



Brindleyplace, Birmingham

location:

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The redeveloped Brindleyplace area of Birmingham brings together homes, offices, shops, leisure facilities and public spaces with a strong sense of identity and history. Designed by John Chatwin.

Its pioneering status is linked to the scheme's incorporation of Birmingham City Council's admirable urban design principles. Consequently the city has gained a new urban neighbourhood, set around a clear network of streets and public spaces enclosed by striking new buildings, as well as the refurbishment and conversion of a Victorian school.



Canalside housing, offices, cafés, bars, a health club and shops create high levels of activity around the elegant Central Square, with its award winning butterfly-roofed glass café providing a central focus to the public open space network, and the more sedate Oozells Square.

Inventive land assembly, creative funding packages, speculative and leveraged development undertaken in the context of tumultuous property-market conditions have been the background to Brindleyplace's success. Underpinning it is the City Council's unwavering commitment to urban design principles, adopted in 1990, which has created high quality design that goes hand in hand with commercially viable, privately funded regeneration.

Introduction

South of the regenerated Jewellery Quarter and adjacent to the International Convention Centre and the National Indoor Arena, the 17 acre Brindleyplace site is bounded by roads to the south and west (Broad Street and Sheepcote Street) and by the Birmingham Canal to the east, and is also bisected by the Brindley Loop Canal.

With buildings by several notable architectural practices, the scheme includes offices (87 652m²), shops (15,740m²), leisure and cultural facilities (theatre and art gallery), a hotel (238 beds), housing (143 flats and town houses @ 119 dwellings/ha plus 35 serviced apartments above Number 8), shops, cafés, bars and restaurants (4,246m²) not including the busy waterfront (5 574m²), car parking (1+ space per residential unit, limited basement parking in office buildings and a 903 space multi-storey), and two key open spaces.



The 4,729m² Central Square was a fundamental part of both the masterplan and the developer's intentions, and is enclosed by buildings of different heights and styles. In the centre, an elliptical glass café provides a hub of activity and movement. The more serene Oozells Square (2,100m²) was a later addition by the developers and is the setting for 7 pieces of monumental granite sculpture by Paul de Monchaux.

Design process

In the mid 1980s Birmingham City Council (BCC) resolved to re-define the city centre and reconnect the surrounding quarters.

The 7.2ha canalside site, left derelict by industrial decline, was intended by BCC for mixed use development with an emphasis on retail, and together with the National Indoor Arena site across the canal basin, was sold for development for £23.3m. After the liquidation of the first developer, the site reverted to its parent, Rosehaugh Stanhope, which invested in decontamination (£0.5m), infrastructure (£12m) and, in 1991, a masterplan from Terry Farrell Partnership.

Rosehaugh also crashed in 1992, and Argent bought Brindleyplace plc and the site on a 150-year lease for £3m, although this increased to nearly £8m within a year with existing development obligations.



Argent appointed ex Farrell architect John Chatwin to review the planning position, to make a revised masterplan, to design all public spaces and to draw up urban design guidelines. The new masterplan was not conceived as 'grand architecture', being more of a flexible framework based on a linked sequence of urban spaces and the development plots that enclosed and defined them. No style was imposed, and an eclectic selection of prominent architects was appointed by Argent, none responsible for more than a couple of buildings. The City Council's contextual approach meant that when one element was changed, a revised masterplan had to be submitted to ensure that the overall vision was not diluted or forgotten in the planning process. The plan's aims were to create pedestrian links and activity within the city's fabric, rather than showcase the architectural style of individual buildings.

In 1994 a limited competition was used to select Townshend Landscape Architects to design the Central Square, which was to have sculpture by Miles Davies, and this firm also worked with the individual building architects on landscape details, and later with sculptor Paul de Monchaux on Oozells Square (1998).

The development as laid out in the masterplan is now finished. Argent Group plc has financed the development by bringing together investment packages at various stages during its progress, and they retain overall responsibility for management and security of the public spaces and infrastructure, with an annual service cost of £750,000 per annum.

Evaluation

A strong sense of place has been achieved which responds to the surrounding area, particularly to the historic canal waterfronts. The new buildings show variety in their design, but are unified by scale, mass and eaves heights, and around these a series of key well-enclosed public spaces provides a legible and visually interesting network. Central Square, sited at the intersection of Brindleyplace's three principal axes, has a fall in level of approximately one metre from east to west featuring a series of strata with different uses, and a small amphitheatre is sited in the sunniest spot. Next to this, an elliptical glass café at the Square's centre terminates vistas into the site and provides a hub of activity and movement. Other views along a secondary axis end with a water feature and Miles Davies sculpture. Oozells Square's shallow uplit rill water feature bisects its central space diagonally, providing a calmer and more restrained atmosphere.



Materials are of high quality, and appropriately for a brick built city, feature substantial use of red and gold bricks, with patterns of red and blue brickwork on walls and paths surfaces near the canals.

Much of the housing overlooks the canal, and the developer's concerns about perceptions of the inner city site's potential security risk led to the installation of a controlled main entrance and locked towpath gates. Some criticism has been made of the office buildings' large floor plate, on the grounds that it offers little fine grain detail and that retail occupiers were failing to achieve high enough volumes of trade. In later stages this has been addressed by introducing mixed-use buildings with smaller, more intricate floor plans enabling a more integrated city fabric at street level. While some buildings, like the National Sea Life Centre, have large expanses of blank walls or backs facing onto streets, key open spaces are, in general, faced by building fronts, creating active edges. The nature of the private 'business park' environment has largely precluded real integration with the public realm, although some success at ground floor level has been achieved in the colonnades or arcades of Numbers Two, Three and Four, edging the Central Square, and in other buildings, where small shops and public cafés enliven the public open spaces they define.

The conditions surrounding Brindleyplace's history are unusual - the property market crash and the long-term approach of the developers as well as the 10-year land assembly programme by the City Council may not be replicated in other developments. It does, however provide valuable lessons: the need for a spatial vision of infrastructure across the whole city that is wider than pedestrian and public open spaces, the need for massive investment on the part of the public and private sectors and the need for incentives for long term investors.

Key design features to look out for

- Creating value through design.
- Investing in quality public realm.

Link and downloads

- Brindley place: <http://www.brindleyplace.com/>
- Argent group: <http://www.argentgroup.plc.uk/index.cfm/fuse/brindleyplace/>

Contact for further information

Architect/Designer:
Architects: John Chatwin

Readings:
Title: The value of urban design.
Author: Carmona, M et al
Date: 2001
ISBN: +0727729810
Publisher: CABE/DETR

Title: Brindleyplace a model for urban regeneration
Author: Latham, I and Swenarton, M
Date: 1999
ISBN: 0953284816
Publisher: Right Angle Publishing Ltd

Title: Brindleyplace implementation
Author: Chatwin, John
Collection: Urban Design Quarterly
Date: 1Apr 1997
Issue: No 62

Title: Quality of urban design
Author: University of Reading
Date: 1996
ISBN: +0854067906
Publisher: RICS

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Project team

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Sidell Gibson Partnership - Architects, Nos. 5, 8 & 10
Allies and Morrison - Architects, Nos. 2 & 6
Anthony Peake Associates - Architects, No. 1
Stanton Williams - Architects, No.
Associated Architects - Architects, No. 9
Levitt Bernstein - Architects, Oozells Street School refurbishment to Ikon Gallery

Tarmac Construction & HBG Construction (joint main contractors)
Argent plc (Client, developer and project management)
Crosby Homes (Housing developer)