

WORLD CITIES

Birmingham Welcomes the World

In May 1998, 'as pulses sped and sweating clowns were spotted making ready to laugh in the face of the G8 in the adrenalised melee' [1] the city of Birmingham became a World City - 'Europe's Meeting Place' [2] 'at the heart of European -- if not world -- affairs' [3].

Birmingham's credentials as a World City are evidenced by its "importance as a venue for European government and business leaders (which) was established as early as 1992, when it became one of the few non-capital cities to have hosted a European Union summit meeting. In 1996, Birmingham hosted a summit of the Western European Union. More recently, in 1998, Birmingham hosted the Group of Eight (G8) summit of world leaders, and was the venue for a number of EU meetings during the British Presidency. Birmingham's attractiveness as a major venue for European and world leaders demonstrates both its excellent conference facilities and communications links (not least an international airport), as well as the growing reputation of the city as a major cultural, leisure and business centre" [3].

That the May 1998 Global Street Party involving Jubilee 2000, Reclaim the Streets and others is not referred to in confirming Birmingham's new status is to miss the duality of possibilities within the new World Cities. As Naresh K. Bhaskar has noted [4], "...it appears that the world city's signature landmarks could replace the nation-state's debating chambers as the obvious sites for contesting ideological and cultural regimes...(there is now) a relationship between public perception of the world city and media portrayals of global terrorism and (this) suggests that the heightened symbolism of the world city in the public imagination increases vulnerability to terrorism and civil disobedience."

From the "merciless and promiscuous carnage" [5] of the Blues and Greens in 6th century Constantinople, the image of the World City has always provided the ideal backdrop for civil disobedience.

World Cities are now the product of the intensification of globalisation, economic restructuring, and new communication and information technology connectedness. And these are of course appropriate conditions for recontextualising the city "with banners reading 'Protest is Hope' (underneath the G8 Joker) 'Beneath the Tarmac the Grass', a huge red kitelike masterpiece with floating yellow tassels bearing the names of all the global street parties, and of course not forgetting that old favourite: 'Reclaim the Streets'" [1].

The Growth Coalition

Achieving 'World City' status requires the highly organised and focused use of a city's power and funding. To make itself structurally attractive to the investment of global capital, the City of Birmingham had to become growth orientated, create a new self-image and market this new image on the world stage successfully.

To become a World City at a time when fewer 'control points' are necessary to support the process of globalisation requires the creation of a 'growth coalition' between local government and business elites united in the pursuit of economic development. Throughout history any forced change in a city's profile which has had a significant impact on urban policy and management has required the intentional coalition between influential people "who derive their power from different sources, who share some policy objectives like that of promoting the growth in their city, and who can gain some economic, political or social rewards from their involvement" [6]. For example, during the second half of the 19th century Joseph Chamberlain, as Mayor of Birmingham supported by "men of outstanding ability" [7], made use of the 1875 Artisan Dwelling Act to make homeless 13,538 Birmingham workers by the insertion of a new business and retail corridor called Corporation Street.

The "growth coalition" [8], a civic elite comprising a strong political force and a relatively unified private sector business machine, operates aggressively within the wider institutional and corporatist setting. As the dominant urban regime, the growth coalition artificially

stimulates the regeneration of a city within a condensed timetable through a process not of rehabilitation but of forcing through cultural change. The rhetoric of such change is one of improvement - optimism, renewal, revitalisation, progress, the eradication of poverty and the elimination of social exclusion, but the reality is often 'placelessness'.

Competition between cities produces winners and losers. Cities are aware that they are competing with other cities for foot-loose global capital. And because global competition creates dependency, each World City becomes increasingly cuter at constructing and reproducing an acceptable self-image as a means of promoting itself to further investment.

As urban design (and its allied activities) becomes simply a device for promoting new urban images attractive to the restructuring of global economy, the authenticity of 'place' is continually undermined by the political and economic processes of the new global spatial identity. And shifts in global agendas impact on local places as the neutrality of placelessness (ie. the inauthentic) becomes the accepted backdrop for global homogeneity.

"Local Vibes Not Global Lies"

Global homogeneity has meant that intellectually prefabricated derivation from other places is now a legitimate tactic for regeneration. The regeneration programmes of the European capital cities (ie. Paris developing further its image as a city of 'grands projects' and Barcelona's high impact public relations projects) have created a vocabulary of acceptable visual chewing gum to be plundered by other aspiring cities.

Victoria Square in Birmingham, as 'a symbol of confidence in Birmingham's future' which received the 1993 "Street Design" National Award for Pedestrianisation and 1994 Civic Trust Special Landscape Award, had the brief to match 'the best continental practice' [9]. Its combination of "classical references and durable civic materials with multi-cultural themes" [10] is an example of a once impossible global vernacular.

In keeping with the requirements of placelessness, the design of Victoria Square allows only for limited 'event operation' and even the litter bins are of "a reasonable size to co-ordinate with emptying frequency, completely lockable and taken out of use easily for special events due to potential terrorist action" [9].

The site of Victoria Square which "was seen as the most significant opportunity to provide a genuine civic space at the hub of streets and squares network" [10] is an expression of placelessness and the limiting of local innovation and inventiveness.

Place and Culture

The 'problem' of place is that its generic qualities are difficult to pin down. "Place has to be one of the most multi-layered and multi purpose words in our language" [11]. The word 'place', though, is one of the most useful words to describe our 'being' in the world - place as site, locale, neighbourhood, city, region, and so on. And in all of these site-type places we also come to know 'our place' and the 'place' of what we do.

As a representation of our being in the world, place is about the specificity of the social, cerebral, ethnic, political and historical dimensions of a physical site [12]. Through the meeting of complex needs ('the daily round'), the creation of informal support networks and social standing, the development of a sense of trust and the recognition of overlapping benefits, places become valued in terms of our place within them and in what we do in those places. In cities this is akin to notions of cultural citizenship.

Cultural citizenship is the means by which notions of 'our place' and the place of what we do in urban places - our being in the urban world - are both mediated and valued. Cultural citizenship is embodied within, and requires the relational context of, specific place.

When places become place-less, or when the processes of mediating and valuing cultural citizenship are forcibly disrupted, our 'being in the world' becomes inauthentic. This is placelessness.

Identity and Placelessness

In Birmingham where being 'at the heart of European -- if not world -- affairs' means creating European identity, cultural citizenship may no longer be meaningful or possible. The possibilities for cultural citizenship within the local identity of place have become increasingly eroded and replaced by the simplified economic-related rights of citizenship within the emerging super state of placelessness.

"A European identity is necessary for the European Union to avoid "fragmentation, chaos and conflict" of every kind (military, social, economic and political) and to help achieve cohesion, solidarity, subsidiarity, concertation and cooperation...cultural citizenship and European identity, differ in various dimensions: content production, political strategy...(and) goal, idea of citizenship, idea of cultural identity and relation between citizenship and cultural identity" [13].

Before the G8 conference in May 1998, Birmingham was granted £1.6 million under Objective 2 for 'Destination Marketing' to enhance the City's image as a regional centre within the new global order. This followed earlier funding packages throughout the 1980s and 1990s for the International Convention Centre and National Indoor Arena complex, the Broad Street Redevelopment Area, and phase 1 Pedestrianisation of the City Centre core itself (including Victoria Square). Part of the £1.6 million through Objective 2 "was spent on a visual programme for the G8 Summit with items such as 'city dressing' (using banners, for example), a 'hearts and minds' campaign for local citizens, bridge banners ('Birmingham Welcomes the World'), national press briefings and information packs, a dedicated web site, and a hotel TV programme" [14].

Although there is a democratic process of electing local, national and European representatives, the process of decision making is very much top-down. "Activities affecting regional and local areas are only suggested by the European Commission following extensive consultations. They are then discussed, amended and decided upon by democratically elected Members of the European Parliament and Government Ministers. The Commission, Government departments, local authorities and other partners then work closely together to implement what has been decided" [14].

After some fifteen years of funding following top-down decision making, the new growth coalition positioning Birmingham as a World City 'at the heart of European -- if not world -- affairs' has created the placelessness with which it is comfortable and which it is pleased to market back to itself. Proof of this success followed the NATO Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting in Birmingham in October 2000. "Commodore Geoff Edwardes, Ministry of Defence project manager for the conference, said: 'The ICC [International Convention Centre] is ideal - you can't beat it. For a meeting such as this where it is complex, it involves high security and potentially awkward logistical problems you need to keep the whole thing compact. The compactness of this part of the city centre made the whole thing - no one had to walk more than a few-hundred yards.' The two day meeting of defence ministers has brought with it more than 500 delegates and 300 media representatives. The ICC was chosen as a venue in 1998 following the success of the G8 Birmingham Summit" [15].

L'imagination au pouvoir – Let Imagination Rule

The city streetscape has traditionally evolved through the social complexities of place. As "proud repositories of a common history" [16] this streetscape of corridors and squares supported the extremes of cultural citizenship – protest, celebration, information and commercial exchange.

Birmingham started as a market town, developed as a manufacturing and commercial centre and became known for its rioting [17]. Before it gained city status in 1889 rioting respected the spatial patterning of Birmingham's natural growth – starting in the market place and

moving north into the manufacturing and commercial quarters. With the modernisation of the City starting in the late 19th century a new civic quarter was created to the east of the historic city centre. The processes of modernisation and subsequent regeneration throughout the last 150 years have been orchestrated by growth coalitions to limit the extremes of cultural citizenship through the creation of defensible placelessness.

This agenda started in the first modern World City where the possibilities of social extremes were overcome by an aggressive insertion of new boulevards and squares. "It must be said that what are called the embellishments of Paris are basically nothing but a general system of offensive and defensive armament against uprising, a precaution taken against future revolutions, which has been pursued for twelve years with an indefatigable perseverance, without the ingenious Parisian's appearing to suspect a thing" [18]. And a hundred years later, following the events in Paris during May 1968, the streetscape as the specificity of place was again the victim – "the mutilated arrondissement...lost its old cobbled streets (too threatening to an authoritarian state, which replaced them with dull asphalt)" [19].

In Birmingham aspiration has been limited to matching 'the best continental practice' but the outcome is still placelessness and the loss of social complexity. And the strategy has been successful. Although a few leaflet distributors gathered to the edge of Victoria Square during the NATO conference, the earlier Global Street Party came nowhere close to the venue used for the G8 conference. Instead the Party was held on St Martin's Circus, the traffic island close to Birmingham's historic starting point – its market place. A market place which, two years later, is undergoing redevelopment.

Imagine if Birmingham had been Prague in September 2000. The place would have been full of dancing and tactical frivolity, costume, smoke bombs, banners and flags, barricades, pepper spray, boarded up windows, balloons, water canon, large inflatables, baton waving, processions and sit downs, bottle and stone throwing, music and sound tracking, whistle blowing, shield walls and protective clothing, littering and graffiti, fireworks and fire crackers, Pinks and Blues. There would, of course, have been the possible destruction of property but at least the city would have been alive – it would have been a place again.

"...imaginary beings. As symbolic protectors of civic pride and dignity their attributes consist of agility, power, strength and reason. Their benign disposition through their form...creates a spatial installation of peaceful coexistence" [20].

And what of the possibilities of public art? Does it take its place with the other urban design disciplines and serve the growth coalition in creating further placelessness? In its time Victoria Square was heralded as "part of the largest current PUBLIC ART PROGRAMME in the UK" [20].

"Victoria Square, with its specially commissioned sculptures, is a truly international civic square which...now rivals some of the great public open spaces of the world" [21].

If public art is also the art of making places, it has to learn to work outside of, and possibly in opposition to, the power coalitions which have eroded notions of 'place' for a hundred years. If public art ignores the social complexity of 'place' - our 'being' in the world - that art will be without meaning or content. A trifle.

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FOOTNOTES

1 The Global Street Party on 16 May 1998 involved 37 towns and cities in 22 countries [source: Reclaim the Streets Archive]

2 BCC website

3 University of Birmingham: European Studies 'Birmingham - A City at the Heart of Europe'

- 4 Naresh K. Bhaskar: 'Global Terrorism & the World City' at City, Space & Globalisation Symposium, Michigan February 1998
- 5 Gustave le Bon: 'La Foule' 1895
- 6 Clarence Stone: 'Regime Politics' 1989
- 7 City of Birmingham Handbook 1935
- 8 Harvey Molotch: 'The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place' 1976 and John Logan & Harvey Molotch: 'Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place' 1987
- 9 Geoff Wright & John Blakemore: 'Victoria Square Birmingham' (Urban Design Group)
- 10 'water feature...224 fibre optic uplighters and 400 metres of glowline fibre optic track (highlighting)...steps, weirs, statuary within the water feature and other works of art...clay paviers (in)...a herringbone pattern to produce a smooth but functional surface finish...stone sett bands in a sunburst pattern...York stone...robust, metal site furniture of high quality, with a modern sense of detail, and weathered bronze appearance...including seats, bins, tree grilles and tree standing planters...bollards and lighting columns...cast bronze central figures...letter carving'
- 11 David Harvey: 'From space to place and back again' in 'Mapping the Futures' 1993
- 12 Jeff Kelley: Keynote Address, 'Public Art - the New Agenda', University of Westminster 1993
- 13 Juan Delgado-Moreira: 'Cultural Citizenship and the Creation of European Identity' in the Electronic Journal of Sociology 1997
- 14 The European Commission: Representation in the United Kingdom - The West Midlands
- 15 The NEC Group website - 16th October 2000
- 16 Spiro Kostoff: 'The City Squared'
- 17 Before Birmingham became a city in 1889 significant riots include 1715, 1791, 1793 (the little riot), 1810 (the market riot), 1813, 1816 (Moor Street riot), 1837 (Royal Hotel riot), 1839 (Bull Ring riot), 1847 (Snow Hill Flour Mill riot), 1867 (Murphy riot).
- 18 Victor Fournel: 'Paris Nouveau et Paris Futur' 1865
- 19 Thirza Vallois: 'The 5th Arrondissement', Paris Kiosque Volume 5 #5 May 1998
- 20 Media Relations Office, Leisure Services, Birmingham City Council 6th May 1993
- 21 Cllr Fred Chapman, Chair of the Planning Committee, Birmingham City Council quoted in 20

[2800 words]