



Paul Butler Associates

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Lessons from the Windy City

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In our planning world, it sometimes feels as if wheels are being re-invented enthusiastically every ten years or so – regional versus local, detailed or broad brush development plans, private or social housing, green belts or economic development – all debates which have been going on since the Second World War or earlier. We need a sense of perspective. An understanding of the history of our towns and cities – as well as post war planning initiatives – brings a valuable overview to what we are trying to do and where we are going. An excellent example of this sense of perspective is provided by Chicago – a city where modern planning was almost invented and where the importance of the individual plot and the broad sweep of the city's development are both understood and appreciated in a way that is often sadly lacking in the UK. In Chicago they are celebrating the centenary of a Plan. Of course not just any plan, but Burnham's plan. And not just any celebration: an amazing range of events and exhibitions – including temporary pavilions by Zaha Hadid and the Dutch architect Ben van Berkel – designed to get everyone involved. And they are not using the centenary just to pat themselves on the back or to carry out an interesting piece of historical research; but to provide the starting point for a discussion on the future of the City now.



Fig 1. Zaha Hadid's temporary pavilion, Millennium Park, Chicago

Can we learn from this in Britain? Well, Manchester has just twinned with Los Angeles. Perhaps the lesson there is how not to develop cities: an obsession with cars and freeways destroys the fabric of a city; and when the day comes that the car is not king (has it already happened?) one wonders

what will happen to all the massive infrastructure designed to move an individual from home to work.

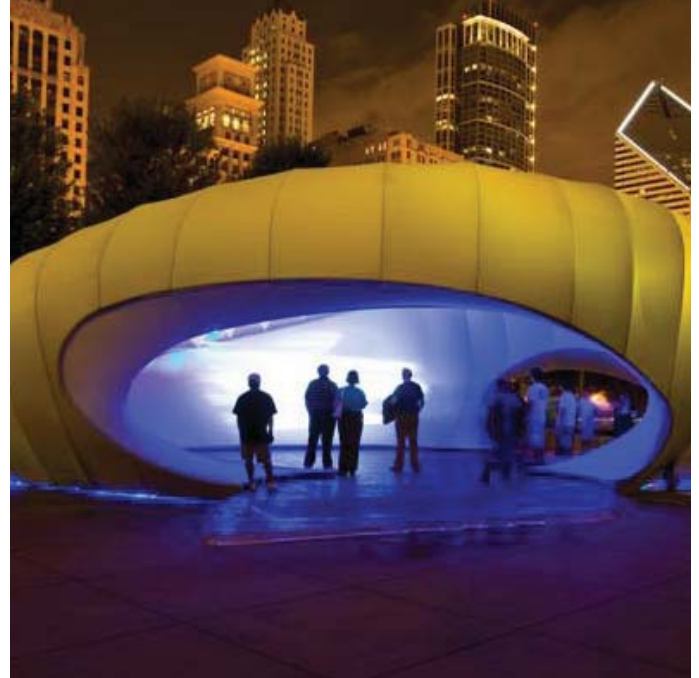


Fig 2. Hadid's pavilion houses a multimedia installation

In the UK the frantic pace of development seen in most towns and cities has come to a shuddering halt. This is bad – little investment, half finished buildings – and good: a time for reflection about what really matters in our towns and cities. So, where to start? Well, the framework is already here with our existing Planning and Listed Building Acts; and what has happened in Blackburn (amongst other places) shows what can get done.

Blackburn never saw the major development in cities such as Liverpool or Manchester; but unthinking design was a problem. So English Heritage and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council commissioned a team led by Paul Butler Associates to develop a series of documents which would, on the basis of the history and character of the area, show what was important and must be enhanced if the town is to develop as an interesting, thriving and successful place.

A desk based archaeological study was produced by Oxford Archaeology North – a basic reference point for understanding what there is and its significance. Paul Butler Associates then produced a series of appraisals and management plans for the conservation areas within the town centre. This is not an historicist approach to development – leave everything well alone, replicate what has gone before – but it does mean that if you want to enhance the essential character of a place, avoid it becoming a clone town or one subject to the latest planning /development whim, then there needs to be an understanding of the history and character of the area. On the basis of this understanding, Landscape Projects



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produced a public realm strategy for the centre; and OMI Architects prepared a series of mini design guides showing what could and should happen on key sites within the centre.



Fig 3. Blackburn's town centre

The value of this type of work will only be shown over the next few years, perhaps decades. It may be that, as with many consultant studies, it will be scarcely used and referred to and that decisions will be taken on the basis of pressure for development and the latest ideas which have caught the imagination of developers elsewhere. But the hope is these documents will help developers, their agents, the planners and the council members to sit back, think about what is really significant about their towns and cities, and allow and encourage development which brings out the essential character of these places.

Historian Simon Schama spoke, at CABE's tenth anniversary, about his 'deep, instinctive belief that all children are wired for memory and narrative. Children want to be part of buildings that talk about where they have come from. They want to walk and live in those kinds of places. And later take their own children to them'. I agree, but would add 'adults' to children as well. We all need a sense of history and place. The current downturn gives us, as planners, a chance to sit back and think about the past, where we are now and where we want to go. We could do well to learn from Chicago. If we can't go back a hundred years to celebrate an iconic plan, we can go back several centuries of planning and development; and perhaps half a century to see what we wanted to do after another of our crises: the aftermath of the Second World War and, perhaps, our heroic days as plan makers. What happened to those plans? What has worked with them, what has gone awry?

We have the tools to do the job; we need the commitment of planners and politicians – national and local – to make sure that what we do in the future is based on a proper understanding of the character of our towns and cities. Only by doing this will we be able to say – in perhaps 50 years time – that we took advantage of this crisis; and learnt something about how to develop beautiful, thriving and social towns and cities.

References

Blackburn Town Centre Heritage and Design Series, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council (June 2009)