

A golden development in the Jewellery Quarter

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A welcome piece of public realm has been built in the Jewellery Quarter, something the city needs more of, argues Joe Holyoak, 18.05.2015.



Golden Square in the Jewellery Quarter

Buildings and other structures form our mental images of cities. Think of Paris, Abu Dhabi, Sydney, Rome and what pictures float irresistibly into your mind? Those structures are powerful signs.

Yet with few exceptions, they are external to us. We think of them, we may walk past them, but mostly we rarely have occasion to use them, to be inside them. The Rotunda may be a very recognisable symbol of Birmingham, but I would guess that only a small minority of citizens have enjoyed the view from the top floor.

Instead, it is the spaces between the buildings that we inhabit: what urban designers call the public realm. We regularly occupy these spaces, and their quality (or lack of it) has a significant influence on our lives. There we may feel safe or insecure, comfortable or windswept and exposed, engaged or alienated.

One of Birmingham's successes in the past 25 years has been the creation of decent public spaces in the city centre. When I was young, there were only two, Chamberlain Place and the **Bull Ring**, and those had been shaped in the 19th century. Victoria Square was a traffic island, and the church owned the other spaces.

The headlines go to major new civic spaces like Centenary Square, **which is currently in the final stage of the competition for its redesign.** I shall write about the five shortlisted designs when they go on public display next month.

But small local squares, which serve their immediate vicinity, and which have the potential to knit themselves into the fabric of everyday lives, are important in a different way, though less celebrated.

Recently completed is Golden Square in the **Jewellery Quarter**. It's small, and it's fairly unpretentious (though not entirely so), and it is very welcome as a new local public space, in a district which previously has possessed only St Paul's Square on its periphery.



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It's taken a long time to happen - the design competition, organised by the city council, was held in 2008.

The competition was won by a team headed by the landscape architects Capita, with architects Bryant Priest Newman, the artist David Patten, and engineers Ramboll. Their winning design has been executed fairly faithfully.

The square is in the right place - at the corner of Vyse Street and Warstone Lane, next to the local landmark of the Chamberlain Clock, at the crossroads which is generally perceived as the centre of the quarter. But the site itself was unpromising, being the car park of the Big Peg.

The Big Peg is an aberration in the history of the Jewellery Quarter, an eight-storey flatted factory built in 1969, following the demolition of terraces of jewellers' workshops. It was intended to provide modern premises for jewellers and workers in precious metals, but it was a misguided enterprise as they couldn't afford the rents. It is an isolated fragment of a mad utopian scheme from the 1940s to replace the whole quarter with similar blocks.

It was designed in the contemporary anti-urban manner, ignoring street frontages, and leaving unsightly left-over spaces around it. It is to the credit of the competition organisers and the design team the square succeeds in mending the damage done to the streetscape, and in joining up the various edges. Shops and cafes on the ground floor of the Big Peg now address the new square, facing it across an elevated terrace.

Besides the liability of the Big Peg, the designers had also to cope with the existence of the Rose Villa Tavern on the street corner.

This is a fine Mitchells & Butlers pub from 1920, which like other corner pubs (the Woodman in New Canal Street, the Anchor and the White Swan in Bradford Street are examples) was spared when the rest of its block was demolished. So it leaves a blank wall facing the square, which was another liability for the designers to take on.



A large electronic information screen is positioned there. The blankness is further mitigated by the addition of a pavilion on the Warstone Lane frontage. This was to have been an information centre, but will probably become a jewellery shop. It is built in rusting Corten steel, a tough and robust shell which contains a lining of smooth gold-anodised aluminium - a nice analogue for the Jewellery Quarter itself.

The square is in two halves. There is a simple flat area paved in blue brick next to the pub, which is intended to accommodate public events. The other half is sloping grass, crossed by paved footpaths, and planted with apple trees. Before the growth of the industry, the site contained small houses and orchards: now the fruit trees grow again.

Corten steel appears again in columns along the edges of the paved area, supporting a grid of cables containing overhead lights. It is also in the floor, laser-cut with two texts about the quarter: the words of an 1808 poem, and a not-quite poem by Ian McMillan. The blue bricks are moulded with relief patterns of pen nibs, a famous Jewellery Quarter product.

There are plenty of benches to sit on, in hardwood integrated into concrete retaining walls – nothing freestanding or vulnerable. The quality of the concrete is a disappointment: patchy in colour in places, and poorly jointed. But generally materials are well chosen, and should survive skateboarders and other tough use.

Golden Square is a place which should prove a valuable focus for the Jewellery Quarter and I look forward to seeing it well populated when events are held there. It's not high profile or spectacular and may not win national design awards like Eastside Park.

But it's a good local piece of public realm design – soundly-based, both practical and imaginative, with a discreet element of relevant art. Every district of Birmingham ought to have somewhere like it.

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