

## Coventry Phoenix Initiative

### Achieving Urban Renaissance through Public Space and Art.

#### Introduction

1. Cities, like the people who create them, are individual and highly complex.

Every city has its own unique identity and character that grows from factors such as its topography, its climate, and its social, religious and industrial history.

The physical evolution of a city responds to these factors and becomes an important manifestation of this identity. A city's built form will bear witness to its past in its urban structures and its buildings, and provide space for the cultural institutions and traditions which draw its citizens together.

If there is a radical break in this evolutionary process, the city risks losing its sense of its self - its heart and soul. This was the case for Coventry and was what the Phoenix Initiative set out to tackle.

The Phoenix Initiative is an urban regeneration project consisting not of iconic buildings or grand gestures, but of urban interventions which seek to make connections both in time and space, in a way that is designed to reinforce Coventry's urban environment to allow it to better express and support the city's identity and its senses of self.

#### Coventry

2. Coventry is an ancient city, which grew to be one of the wealthiest cities in Britain in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It has prospered over the years on the back of a variety of industries, watch making, ribbon weaving, and more recently, after a period of relative decline, with the aeronautic and motor car industries.

Coventry's colourful and rich past remains part of our national psyche, in associations such as Lady Godiva, the term 'sent to Coventry', the memory of its devastation during the blitz of 1940, and the triumphant reconstruction of its cathedral in the post war period.

However more recently its brutalist post war reconstruction combined with the economic recession that followed the decline in the car industry in the 1970's gave rise to physical and social problems that lead to the city being famously characterised as a 'Concrete Jungle' and as a 'Ghosttown' in songs by the Coventry band The Specials in the early 1980's.

These songs described a state of lawlessness and lack of hope and opportunity, which was vividly characterised in the form of an alienating urban environment. These associations have been hard to shake off, and continue to affect the way outsiders view the city and the way Coventry views itself.

#### The Problem - Post war reconstruction

It is worth exploring briefly the approach to urban planning that guided the post war reconstruction of Coventry, and explore how they lead to the social problems that so undermined confidence in the city.

3. The devastation caused by the wartime bombing destroyed large swathes of the old city centre. The rebuilding of Coventry after the war was indeed the first Phoenix Initiative with the symbol of the mythical Phoenix being added to the city's coat of arms.

4. In approaching this reconstruction the city adopted a modernist tabula rasa approach to urban planning, which ignored historic city blocks and street patterns,

relying instead on a more deterministic empirical approach to the creation of the new city.

Donald Gibson, the post war city architect, reinvented Coventry around as a rationalised, zoned and segregated place, with a new pedestrianised shopping precinct at its heart. Whilst humane and civic in inception with its concern for public space and local amenity, it had more to do with the prevalent approach to urban design in the 1940's and 50's than it did with Coventry itself.

5. The economic rejuvenation of Coventry after the war – largely based on the car industry – accelerated this pattern of change with a more heroic and brutal approach to rebuilding, with the city's ring road – once voted the 'Best Ring Road in Europe' - acting a fitting memorial to this era.

Whilst ironically defining the extent of the old medieval city - a scale of city based on pedestrian movement – it separated the centre from the rest of the city creating a largely car-dominated environment that infected most of the central area. Surface and multi-storey car parks littered the city centre, whilst large monolithic buildings replaced Gibson's more integrated civic approach, dominating the streetscape and skyline and eclipsing what remained of Coventry's illustrious past.

In addition to the alienation of the physical forms, the prevalent town planning principles of zoning and segregation contributed further to this urban decline. The city centre was dominated by single use blocks of offices, shops or university accommodation, with housing largely restricted to the area beyond the ring road. Outside the functioning of these primary used, few people found cause to stay or visit the city centre especially at night, creating a vacuum for lawlessness and fuelling the cycle of further decline.

## The Solution

6. The new Phoenix was one of a number of initiatives the city council adopted in the mid 1990's to tackle the physical, economic and social problems created by this urban decline.

- They set up one of the first city centre companies to work with council agencies and local businesses to clean up, maintain and monitor the public areas within the city centre.
- A CCTV network was established to tackle lawlessness and vandalism, and create a sense of security.
- Events were organised to get citizens to visit and identify with their city centre.
- A public art and public lighting strategy was commissioned.
- And more recently the cultural infrastructure of the city was reinforced with investment in the City Squares Programme, and in improvements to the Transport Museum, Herbert Art Gallery and Belgrave Theatre.

The Phoenix was the most ambitious of these initiatives as it set out to tackle a whole urban quarter.

## Phoenix – the beginnings

7. In 1997 MJP won a competition to master plan the Phoenix Initiative Site.

The brief at that stage was reliant upon major Millennium Commission funding for a project that was to be a National Centre for Human Achievement, and on Heritage Lottery Funding to rebuild the Coventry Transport Museum.

Soon after the competition it became clear that the substantial funding required to deliver this project was not going to be forthcoming. However, the Millennium Commission was very supportive of a more modest proposal built around the urban regeneration ideas that were implicit in the original brief.

As such in August 1997 a bid to the Millennium Commission was submitted for a master plan that sought to remodel part of the original site.

### The Route

8. It was a proposal to create a series of new public spaces linked together to create a journey that would connect the Cathedral to the Transport Museum and beyond to a new garden of International Friendship.

A loose narrative informed the development of this idea, conceiving the route through the new spaces as a journey through time – from the 1000 year history of the Benedictine Priory that was excavated to form Priory Garden, to the ever changing present embodied in the civic events that are held in Millennium Place, to the hope for the future represented in the new Garden of International Friendship.

### Intentions

9. Behind these proposals lay three wider objectives:

- To help create a new urban identity for Coventry

Underpinning the definition of a new urban identity was a cultural proposition supported by artists, archaeologists, landscape architects lighting designers and engineers, which sought to re-forge connections that had been lost in the previous redevelopment of the city:

- connections in space with new routes and views linking to the rest of the city
- connections in time, both literally through revealing its archaeology and metaphorically through the interpretation of artistic collaborations
- and connections within the community by creating art works and places that would bring people together and provide a venue for all kinds of social interaction.

- To create places for people

It was recognised that a new form of urban infrastructure was required to start to tackle the harsh physical legacy of the previous decades, one that would be less dominated by cars and large impermeable single use urban blocks. With a focus on public space, it was to be a place for people, designed to encourage a scale, mix of uses and richness of experience that would attract life back into the city centre. The project proposed the demolition of a multi-storey car park and the closure of a major traffic interchange, which symbolised the new priorities that would underpin the project.

- Stimulate economic regeneration.

An underlying hope was that the master plan would stimulate new economic investment to the area, through increased visitor numbers to the new and existing attractions, and through investment in new commercial developments which would bring new facilities, jobs and residents to the area. At this time there was no evidence that such investment would be forthcoming.

## The Site

10. The 3 hectare site identified was a rundown area of the city centre fringe.

The city council was the free holder of major parts of the site, and Holy Trinity Church and the Cathedral were supportive partners from the start.

None the less there were a large number of other landowners and leaseholders who had to be persuaded to sell their properties to allow the project to proceed, with only the former Hippodrome Theatre, which was being partially used as a Bingo Hall, requiring the use of CPO powers to allow the project to be implemented.

However, the failure to reach agreement with Sainsbury's, who owned a store at the centre of the site, did lead to the need for rapid redesign of the Master plan strategy due to the lack of funds available for its acquisition. This required the reconfiguration of Millennium Place, replacing the buildings, that had been proposed to give it a three dimensional form, with a dramatic new paired arch structure.

## The Proposals

The final master plan creates five new public spaces, with eight integrated public art works: The spaces from the Cathedral are:

- Priory Garden
- Priory Cloister
- Priory Place
- Millennium Place
- The Garden of International Friendship

## Phasing

11. The project was delivered in three phases with GIF, Priory Garden and Cloister being constructed first due to all the land being in the ownership of the City Council, Cathedral and Holy Trinity Church, and Priory Place and Millennium Place following in Phases 2 and 3 respectively, but implemented simultaneously once sites were made available.

The phasing, whilst driven by site acquisition, allowed the realisation of the early phases to act as valuable promotion to attract private sector partners for the latter phases. The dearth of commercial interest at the start of the project gave way to a growing interest in the area, leading to both Priory Place and Millennium View being the subject of developer architect competitions, with resultant land values wildly exceeding original estimates.

### The Journey

I will now briefly describe the project following the journey from the Cathedral and heading north down the site.

### Cathedral

12. St. Michael's Cathedral is a fitting start to the journey. The themes revealed at this stark conjunction between old and new, of reconciliation with the past, belief in the present and faith in the promise of the future are essential to Coventry as a whole and are the foundation of the ideas developed through the Phoenix Initiative. It also acted as a source of inspiration in the way it integrated artists into the creative process, allowing the building to address the themes of faith, reconciliation and rebirth with an almost medieval intensity, resulting in a masterpiece of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

### **Priory Garden**

13. Walking west across the cathedral close, brings one to the new sunken Priory Garden, which is the first of the new Phoenix public spaces. The garden designed with Rummey Design Associates is on the site of the former 11th century Benedictine Priory Cathedral which fell victim of the dissolution of the monasteries in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

The garden is formed on the site of a former church centre, and involved a 3m deep archaeological excavation of the site down to the level of the floor of the former Cathedral. The linear plan of the garden reflects the plan with the walls and piers that defined the nave all visible elements within the completed design.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Blue Coat School at one end was constructed off the base of the northwest tower of the original frontage and was restored as part of the project and now accommodates the new Holy Trinity Church Centre.

This quiet contemplative space contains interpretative interventions ranging from artworks by Chris Browne to an animated computer reconstruction of the Priory Church on screens located at the centre of the nave. Chris Browne's explores Coventry's history with artworks which are created from objects discovered as part of the archaeological excavation of the site, combined with objects from Coventry's industrial past.

## Priory Cloister

14. Wide steps and winding ramps lead from the bridge that crosses Priory Garden down to Priory Cloister. The cloister, enclosed by a new red sandstone wall, with implied ambulatories formed from pleached lime trees within, was built on the site of the original Priory cloister. The ground plane is disengaged from the enclosing wall by a recess, which glows blue at night. The artist David Ward created an artwork 'Here' for the centre of the cloister. Eight outdoor speakers elevated on posts relay individual compositions of recorded voices. The effect is of

'whispering trees' recounting concurrent memories of Coventry's past. At night the blue glow to the internal perimeter of the cloister has the effect of dematerializing the space, reflecting in some way the transitory quality of memory, be it that of the original cloister or those shared by the voices in the space.

### **Visitors' Centre**

15. A new Visitor Centre occupies one side of the cloister space. The extensive glazing and disengagement of the roof from the enclosing wall ensures that it is seen as an integral part of the cloister space. It contains an interpretation centre for the Priory and provides a meeting space for The Multi-Faith Group, an organisation set up to encourage understanding and co-operation between Coventry's diverse religious communities.

The wall separating the Visitor Centre from Priory Garden has its origins in the 14th century as the Cathedral's north nave wall, but was substantially rebuilt in the 18th century from using stone robbed from the monastic ruin. The original wall is revealed through an aperture in the floor, and the 18th century wall has been retained and restored. A slate creasing defines the break between this and a section of new walling constructed in matching rough stone. This wall exemplifies the layered history of the site and embodies the approach of the new interventions.

### **Ribbon Factory**

16. To the west of the cloister is the old Ribbon Factory, the last remnant of Coventry's once vibrant ribbon industry. It has been carefully restored and refurbished by developers Complex Development Projects to form new loft style apartments and a restaurant unit opening onto the area adjacent to the Cloister.

### **Priory Place**

17. Further wide steps or a continuation of the ramp that runs around two sides of

Priory Cloister lead into Priory Place. Created on the site of a redundant multistory car park, it is devised as a convivial meeting place surrounded by bars, café's and shops, this new space was created in partnership with developers CDP.

18. The three blocks that define Priory Place are planned to articulate the routes through the space, which reinterpret historic routes through the site. The hard landscaping and dramatic water feature, 'Waterwindow.' 19. by artist Susanna Heron's, reinforce these patterns, which express the anticipated life and activity of the space.

20. The architecture of the buildings is layered horizontally to reflect the historical and topographical strata of the site, but also to create an appropriate urban hierarchy to reflect the mix of uses contained. The ground level in Priory Place drops away to the north and east to reveal a battered stonewall forming a sturdy and grounded base to the building. At the level of the plaza, white concrete columns define the public zone, providing a permanent architecture for the shop fronts. Three levels of flats above are defined by a white render plane cut away to accommodate recessed and projecting bay windows each designed to capture views or daylight. An attic storey of penthouse flats is expressed by a continuous perimeter loggia.

## Youell House

21. Youell House located to north of the space provides new administrative accommodation for the Cathedral. The design seeks to mediate between the scale of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century houses on Priory Row which it faces over a shared garden to the south, and the dynamism of Priory Place to the North.

The most significant archaeological finds on the site were uncovered under Youell House. This lead to a full excavation of the whole footprint of the building, which was constructed over the remains. These can be viewed from Priory Place through a glass window.

## Millennium Causeway

22. Looking down the slope towards Millennium Place the space is channelled into a narrow causeway, restricting and framing views of Millennium Place and the Whittle Arches beyond.

Towards Priory Place the ground plane is sculpted into wide stairs, criss-crossed by a winding ramp.

Towards Millennium Place, the causeway becomes a simple shallow ramp passing between battered red sandstone walls, with giant three storey bay windows above, which fold out of the white rendered walls above like giant shutters, mediating between the scale of Priory Place and that of Millennium Place.

## Millennium Place

23. Formed from the site of a major traffic interchange and a redundant theatre, Millennium Place is a major new civic space for Coventry. Bordered on two sides by roads, it is prominent to all who pass through it during the day or at night. 24. To the north it is contained by a cyclorama wall, which forms a new frontage for the Coventry Transport Museum.

The BBC have leased accommodation in Priory Place overlooking Millennium Place, which will in time give it a prominence and significance both locally and regionally as a recognizable symbol for Coventry.

It has already become the venue for the major civic and cultural events, which make the citizens identify with it and put Phoenix in their mental map of the city.

## The Whittle Arch

25. Providing a physical connection to Priory Place and giving height and prominence to Millennium Place, the 1.5m-high Whittle Arch springs over the space

as paired arches that kiss at their apex. The arch is named after Frank Whittle, the inventor of the jet engine and is designed with allusions to aeronautical design.

### **Time Zone Clock**

26. The fan shaped black granite surface of Millennium Place is dominated by the 'Time Zone Clock', a major artwork by artist Francosie Schein. The work depicts a Time Zone Map of the world in aluminum castings with inlaid LED strips. Stainless steel discs set within the map locate the capital cities of the world and Coventry's 26 twin cities. This work responds to the new space, whilst making reference to Coventry's past as a centre for clock making, and its modern day role at the centre of the movement for international peace and reconciliation. As a geopolitical map it also depicts a point in time – the new Millennium - to which the space is dedicated.

### **Public Bench**

27. Lining the north of Millennium Place is an artwork by Jochen Gerz called the 'Public Bench.' Created in collaboration with local people, the work commemorates a friendship, meeting or special relationship between two people. These are recorded on red plaques fixed to the wall behind the bench. Over 4000 names of local people and visitors are recorded on the wall to date, and it is intended that the work continues until the wall is full.

### **Future Monument**

28. Another work by Jochen Gerz to the east of the space called 'The Future Monument' recognises Coventry's former enemies with illuminated glass plaques ranged round a shattered glass obelisk. Smaller plaques on the opposite side represent community organisations in Coventry who were involved in the artwork.

Both Jochen Gerz's artworks derive from extensive interaction with members of the public. This gives them a particular poignancy, and gives rise to a tangible

engagement with, and sense of ownership for these works by visitors and residents alike.

### **Coventry Transport Museum**

29. The refurbishment of the Coventry Transport Museum has provided additional galleries and much improved visitor facilities. The most dramatic change is the new frontage to the museum facing Millennium Place, bringing the museum into the heart of the city.

30. Behind the new frontage a double height volume opens onto a large temporary exhibition space and a new museum shop. Four new galleries have been added to the existing displays making it the largest transport museum in the UK.

### **Glass Bridge**

31. A ramp rising behind the Public Bench provides access to a dramatic cantilevered spiral ramp that rises up to the glass bridge. Lined with over 800 glass fins screen, printed to the designs of the artist Alex Beleschenko, the bridge flies over the listed Lady Herbert's Garden and the last remaining section of the 14th century city wall, to land in the new Garden of International Friendship.

32. Inspired by the idea of a blue ribbons weaving through the trees, the design adds a shock of colour and vitality to the last leg of the journey.

### **The Garden of International Friendship**

33. Set between the Edwardian Lady Herbert's Garden and the ring road, this new garden, designed by Rummey Design Associates, recognises Coventry's important role as a centre for international peace and reconciliation. The design seeks to reconcile its own position between the ring road, the older garden and as

the termination of the Phoenix route through a combination of stone walls, earth works architecture and planting.

A curved wall facing the ring road contains a sunken garden, which encloses an artwork by Kate Whiteford based on a maze inspired by the pattern on a medieval floor tile and recalling the orchards and gardens that were situated outside the city walls in medieval times.

The top of the curved wall has an in-set bronze plate engraved with a text extracted from the *Coventry Mystery Plays*, by the poet David Morley.

### Summary

**34.** The Phoenix Initiative was never seen as an end in itself. It is part of an ongoing regenerative process. However the initial outcomes of the project can now be seen and judged against the original objectives

**35.** It aimed to address issues of civic identity through an urban and artistic exploration of the city's past, and through identification with its present and future aspirations. It sought to provide places that have distinct character and encourage participation both passively, through a gradual appreciation of the artworks or archaeology that are integral to them, but also actively through participation in performances or events that take place within them. It is evident that such participation is beginning to develop, with over 50,000 new visitors annually to the Priory Visitors Centre and visitors to the refurbished Transport Museum up by 400%. Millennium Place, Priory Garden and The Garden of International Friendship have all been used as venues for a variety of theatrical and civic events

and performances, attracting a wide cross section of visitors to the area. People are beginning to identify with the place and the life it supports.

It aimed to address the broken physical links in the city's history, to find a form of development that would engage with the demands of the car without letting it dominate; that would allow a vibrant mix of uses to create life and activity through the day and into the evening; that would act as a new paradigm for the future development of the city centre. These themes subsequently found currency in the government-sponsored initiative for the development of sustainable communities. Already the project has attracted new commercial and cultural uses to the site in the form of over 150 new homes, 50,000 sq. ft of commercial space, a major new facility for the BBC, and further commercial and cultural investment into the Coventry Transport Museum.

**36.** Finally it aimed to be a catalyst for economic regeneration. In this area the project has exceeded expectation. It has generated over £44M of public and private investment into the site on the back of the city councils initial £13.5M investment.

**37.** In addition to this, it has given the city council the confidence to pursue further regeneration to the NW of the site. Phoenix Phase two covering the area around the Transport Museum, and the redevelopment of the sites to the east of Millennium place are now proposed as part of a major new regeneration project for the Swanswell area of the city. The redevelopment of these sites will complete the context for Millennium Place and allow the journey to continue to a new revitalised area of the city.

### The future

**38.** Given the complexity of cities and the mistakes of the past, there is no room for complacency. We can only hope that Phoenix will continue to find its place in

Coventry's psyche, and that it can grow and adapt as required to meet the challenges of the future. Given that the core of the project is public realm works, their active management and maintenance will be essential to its future success. To date this is something that Coventry continue to take very seriously, and we hope that this commitment is not lost.

In the meantime we will look forward to visiting it in ten years time when it is no longer new, but has become part of the urban topography of the city centre, when the surrounding area has responded to its challenge, and people view Coventry City Centre as a rich and civilised place to visit, and the associations with 'Ghosttown's and 'Concrete Jungle's are just another memory of a bygone era.

The journey through the site however reveals its physical topography, by opening views and routes from the high ground of the cathedral precinct to the south down to the valley and lost waterways of the River Sherbourne and Radford Brook below. The historical topography is exposed as one passes from the secular and spiritual heart of Coventry, via the lost priory of Saint Mary's, over and beyond the remaining section of the original city walls. The journey gradually reveals the centre, the boundary and the world beyond the enclosure of the medieval city, terminating with the new Garden of International Friendship.