

## **2012 FarGO Creative Village, Coventry Scheme concept with Bryant Priest Newman Architects**

FarGO Canopy: Spoking patterns may be radial or semi-tangential. For a normal wheel size and spoke count, semi-tangential 'lacing' is used to transmit torque from the hub to the rim. The most common spoking pattern is 'three-cross' lacing, where each spoke crosses three others on the same flange of the hub before meeting the rim. The last cross is normally 'interlaced' by wrapping the spoke around the one from the other side of the flange.

### **FarGO VILLAGE & the Culture of Coventry**

#### **1. Art is integrating. Architecture Painting Sculpture and Living.**

Immediately after his appointment as City Architect of Coventry in 1939, Donald Gibson did two significant things:

- firstly, he removed Planning control from the duties of municipal engineers and surveyors to allow architecture to take the lead on city-building programmes.
- secondly, he initiated the 1940 'Coventry of Tomorrow' exhibition. Although not unique in terms of pre-War civic regeneration schemes, the exhibition was unusual in that members of the City Council had been given copies of Lewis Mumford's 'The Culture of Cities' to read as a basis for understanding the ideas expressed in the new plans. The introductory panel for the exhibition read:

**"Art is integrating. Architecture Painting Sculpture and Living. The well making of that which needs making. Eating Dressing Housing Engineering. First in a series of exhibitions of the works of those moving towards this synthesis."**

A few weeks after the exhibition opened, Coventry was blitzed on the 1 November 1940. Given the scale of the city, the bomb damage was considerable. As Donald Gibson later commented, we "used to go up and see which buildings would be burnt to see how it would speed up our planning. [...] We knew which were the key buildings to get down."

#### **2. First printing in England of Lewis Mumford's 'The Culture of Cities' [1938]**

"Nothing is unthinkable, nothing impossible, provided it comes out of the needs of life and is dedicated to life's further development."

The book's last but one paragraph concludes, "We must restore to the city the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations, that have long been neglected or suppressed. For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men." As Time Magazine commented, Mumford's "guiding principle is that the City is not only a form of life but, through its layout and architecture, a form of art – potentially the form of forms."

#### **3. Artists & Post-War Re-Building**

The post-War reconstruction of Coventry was seen as a project of national significance, requiring a bold future vision. Following the November 1940 bombing, and over lunch at Claridges, Lord Reith, Minister of Works and Buildings, and the city Mayor agreed that Coventry "should be a test case...for the Government and for England."

The 1945 exhibition 'Coventry of the Future: Some Proposals and Suggestions for the Physical Reconstruction and Planning of the City of Coventry', prepared by Gibson and City Engineer, Ernest Ford, attracted an audience of 50,000, i.e. one-sixth of the population. The city's first post-War sculpture ('The Levelling Stone in the Precinct') was ready for installation as part of the Victory Day celebrations of 9 June 1946, and this art work not only marked the central axis of the proposed new shopping precinct but also announced the start of the reconstruction project.

The post-War plan for the new city centre was based on two significant projects, a new pedestrianised shopping precinct (the first of its kind in Europe on such a scale) and a new cathedral (later undertaken by Sir Basil Spence). Significantly, both involved the commissioning of artists.

Walter Ritchie's two polychrome sculptural reliefs 'Man's Struggles' (now on the front of the Herbert Art Gallery) were unveiled in the new shopping centre by Lewis Mumford in 1953.

The reconstruction project was formally completed in 1964, although the period of artists contributing to the post-War reconstruction and reconciliation of Coventry possibly concluded with the piece 'Yoko by John and John by Yoko' [1968] by John Lennon & Yoko Ono. This comprised a seat and planted acorns in the "bombed almost to destruction" 'old Cathedral' [14th & 15th centuries], and was intended to give "people the opportunity to sit and contemplate." Sadly, within days of opening, the "acorns were stolen... Lennon's seat was thrown into shrubbery and the plaque bearing the title of the piece was removed" [George Noszlopy, 2003].

Yoko Ono returned to Coventry in 2005, bringing a replica of the peace bench first donated on the couple's cathedral visit in 1968. She also planted two trees in the cathedral grounds. [BBC Coventry & Warwickshire].

#### 4. What Happened Next...

Having set the foundations and marked out the general outline for the new city centre, Gibson left his post as City Architect in 1955 and was replaced by Arthur Ling who delivered the physical build.

**"The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind."**

- Lewis Mumford 1938

Beyond 'Art & Language', "the foremost conceptual art grouping of the 60s and 70s formed at Coventry Art School in 1968", these "simpler and more personal forms of art" in Coventry have tended to be music-led.

It is a freak of history that the first section of the M1 Motorway (opened 2nd November 1959) ended at Junction 17, the A45 to Coventry. Until later sections were completed (1968), Coventry was the most northerly point easily accessible by touring bands out of London (probably starting with Eddie Cochran in 1960).

From jazz at the Coventry Arts Umbrella Club, the influential Bert Weedon living in nearby Allesley Village, to the emergence of Two Tone and the ubiquitous Pete Waterman, Coventry had a 'scene'. But this is probably best understood by checking out the local music 'fanzines' of the 1970s and early 1980s, notably:

'Broadgate Gnome' (1970 to 1971) "an anarchic brew of attitude, politics, bands and great 'freak' atmosphere."

'Hobo' (1973 to 1974) "poems, local bands with slightly more emphasis on music and community network. Edited by Trev Teasdale, Pete Waterman wrote a soul page, there were features on the local songwriters and clubs and more of a 'get out and do it' attitude."

'Alternative Sounds' (1979 to early 1980s) "i took up the fanzine...the typewriter rather than the guitar... :) ...I was proud that I was contributing to something as culturally and politically important as the punk and post punk music scene...and just to Coventry" [Martin Bowes].

There is a strong graphic quality to some of these 'fanzines' that may be useful at FarGo. Particularly (and by way of example), 'Alternative Sounds' Issue #3 at: <http://coventrymusichistory.typepad.com/blog/2008/02/alternative-sounds-issue-no3.html>.

Other sites worth checking include:

<http://coventrymusichistory.typepad.com/blog/2006/12/poems-from-the-broadgate-gnome.html>

<http://trevsongs.typepad.com/blog/>

#### 5. And Since Then...

"This town, is coming like a ghost town  
All the clubs have been closed down  
This place, is coming like a ghost town  
Bands won't play no more  
too much fighting on the dance floor

Do you remember the good old days  
before the ghost town?  
We danced and sang, and the music  
played in a de boomtown"

"However more recently its brutalist post war reconstruction combined with the economic recession that followed the decline in the car industry in the 1970s gave rise to physical and social problems that led to the city being famously characterised as a 'Concrete Jungle' and as a 'Ghost Town' in songs by the Coventry band The Specials in the early 1980's."The 'Phoenix Project' regeneration programme for Coventry's central area [taking in the two cathedrals, the university and the Museum of British Road Transport] was supported by a public art strategy [Public Art Commissions Agency] based on the theme of 'communication' led to the commissioning of artists Alexander Beleschenko, Christine Browne, Jochen Gerz, Susanna Heron, Françoise Schein, David Ward, Kate Whiteford. As an advocate for the early commissioning of artists to public realm schemes, Richard McCormac of MJP Architects encouraged the idea that "the art works themselves shape the spaces, rather than being simply placed within them" [MJP Architects].

With the 'Phoenix Project', Richard McCormac's heart was in the right place. The early involvement of artists, etc., recalls some of what Donald Gibson had aspired to in the May 1940 'Coventry of Tomorrow' exhibition and in his reading of Mumford's 'The Culture of Cities'. But in reality, McCormac's approach was closer to that of Basil Spence on the new Coventry Cathedral.

Spence was "absolutely of the opinion that the three artists – the architect, the painter and the sculptor – should go hand in hand from the earliest possible moment." This ideal partnership, however, seldom found full expression in his work. He viewed architecture as 'the mother art', in that it traditionally 'brought together almost all the arts', [and this] "meant that while artistic partnership might be possible within his projects, 'hand in hand' collaboration rarely materialized. Spence always retained control, orchestrating and conducting any artistic contributions to projects"

– S. A. Walford

What McCormac and Spence overlooked was Gibson's ability to improvise with artists, to dance and sing "in de boomtown". They also overlooked Mumford's understanding that the city is a "conscious work of art [that] holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art."

In 1946, Gibson and the artist Trevor Tennant had driven to the Lake District to 'acquire' a block of Cumberland granite on which they worked together to create 'The Levelling Stone in the Precinct' that announced Coventry's post-War reconstruction. It is perhaps significant that the 'Levelling Stone' is not 'signed' by either the artist or the architect. It is not, as such, a work of art or architecture. It is, instead, a marker and a benchmark for surveying and establishing the levels for a new Coventry.

It is also the product of a friendship. Trevor Tennant had got to know Donald Gibson while working in the War-time camouflage unit in Leamington Spa. Maybe camouflage is important to a city like Coventry.

## **6. So, FarGO Village...**

"Painted graphics will be applied to the external facades in keeping with other buildings on site" [BPN: 1849 D&A Statement].

"...within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art" [Lewis Mumford: 'The Culture of Cities'].

How do we do this?

## **7. Painted Graphics & External Facades**

"We want to build something visibly creative" [Ian Harrabin]

The BPN statement sets up a 'this' (painted graphics) and 'that' (external facades) duality in the hope that the two will synthesise to express the "something visibly creative" that Ian aspires to.

We need to understand what is behind this image. Are we really talking about black and white chequer patterns and colour circles on the floor, with sub-'Summer of Love' graphics to the walls?

## **8. A Three Layer Strategy**

It might be better to go with a three layer strategy:

- a PRIMARY layer that maximises the possibilities of the external facades;
- a SECONDARY layer that organises and characterises the (total) place and establishes the 'communal framework' (Mumford); and
- a TERTIARY layer that is about the "many simpler and more personal forms of art" (Mumford).

It needs to be a bit like this...