

The vital link

The architectural and artistic concept of Bute Avenue

"Bute Avenue will form the crucial link, physically and symbolically, between the existing city centre and the waterfront, Cardiff Bay"

Summary brief for artists produced by Cardiff Bay Art Trust

Cut off for a century from Cardiff city centre by the mainline railway from London, Cardiff Bay will achieve its formal re-integration along a new north-south axis, Bute Avenue. Breaking into the historic core of the Welsh capital by a new under-rail link from a public square of metropolitan proportions, this will be a corridor of life, leisure and landscape as well as of vital road and public transport links between the twin communities of the historic city centre and the reborn waterfront.

The attention being given to the landscaping and urban design of this link echoes a 100 year-old exercise in civic concern for quality of the built environment. In 1898, the city council acquired the 24ha Cathays Park estate, immediately north-east of the city centre, from the Marquess of Bute, whose family owned and grew rich from Cardiff docks and spent part of their wealth on remodelling the city's 13th-century castle.

On Cathays Park, the former home farm of the castle, the city engineer laid out Britain's first planned civic centre, which groups the City Hall, law courts, University College, National Museum and later government buildings in a carefully-created setting of spacious public gardens - in overall effect, not unlike a more compact version of the Mall in Washington DC. In the articles which follow, Barcelona-based architect David Mackay and Scottish artist Jane Kelly describe their collaboration in a comparable exercise in publicly-funded urban design.

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The way to the waterfront

David Mackay outlines the vision

Cardiff is a city of constant change and adaptability, that knows the pulse of the world economy and how to take the rough with the smooth. A city that knew how to supply the world with its black energy and iron and steel and then, when these began to run out, to switch over to other tasks with a song in the heart and fraternity in the streets. A European city that combines the roots of his historical identity with a utopian vision and the energy of youth from many cultures, placing it in the vanguard of an emerging European Community based on cultural and economic exchanges between merchant cities, rather than the cumbersome structure of invented frontiers.

If you place your right hand on a table and spread out your fingers, you will see the geographical, economic and social structure of Cardiff. The fingers are the valleys that feed into the Bay - the palm of the hand - and the thumb, if bent a little, is the rock of Penarth that protects the Bay from the Atlantic winds. The fraternity of the valley people is well known and, when their streets and railways meet as they do in Cardiff, the resulting energy of fraternity and rivalry creates an optimism unusual in the British Isles. But it is an optimism based on a hard recognition of reality learnt from history, far from the virtual fantasies of a superficial economy.

These valley communities united with their railways that led down to the docks and the Bay. But the Great Western Railway from London to Fishguard cut across these valley fingers, severing the Bay from the city centre. Communities to the south, in and by the Docks (once known as Tiger Bay), quickly established their own strong personalities, such as that of Butetown.

Now, with the mines closed and the docks almost silent, Cardiff has moved quickly to adapt its economy to meet the times. The Barrage across the Bay is under construction and soon the tides will be beyond the reach of the waterfront, making this once again the generator of city life. In turn its natural connection, along the length of the new Bute Avenue, has to be given a scale appropriate to the Bay in its role as the lifeline between the busy city centre and its reconstructed waterfront.

Return to urban design

We say reconstruction rather than development intentionally, as the former implies a certain historical consideration. During the last 50 years, the lessons of the traditional city have been forgotten and replaced with the specialised requirements of the functional city - zoning of uses, densities, traffic on the move and isolated functional buildings. But the vitality of the city springs from the casual encounters of its citizens and their activities in public spaces, and the failure to understand the values of mixed use has led to disintegration.

Both architects and politicians have forgotten their common responsibilities for the design of public spaces, for too long treated as left-overs between roads and buildings. The 18th and 19th centuries produced cities designed with series of related urban "rooms", squares, streets and carefully-placed public buildings. The 20th century has produced a democratic society which has achieved new standards for the physical requirements of living, working and travelling - while housing conditions have improved immensely - but the quality of the urban environment has, in most cases in Europe, proved to be a disaster.

This is now widely realised and, in reconstructing the European city, we have seen a return to urban design and the creation of structural relationships with public space independently of specific functions. The task is now to marry the experience of the past to the achievements of our own culture.

This is what the link between the city centre of Cardiff and its waterfront is all about. One of the largest exercises currently being undertaken by the public sector in Europe in the design of public space to meet these new criteria, it will provide a confident urban setting of quality for the citizens of Cardiff to respond to the city's confidence in adapting for the future. And, where there is confidence, there is investment.

What will the experience be?

If we begin in St Mary Street in the city centre and look south towards the Bay, the new Bute Avenue will dip under the mainline railway viaduct to reveal a monumental circular piece of water where the old Glamorganshire canal used to be. (Picking up a suggestion by the artists involved, the volume of moving water may well be linked to the high and low tides of the Bay; but in any case it will certainly act as the first enticement to the waterfront).

We see a new square, the size of Moscow's Red Square, but very different in concept and use of space. Its form follows that of the mediæval "place", which was created from the merging of streets to form a market place or green in nearly every town and village in the British Isles. The curved north side will have a double-height arcade at ground level and, over the fifth floor, a series of gable roofs. The curved facade and strong architectural elements at ground and skyline levels will allow relative freedom in the design and construction of individual buildings, just as in any British high street.

Bute Avenue itself springs from the eastern side of the Square; 90m wide, it is just over 1km in length. Along the western side will lie the existing community of Butetown; opposite will be a string of new residential and commercial buildings completing a current housing development by Tarmac. The existing railway and embankment will be replaced with a new street-level light railway linked to the valleys through the city centre.

The design avoids the concept of a classical avenue: there is no public building at either end, nor are the two sides the same. Instead, a promenade formed by two lines of trees along the eastern side will "contain" the Avenue before any buildings are built. This basic line of trees is to be seen as an understatement - a line that connects tangentially rather than directly with the main features of the Bay: the new square, the enlarged shopping centre of Butetown, the new Cardiff Opera House, the preserved Pierhead Building and the Inner Harbour.

Bordering this promenade are two carriageways for vehicles with a wide central strip, sometimes paved and sometimes planted with shrubs. Immediately to the east will be a cycle track and the light rail transit. The existing Bute Street will be narrowed to two lanes for local traffic and between this and the light rail will be a linear park divided into sections with rows of trees situated at each pedestrian crossing. The aim is to screen the housing from the traffic and create a succession of smaller areas for leisure and sport on the scale of Butetown itself.

Going southwards along Bute Avenue, there will be a slight slope down to the Butetown shopping centre so that the horizon disappears for a moment - then a rise to a point about 300m before the Opera House. Here the Avenue splay to allow a full view of the approach to the Opera House and Bay and this is where the new Piazza of the Oval basin really begins. The rows of trees go on beyond the Opera House to link with the intense activity of the Capital Waterside commercial development in the old port, the Bay will be displayed in front and, to the east, the new museums will give a finished edge to the old Coal Exchange business area.

David Mackay is a partner in MDM Arquitectes SA, which was established in Barcelona in 1962 and designed the Olympic Village for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

The artists

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Jane Kelly was educated in her home city, Dublin, and Birmingham, where she gained her diploma and subsequently studied sculpture. She has worked with the French artist Kachryn Gustafson on the Square of Human Rights for the Gallery d'Evry in Paris and on the Thames Barrier Park in London, and her Installation (a collaboration with David Patten) was shown at the Warsaw Centre for Contemporary Art in 1993. She has also worked as co-lead artist with her Cardiff Bay collaborator David Patten on the public art and landscaping programme for Sheffield Hallam University.

David Patten was born and lives in the English Midlands, and gained his master's degree in painting at the Royal College of Art in London. He has undertaken documentation projects focussing on public spaces and public artists in New York, Paris, Florence and Frankfurt; held held residencies in Warsaw and Mexico City; and won a 1994 international travel bursary to the USA to study public art policies and practice - which resulted in a subsequent showing at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery of the work of the American artist Siah Armajani (see page xx).

Jack Mackie resides in Seattle, Washington State, USA. During nearly 20 years of involvement in public art, he has worked as lead design team artist for the US\$450 million Downtown Seattle Transit Project and project artist for the US\$518 million Santa Clara County light rail project in California. He has co-authored the art and design programme for the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority and the aesthetic design standards and design implementation procedures for the CENTRO Transport Authority in Birmingham, UK.