



Priory place

location:
Coventry

Priory Place is a new mixed use development in Coventry city centre, providing 84 apartments and 3000sq.m of retail space at ground level. The scheme forms a key part in the wider 'Phoenix Initiative'. This initiative was conceived by Coventry City Council in the mid 1990's as an innovative and ambitious regeneration programme that would revitalise the central area of the city around the cathedral, the University and the Museum of British Road Transport.



Introduction

The masterplan that evolved sought to create a metaphorical journey that would symbolise reconciliation between the conflicted history of the area and its prospective future. The project became a series of spaces linking the City's cathedral quarter with the edge of the ring road and modern commercial land to the north. While this case study is specifically interested in the Priory Place development, it is worth having a brief look at the wider 'journey', within which this project sits.

A new visitor centre, Priory Garden and Priory Cloister form the first 'event' on the journey and are located opposite the Holy Trinity Church. The visitors centre is a striking piece of contemporary architecture that uses transparency and local materials to generate a sense of place and openness. The Priory Garden and the Priory Cloister are both very much inspired by their setting on the site of the excavated 11th century Priory Cathedral.

Priory Place is located at the heart of the masterplan proposals, and utilises several buildings and hard landscaping to create a new high quality pedestrian link between the revitalised cathedral area and the new Millennium Place. The buildings, which are boldly contemporary in their character, fully engage with the public space by physically defining it, and enlivening it by presenting a mixed-use and active frontage to the public realm.

Millennium Place is the centrepiece within the masterplan project and provides the city with a new, very high quality public space. The square is rich in public art and interactive design features that attract, engage and excite visitors. Millennium Place has become a key landmark in the wider identity of the city. It creates an excellent setting for the Museum of British Transport and offers the potential to host outdoor exhibitions and public events. The positive character of the space is heightened further by it being a place on a journey and not simply a destination, with a new ramp providing access and views to the Garden of International Friendship.

This garden is the last individual project in the masterplan, and represents Coventry's role as a City of International Peace and Reconciliation. The garden sits at the north east edge of the masterplan site, adjacent to the recently restored Lady Herbert's Garden and the old city walls.

Design process

The masterplan was initiated by the City Council in late 1997. MJP Architects won a limited competition with proposals which included major art works. The Public Art Commissions Agency (PACA) took a key role in producing an overall Public Arts Strategy based on the themes of communication and reconciliation. The Phoenix Forum was created to hold consultation exercises with local interest groups and a series of exhibitions provided the opportunity for public consultation.

Though design work began in earnest in 1997 it soon became apparent that the levels of available funding would not match the City's initial vision and the scheme was therefore reduced in size and content to cover the three hectare area seen today.

Taking lessons from Birmingham, MJP were keen to ensure that the public spaces in Coventry would be tighter and more dynamic. The intense collaboration between urban designer and artists meant that the art works themselves possessed and shaped the newly created spaces, rather than simply being placed in them.

Priory Place is designed as a vibrant urban space surrounded by shops, bars and cafes with new housing above. It provides 84 apartments and 3000sq.m of retail space at ground level.

The development team included:

- Rummey Design Associates (Urban Designer and Landscape Architect).
- MacCormac Jamieson Prichard (Masterplanner and Architect).
- Alexander Beleschenko, Christine Browne, Jochen Gerz, Susanna Heron, Françoise Schein, David Ward, Kate Whiteford (Artists).
- David Morley (Poet).
- Speirs and Major Associates (Lighting Designer).
- Ashgate Development Consultants (Project Management).
- Babties and Harris + Sutherland (Engineers).
- WT Partnership (QS).
- Whitby Bird (Structural Engineers – glass bridge)

Susan Heron's art installation, Waterwindow, provides a glimpse of Priory Place from the cloister. A white rendered wall divides the historically inspired spaces from this more contemporary square. A sheet of copper, fixed to the wall, forms a backdrop to a wall of water. From the entrance in the wall a ramped bridge leads into the space, crossing a triangular pool into which the wall of water falls. A flight of concrete steps provides additional access to the side of the wall. The space is rhomboidal with access at each corner. Three new blocks which house ground floor bars and restaurants with apartments above define it. The contemporary architectural design uses a combination of materials which include white render, timber and local red sandstone.

Constructed above undercroft parking, Priory Place has an entirely hard landscape treatment of Portuguese granite slabs with granite sett edging, which is intended to contrast with the garden areas around the Priory. The materials are laid to various sizes and patterns to define routes and functions.

Evaluation

In commissioning this masterplan and associated artworks Coventry City attempted to move beyond more conventional conceptions of public art to more interactive installations which are integral with the urban and landscape design.

When assessed against project aims, the Phoenix Initiative achieved much in reclaiming a run down area of the City. However, the various elements of the masterplan had mixed success. As an intimate, mixed use public space, with a strong sense of enclosure Priory Place is one of the most successful elements of project and sets a good example in respect to urban, architectural and landscape design.

The residential units around Priory Place represent the first City Centre residential development and commercial developers, including the BBC, have taken up vacant units on the ground floor which help to enliven this space.

The success of Priory Place as a linking route between the Millennium Place and the Priory Garden is debatable. Perhaps the route never represented a 'desire line' in the city or perhaps the legibility is not strong enough. It appears underused or at least used only as a secondary route.

The lighting scheme in places has not stood up well to the tough urban environment and although one can appreciate the intention of using low-level, human scale light fittings, they have proven vulnerable to vandalism.

Susan Heron's Waterwindow is perhaps the most effective piece of art and has probably benefited from being the simplest and best integrated of the works.

Key design features to look out for

- The way in which the architectural and landscape design has specifically responded to the wider urban design rationale to generate links and movement between different parts of the city.
- The buildings facades are clearly presented as two differing elements, with the retail/commercial ground floor uses being highly glazed and set behind a protecting but open arcade encouraging occupation of the edges of the space, and the residential units above set behind private balcony spaces and within a more solid façade treatment.
- The hard landscape design is very much concerned with articulating the patterns of movement through the space while creating informal seating opportunities and peripheral spaces relating to the building facades.
- The high level to which the public art installations are integrated with the overall physical expression of the space, and the sense of unity between elements that this gives. The art is not simply on display.

Link and downloads

McCormack Jamieson Architects - Phoenix Project: http://www.mjparchitects.co.uk/urbanism/Phoenix_screen_060518.pdf?sessionId=2414ea09e8f4e71dc444e1d28ae6cdc8

Public Art Online - Phoenix Case Study: http://www.publicartonline.org.uk/casestudies/regeneration/coventry_phoenix/description.php

Home Design Awards: http://www.homedesignawards.com/homebuilder/homebuilder_2005/Category4/priory/priory.htm

CABE – case study: <http://www.cabe.org.uk/default.aspx?contentitemid=1110&aspectid=23>

Description of Phoenix Initiative by original Conservation Officer: http://www.ihbc.org.uk/context_archive/76/pheonix/coventry.html