

## Beorma Artists

"...we can help to create the conditions in which the city's potential energy can be unleashed. This is the role of the BIG CITY PLAN."

– Birmingham Big City Plan Charter

Artists currently make little or no contribution to Birmingham's physical regeneration – certainly artists are now less integral to the City's place-making agendas than they were 20 years ago.

Physical regeneration tends to roll out as piecemeal or site by site development. This results in a "little parcels little minds to please" [the Poet Clare] approach that shatters bigger vision and best intentions.

What artist involvement there is tends to be via the siting of stand-alone artworks at the back end of individual developments. This, at best, produces the "city centre as art gallery" scenario [6.78 of 'The Birmingham City Centre Masterplan'].

Is the "city centre as art gallery" a planned strategy, or is it simply a consequence of art being procured via the 'little parcels little minds to please' approach to physical regeneration?

How does the "city centre as art gallery" knit with other Masterplan aspirations – graininess versus bland development (6.14); grittiness and the creative use of S106 (6.39); local grit, diversity and authenticity and a different kind of urban development (6.49); greater investment in creativity and culture (8.12)?

Don't these Masterplan aspirations (now carried forward as Big City Plan 'themes and ideas') invite (require?) artists to work in different ways? To reveal content and narrative, develop context, 'put the moon in the dewdrop' (8.12). This is about artists linked to rescue archaeology and early-doors site appraisal and/or artists working on area statements, development frameworks and design guidelines and/or artists as part of design teams.

And doesn't all of this invite (require?) the City Council to think in different ways? To "create the conditions in which the city's potential energy can be unleashed". To connect the considerable amount of artist-led activity and research happening in Digbeth/about Digbeth to regeneration outrun.

"Cities thrive on their differences, their uniqueness, not their sameness. Birmingham is a gritty, industrial city. Its authenticity lies in its architecture, its materials, its streets and spaces."

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By way of example. Sahlia Investments development of a 0.77 hectare site between Digbeth, Well Lane, Park Street and Allison Street. The 'Beorma Quarter' design by Trevor Horne Architects. There is a huge gulf between something like Luis Barragan's Satellite City Towers and the 7th century settlement at the crossing of the River Rea. A huge gulf. Something that can only be filled by poets – by artists who can weave ideas, make connections, collapse time, and underpin conceptually what could otherwise be a meaningless association between development and location.

Authenticity doesn't lie in architecture, materials, streets and spaces.

## Two Final Comments:

1. Mark Ball's statement that "creativity flourishes in a mess", and Tess' plea not to be prescriptive [both Big City Plan Charter], aren't the same as ignoring the opportunities, refusing to learn new tricks, resting on past achievements and old ways of doing things, or

being risk adverse. Ignorance, refusal, complacency, and fear don't build great cities. They don't "...create the conditions in which the city's potential energy can be unleashed." The Big City Plan is an invitation to think and work differently – to be more ambitious and imaginative about future place-making. To involve artists when and where it means something. To move on from Birmingham's public art busted flush.

2. If the involvement of artists does carry risk beyond the comfort zone of the City Council, the way to mitigate any such risk is not to appoint low experience third parties to sit between artists and commissioners – this simply passes risk back to the artist.

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[http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/Media/Parkinson%20report.pdf?  
MEDIA\\_ID=258090&FILENAME=Parkinson%20report.pdf](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/Media/Parkinson%20report.pdf?MEDIA_ID=258090&FILENAME=Parkinson%20report.pdf)

<http://bigcityplan.birmingham.gov.uk/plan.html>