopping centre. Over 3,000 public car parking spaces were created in three new car parks adjacent to and within the scheme but in addition they funded the refurbishment of the historic Moor Street railway station providing enhanced services to London. The remodelling of the Inner Ring Road, which was actually lowered, to facilitate St Martins Walk provided the opportunity to concentrate bus services directly beneath the scheme and provided a new surface crossing too and from the main railway station at New Street. The creation of a new link road alongside the retail markets allowed maximum penetration of the area by buses.

An important consideration for the developers was how the spaces and routes created would be managed so the experience and quality of the shopping centre was extended to the public realm. As such the City Council, using the model successfully

applied for Brindleyplace, was content to effectively allow privatisation of the public squares and routes which are managed, maintained and policed by the private developers with a legal guarantee of public access. At a time of increasing pressure on the City Council's coffers this has provided all the benefits but with none of the pain!

It is important to recognise that the new Bullring has not only provided a significant new retail offer for Birmingham extending the retail catchment by some 40%. Its design has also helped to facilitate and continue the physical growth of the City Centre Core via its connections and flows – it has done the complete opposite to the 1964 inward looking design – it has positively encouraged the redevelopment of adjacent areas by its enhanced accessibility. Thus the next area of regeneration that will be implemented over the next 10 years is Eastside. This area which is now connected to the City Centre by pedestrian and vehicular flows as a result of the new Bullring, as well as by the City Council, further removing the concrete collar at Masshouse is set to house major new City Centre attractions focussed around a new surface level system of pedestrian friendly boulevards and squares. A new City Centre Park with our new Central Library located at its heart is also planned to help improve the attractiveness of the area for the private sector. As you can see, emphasis on making a City of Flows or as we call it a city based upon a streets and squares philosophy is still continuing this day and is the governing principle for much of our work.

Birmingham has successfully applied a strategy of re-establishing major pedestrian flows as a way of stimulating new private development. After implementing major infrastructure projects in the western part of the City Centre, Birmingham City Council has by virtue of its partnership working with the private sector established a self sustaining momentum in the eastern part of the City Centre such that private developer companies are now carrying out a series of environmental improvement projects at no cost to the public purse. It is now the private sector who are paying for reconnecting the City with the City Council free riding on the back of their investment. The proverbial wheel has turned full circle!