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Will Alsop's Hands 10th May 2004 ©David Patten

"...but now there's a mismatch... Birmingham don't quite pull together and get exciting things done. Birmingham is very nervous..."

– Will Alsop, *Building magazine*, 26th May 2006

On 26th May 2006, *Building magazine* ran an article ('The City of Broken Dreams - How Birmingham Lost The Plot') criticising Birmingham's current loss of vision and confidence in its regeneration programme, particularly when compared to the city's achievements of 1985 to 1998 – a period the article described as Birmingham's "golden years".

Overlooking any errors and editorial bias, *Building magazine's* "drive-by valuation" [1] does begin to raise the issue of development impasse as a result of weakened civic leadership. The recent dismantling of municipal responsibilities has swept away the traditional civic elite lead on regeneration, and replaced it with an unelected and invisible foot-loose growth coalition. This situation is not unique to Birmingham.

The notion of the civic elite – the association of local political leaders with local commercial interests – as the lead on urban development was, in modern times, invented in Birmingham. This was the subject of the lunchtime lecture at CABE's offices in London on 9th May 2005.

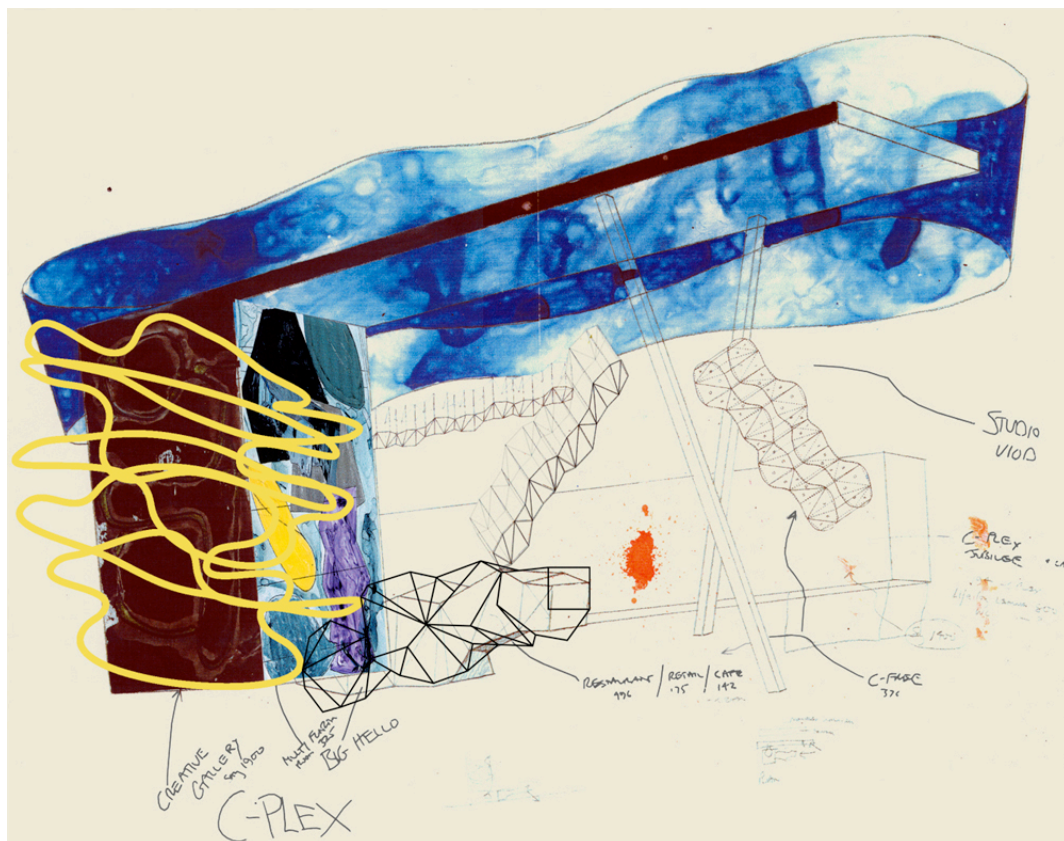
"...in 1870s...a more municipal sensibility emerged, placing the city council at the heart of things – an approach rhetorically pioneered by Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham." [2]

And it is certainly the case that the relational model established by Joseph Chamberlain for the 1875 Artisan's Dwellings Act (which led to the setting out of Corporation Street, etc.) continued, more or less unchanged, for another hundred years, culminating in the delivery of the ICC, Centenary Square, Victoria Square, etc. in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Since the 1990s, though, the relational model has become ruptured. Local political ambition has been checked by central government policy interventions, leading to mistrust and loss of opportunity [3], while, at the same time, Birmingham has been facing mounting criticism of its 1980s and 1990s regeneration achievements:

"Birmingham has re-imagined itself through a 'comprehensive package of aesthetic improvements designed to create an environment that appeared [my emphasis] safe, attractive, and above, all, profitable" [4]..."resulting in the British doughnut, a lump of indifferent carbohydrate with jam in the middle...rich inner-city development surrounded by acres of gloom" [5].

The challenges of mid-nineteenth century urban development – "the desire for small government and low rates, the threat of both the disordered environment and the power of outside bodies" [6] that led to civic elites centred on local borough government as the best way forward – are no different from the challenges now faced at the start of the 21st century. The significant difference, though, is in who gets to set the agenda – and in how delivery of this agenda can be tied to issues of public value [7].



Will Alsop & David Patten, 1998

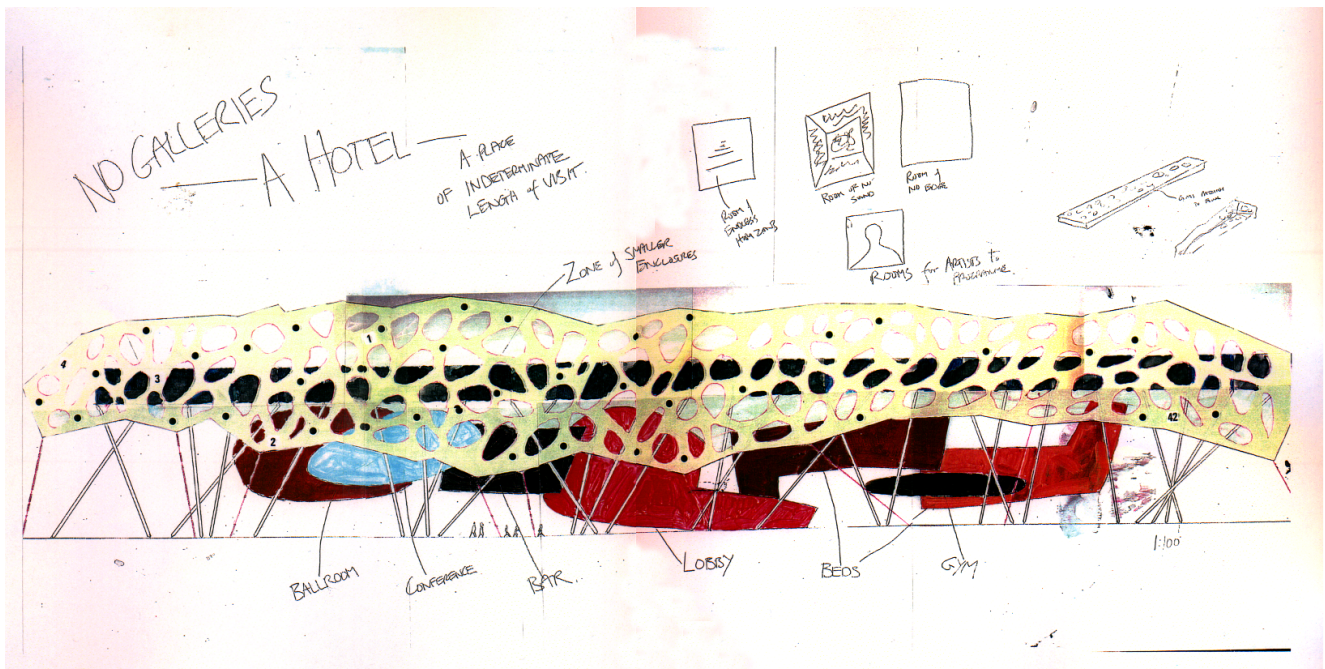
A recent case study on Birmingham carried out by the Work Foundation [8] notes that, in Birmingham, "there are many powerful organisations which are willing to collaborate with each other but not ready to give up their role and position and act in a secondary role" [9].

So in simple terms, and against the backdrop of a missing civic elite, the 'Birmingham Eastside – 50 Golden Builders' project seeks out these powerful organisations and encourages them to adopt a public value role in delivering the next phase of the city's regeneration.

As Councillor XXX has commented [10], "...Birmingham's future years are very much on course in many respects already, [with] some very exciting schemes on the drawing board plus the political determination to 'make it happen'. I just wish that the critics and moaners would check out the facts before going public and this also includes some city organisations..."

The project invites individuals and organisations engaged in the delivery of Eastside to identify themselves publicly as 'Golden Builders', ie. as "people who can move between sectors and groups,

weave agendas together, and find common aims without claiming power. Perhaps these people, of whom there should be more and more, could be what Blake called the Golden Builders of the cities" [11].



References

1. Alan Chatham, Building magazine 9th June 2006
2. Tristram Hunt: 'The rise and fall of the Victorian city: lessons for contemporary urban renewal'
3. The Local Government Association's 2004 Manifesto, 'Independence, Opportunity, Trust', proposes a new vision for independent, self-governing communities: "In The next four years: the future is local we set out the action needed over the life of the current parliament to turn this vision into reality. Ministers should acknowledge the great strides that councils have made in improving their performance. This should take the form of steps to cut red tape and to give local authorities the lead..."
4. The Economist: 'From Workshop to Melting Pot', 6th August 1998
5. The Economist: 'The Doughnut Effect', 17th January 2002
6. R.J. Morris & R.H. Trainor (eds.): 'Urban Governance - Britain and Beyond since 1750', Ashgate, 2000
7. The Work Foundation: 'Adding Public Value' http://www.theworkfoundation.com/research/public_value.jsp
8. The Work Foundation: http://www.theworkfoundation.com/pdf/case_study_birmingham.pdf
9. C. Ferarrio & A Coulson: 'Local Governance and Economic Development - A Study of Birmingham, Based on Institutional Thickness', Milan 8th April 2005
10. personal e-mail 12th June 2006
11. Deborah Jenkins: 'The Richness of Cities' 1998.