

# RSAW City Centre Strategy Forum 23 January 2003

Organised by the Royal Society of Architects in Wales and hosted by Cardiff 2008 at the Old Library, Cardiff

## SUMMARY

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### **Over 70 citizens attended a gathering at the Old Library to debate and comment on the consultation draft of Cardiff's City Centre Strategy, published 6 December 2002**

The meeting was introduced/chaired by Patrick Hannay Editor of *Touchstone – the magazine for architecture in Wales*. Five members of the Design Commission for Wales (DCfW) were present. There were to have been three invited speakers:

- **John Punter** professor of Urban Design, Department of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University, member of the Design Commission for Wales and principal author of the draft WDA Design Guide.
- **Bob Croydon** Senior Partner of King Sturge
- **Julian Stedman** City Planning Department (who was unable to attend).

The following represents summaries of key points made by the chair and two speakers, followed by a summary of contributions made from the floor.

### **Patrick Hannay**

The Chair welcomed everyone. As part of the introduction he asked a series of questions, suggesting that everyone's views may be coloured by their position on the following issues. It would be interesting to know whether there was sufficient consensus on these issues between those present and the City planners and politicians.

- 1 To what degree can /should a City Authority set a strategy for a City Centre?
- 2 Is the strategy informed principally by a reactive mind-set or a pro-active mindset?
- 3 If pro-active are there the resources to do it and how effective can we expect them to be?
- 4 How do you measure a successful City? How is this City authority measuring it?
- 5 Does a sufficient number of citizens share the value judgements underpinning those assessment criteria?
- 6 To what degree are physical, infra structural and building initiatives seen as key contributors to this success (as opposed to 'people' only centred initiatives).
- 7 What level of consultation should inform the City Strategy?
- 8 What is the appropriate nature of that consultation?
- 9 Was such a forum as tonight's, somehow deemed inappropriate by the City authorities and if so why?

It was a tragedy that not a single member of the Planning department, or the Cabinet or Special Projects Office was in attendance.

## **John Punter**

(Prof. Punter outlined the structure and content of the draft document to the audience).

### **A positive climate?**

- Was the ‘City Centre Strategy’ Document a real strategy, a vision, a clear direction? He feared not. The climate was not positive.
- There was the curious alienation of Cardiff’s design and academic community.
- The disappointments of Cabinet government and a strong Mayor.
- The rise of pseudo (managed) consultation as in the St David’s (Land Securities) Partnership proposals.
- A planning department under duress, particularly its development control section crushed under the volume of applications.
- A commitment to the primacy of growth and development almost at any cost (viz Sport Village and Millennium Plaza) with ‘clandestine’ planning as day-to-day practice.
- A failure to add “value” to development (Landmark Place was a god-sent opportunity to create a new more permeable east-west route across the city to connect Queen Street Station westward into the city).
- What we have is town centre management not an approach to strategic planning; a failure to plan positively; opportunism rules.
- While most other go-ahead cities have what is called “smart growth” where integrated planning and sustainability issues are interwoven, we have just growth at any cost.

### **The document’s strong points were**

- A good synthesis of current initiatives
- A good monitoring base for such things as pedestrian movement, consumer views, *etc*
- A good spatial inventory
- A document that was seen by a wide audience
- A good summary if you look very carefully through every page of some key City projects, the development of the Castle and its hinterland Coopers Field as a much enhanced tourist attraction, the Land Securities St David’s 2 development, and the ULTRA high level driverless taxi project.
- While it is understandable that in the 1998 – 2002 earlier version of the document there was no specific mention of the Land Securities development, it is nevertheless curious that there was absolutely no vision for the area, or urban development brief . This lack of pro-active development briefs is an ongoing problem. One wonders what is missing this time round in the current document a total redevelopment of the bus station area along Wood Street to include the Planning offices and all the land eastward toward St Mary Street?

## **Critique of the content**

It is not a plan, nor a basis for negotiation. It is not a vision. It is largely a series of motherhood and apple pie statements to which nobody could object.

The delineation of “Key Issues” falls under rather old-fashioned headings, part reflection of Council structures, part reflection of old planning and commercial property labels, and some positively disturbing in their minimal commitment to some hard facts (for example the key issue of transport). It doesn’t delineate problems and tensions in any strategic way.

Following the “Key Issues” the document then describes “aims, context and goals” for a large number of areas of the city.

- The logic of the city’s fragmentation into these minute quarters is not explained. There is no sense whether there is any historical basis to them.
- The content described is reactive not pro-active.
- It catalogues initiatives already underway.
- Separating them into such small units prevents an overview to get some joined-up thinking on wider issues.
- There is, however, not enough detail to be “a material planning consideration”.
- There is an urgent need to bridge the gap between the UDP (Unitary Development Plan) and the existing City Centre Design Guide which was good of its time, but urgently needs updating, for example on its high buildings policy, given today’s Western Mail illustration of the 22 storey Altolusso apartment building on Bute Terrace by HMA.

## **Learning from examples**

Has there been any learning from leading UK City exemplar strategies in action, like Leeds, Bristol and Birmingham (two of which are competing for the City of Culture bid)? Have politicians and officers visited them to learn some lessons?

What are the strengths of these exemplars? — vision, direction and integration, a huge commitment to investment in the public realm and above all a commitment to design quality and directing growth within a considered spatial strategy for the city.

## **What could and should Cardiff deliver?**

- A fully thought through public realm and ambitious pedestrian movement plan for the whole City centre is urgently needed, particularly for the south east quarter.
- A comprehensible transport network (the recent publication of the excellent bus map is a good start) integrating public transport, traffic management and above all parking. Can 3000 car parking spaces creating what is almost a north-south wall of motor vehicles at the back of the St David’s Part 2, really be part of a sensible transport strategy?
- The Council has large landholdings. This should give them considerable leverage in directing urban change. To publish those landholdings would be a very necessary piece of information in a strategic planning document.

- Are funding opportunities through the Heritage Lottery and Cadw being fully utilised?
- Are there sufficient development control policies/briefs, and finally who will be invited to join the town centre consultative committee announced at the launch on 6 December? The composition of this group will be critical.

## Bob Croydon

The current document would appear to be largely a series of aspirational statements more honoured in the breach. On the ground what we get is a series of reactive and opportunistic events rather than a managed process of change. From the beginning of planning as a profession to pre-1970 the resourcing of the planning process within cities suggested that the principal role was curbing the wilder processes of industrialisation. But in a post-industrial city (such as Cardiff) the emphasis appears to have shifted to promoting commercial activity, accelerate the development process. The resources are in promotion. Development control is seriously under-resourced. The tensions and conflicts between these two forces are not being well managed currently.

The Strategy Document and its implementation should be up-front about other inherent major tensions and conflicts. They are of a City and Regional nature. They need highlighting in the document along with the other issues. Without this the urban estate will continue to be mismanaged.

Some of these principle tensions and conflicts are:

- **The Bay and the City** Quite clearly the job in the Bay is not done. Historical tensions between the former CBDC and the City are legion and hampering the City's proper responsibility for managing the evolution of this area. The tensions between the metropolitan elite and the existing communities need facing up to.
- **The Millennium Stadium and the Old City** What makes Cardiff distinct and unique (the small and long established businesses that occupy the area between St Mary's Street and the Hayes) are massively under threat from the west (the Stadium). Short-term rate reductions for these vulnerable businesses may only be "sticking plaster". There are losers and winners in the 'Regeneration Game' and such traders as in the arcades bear a disproportionate cost for Cardiff accommodating a 'national amenity' in the form of the Millennium Stadium.
- **Housing for whom in the City centre?** High quality affordable housing in the City centre might add *diversity*. The owners of new penthouse flats campaigning to have Churchill Way designated a residents' parking area might be described as *disparity*. To achieve genuine diversity demands imagination and pro-active management.
- **The tension and conflicts associated with Capital City status** – the Assembly versus the City, the City versus the region. The City has a symbiotic relationship to its hinterland/region. Mistaken perceptions in the Assembly (as representatives of that wider region) see the City regeneration task as done – and thus resources to be shifted elsewhere. Electoral short-termism may hinder Cardiff's chance to compete internationally and be a true capital. At least the Capital of Culture bid may be providing some genuine glue between the capital city and the region it serves.

- **Resolving conflicting policies between edge-of-town, out-of-town and in-town major developments** needs the Assembly and City to be on board within the Strategy document and its implementation – not at loggerheads.
- **The Higher education/ELWa/skilled labour magnet** and its implications for transport infrastructure investment: the inevitable expansion of education (“invest in people not places”) will demand infrastructure projects to ease the flow between region and Capital of skilled labour. It cannot be ducked. So it’s people *and* places.

## Points from the floor

**Dominic O’Rourke** (Land Securities) [*The Chair on behalf of the meeting welcomed a representative from this important development in the City. Their presence as evidence of serious commitment to the strategic planning of the City was noted.*] Responding to criticism of the St David’s Part 2 consultation as “pseudo consultation” (see above *John Punter*), Dominic O’Rourke explained their processes were a supplement to the statutory consultation processes of the City’s planning department, not a substitute. They would not be spending a six figure sum if they were just going through the motions. They were in it for the long term. He pointed out plans have evolved as a result of the consultation process. Out of the exemplar cities (see *Punter* earlier) with good strategic planning, O’Rourke pointed out that Land Securities were working in both Birmingham and Bristol. In response to a question from the chair about whether the City Centre Strategy document was a valuable tool to a serious developer, he replied they had formally written to the City saying it should form part of material considerations in any planning application. He suggested Urban Design development briefs for sites were in his experience too prescriptive.

**Richard Parnaby** (Chair of the Design Commission for Wales) Drawing parallels or lack of parallels with Berlin (just returned from a visit there) he suggested a City could helpfully be seen as an object, our largest human artefact. Since it is created, it has to be driven by a set of clear ideas. It has to decide how it wants to be. For that it needs a vision, and that vision (and the City Centre Strategy document) should be informed by a historical understanding of how the City has developed both physically and socially. There was no sign of this perspective in the current document. There must be a bigger idea, not a series of fragmented initiatives.

**Mark Barry** The Strategy documents need clearer statements and policies to indicate active support for a tolerant and socially diverse city culture - particularly, as Manchester has done, to the gay community, within which a sizeable element of any city’s creative talent resides.

**Gareth Jones** (BBC but speaking in a private capacity) It was very difficult to secure accessible information on the St David’s part 2 development. Artists’ watercolours were a completely misleading form of communication and simply confused any understanding of where in the process the application had got to. The displays of the scheme in Cardiff shopping locations were also inadequate and token. The plans had not been logged in the City Centre library as far as he was aware. The documents would be impenetrable to many lay-people. The library, learning element of the whole development, should be a central driving force of the whole project. Wales’ tradition of devoting huge resources to education and the Assembly’s current plans (within ELWa) testify to this commitment. Cities such as Norwich,

Birmingham and the London Borough of Peckham recognised this and didn't hide such a facility on top of a two-storey bookshop.

**Dr Matthew Griffiths** There urgently needed to be a shift in what he perceived as a dominant political culture (possibly which sprung from South Glam) of a profound distrust of officers, and a planning politics of “quick short term fixes” for electoral gain rather than a medium term vision.

**Gordon Lewis (WynThomasGordonLewis)** He suggested the crucial thing was to be clear about what defined a Capital City from a regional city. There was no whiff of that in the document. Cardiff has yet to fully realise it is a capital city. It is young (1956) but Bob Croydon suggested the date was really four years ago when the National Assembly was born. Unsurprisingly, we were still growing up.

**Richard Powell (Artist)** A sense of ownership of the city could not exist when major chunks of it (and it seemed more of it to come) were essentially addressing suburban cultures of 9-5 workers and only for those with considerable resources devoted to a shopping dominated culture. You only had to look outside the Old Library to see the utter deadness of the City centre because of these policies and total domination of retailing as the only horse in town. The City could and should act to alter this.

**Bob Croydon** The new developments in the city were imposing a cosmopolitan lifestyle on communities that had not asked for it. They did not reflect the wishes of the communities, often displaced by the developments (the Butetown effect). This was made worse with the creation of huge public spaces rather than small connecting squares that communities might gain some sense of intimacy and ownership of.

**Tamara Krikorian (Cywaith Cymru/Artworks Wales)**

People in Cardiff are in effect being robbed of their democratic freedom because the current cabinet style city government does not want to engage and discuss policy as evidenced by this evening.

**John Punter** The quality of sub-centres within the City was also very poor. The Strategy needed to recognise the City as poly-nuclear.

**Bob Croydon** Lessons need to be learnt on the dangers of imported ‘grand projects’ that are not informed at all by any local cultural and climatic understanding – Inkin's “Champs Elysées” from the original MBM (Barcelona) master plan - now Lloyd George Avenue.

**Ewart Parkinson (Cardiff Civic Society)** The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century city was a merchant city, the 19<sup>th</sup> century city was an industrial city, the 20<sup>th</sup> century city was a service city and the 21<sup>st</sup> century city was the learning city of diverse cultures. Cardiff with its massive student population and potential expansion of further and higher education should be at the core of any strategy, but the City politicians and officers seemed to be so often divorced from or uncomfortable with its academic community. It was critical to develop a collaborative culture.

**Mike Cuddy** Organisationally, is the Council capable of currently forming a vision? In Ewart Parkinson's day (as Chief City Planner) there was a vision. The experienced

professional's perception of the City Council was often of some very gifted officers but who were always being kept in tight, separate boxes.

**Rocco Piliero** (Percy Thomas Partnership) A critical part of the city's image comes from its public domain management. A massive hike in standards and commitment to repair and place damaged elements was required if Cardiff was to seriously consider itself as a European capital city.

**Jonathan Adams** The London Borough of Southwark's remarkable record in putting culture successfully at the heart of a major strategic planning initiative was largely the work of one individual, Fred Mansell. Could Committees or collectives achieve similar ends? What was the record of the exemplar cities referred to earlier?

**John Punter** Birmingham was the result of a massive and energetic involvement over a few days of international, national and local figures and groups (call the Highgate initiative) which within this period set up all the principles of the plans that have been followed over the last decade. Bristol was a collaboration between a small group of professionals within the City and the Chief Executive's office, and Leeds was largely the result of the vision of the Chair of the Planning Committee.

**Rian Evans** Could the city ever bond with the Bay?

**John Punter** Not while the whole quarter was divided physically and socially on a north-south axis with virtually no east-west permeability, and while the PDR and Lloyd George avenue remained essentially motorways in scale and function. You only had to turn the map of Cardiff on its head to see how the whole Bay area and its PDR read like "edge city" – never the heart of it.

**Bob Croydon** At the time of the MBM proposals there had been an initiative by the Architecture School for a completely different vision of a connecting link which was not only vastly reduced in scale, but had a much more subtle pattern of mixed-use development with pedestrian and cycle routes and vehicular routes east-west and north-south offering the opportunity to eventually knit Butetown into the whole city fabric. (But we went for importing the Ramblas into Cardiff.)

**Richard Nelms** (Cycling campaign) Promises of a bridge for cyclists over the River Ely seemed to evaporate under current moves around the Sports Village. What did John Punter actually mean by "clandestine planning"?

**John Punter** It was completely impossible for any concerned citizen to engage and keep up in any meaningful way with developments at the Sports village. It was simply a "triangle of opportunity", a desperate search for any sort of development - garden centre retail parks, golf driving ranges on top of B&Q etc etc with no sense of any planning framework. Also, worryingly, no mention of a national ice rink as a replacement for that to be demolished under the Land Securities proposal.

**The Chair thanked the speakers and closed the meeting. The meeting ended at 8.30pm.**