



Bristol: 'A city with self-belief and swagger'

With its architect mayor focused on regeneration and the city's new arena, Bristol has a new buzz about it, writes *Tom Ravenscroft*

BRISTOL Led by its first elected mayor, architect and former RIBA president George Ferguson, Bristol's vibrant music, festival and street art scene (made famous by Banksy) gives the impression of a city on the up. Earlier this year, the local Architecture Centre ran an exhibition called Bristol: Ambitious City.

'[There is a] genuine sense of a city with self-belief and a little swagger,' says Bristol-based architect Tom Russell, founder of Tom Russell Architects and a former lecturer at the University of the West of England (UWE).

An emerging architectural community, led by the resurgence of the Architecture Centre, which relaunched in May 2012 following a major overhaul under the leadership of *Architectural*

Review associate editor

Rob Gregory, has been bolstered by the election of the mayor. Following the closure of Bristol University's architecture

department in the early 1980s the city was left without an architecture school until UWE established its department in 1996. Over the past five years, UWE's architecture school has doubled in size from 300 to 600

students. New studios have set up (including Smith Maloney Architects, this week's New Practice, page 20); AHMM and BDP both have offices in the city; and Bristol-based Stride Treglown has risen to number 10 in the AJ100.

Yet, despite its vibrant scene, Bristol does not have a reputation for great buildings. While Pevsner described Bristol as a city that 'reveals its charms slowly', Elena Marco, associate head of architecture at the UWE, describes it as an 'attractive city' with 'no real wow architecture'.

With the exception of Charles Holden's Grade I-listed central library, and Percy Thomas Partnership's Clifton Cathedral,

the UK's former second city is almost devoid of exceptional modern buildings.

The city's lacklustre built environment is the result of a legacy of missed opportunities, the most notable being Stefan and Günter Behnisch's Harbourside Centre for Performing Arts, abandoned in 1998, which 'would have had a massive effect on perceptions of Bristol', according to Ashley Smith of Smith Maloney.

Completed in 2011, the M Shed museum also demonstrates a lack of architectural confidence. A retrofit of a 1950s transit shed by Australian practice LAB Architecture Studio, the project suffered from a council U-turn from 'transformation' to refurbishment. The completed building was described by Gregory as 'a rather mashed-up and schizophrenic place that, regardless of the fine views it

**FOCUS ON
BRISTOL**

ABOVE: TOM RAVENSCROFT



opens up, fails to maintain any architectural coherence inside and out' (AJ 07.07.11). Although the museum is undoubtedly popular, attracting 50,000 visits a month, the council's ambition for M Shed pales in comparison with, for example, the brashness of 3XN's Museum of Liverpool, which opened a month later.

Architects are pinning their hopes on Ferguson to break through the city's conservatism. According to Martin Sutcliffe, director of BDP's Bristol office, 'the election of the mayor is creating a buzz about the city when you travel' – both nationally and internationally. It is a buzz that Ferguson is keen to capitalise on when seeking investment.

Ferguson's victory in the polls as Bristol's first elected mayor has placed architecture at the forefront of thinking about the city's future.

Having already been named European Green Capital for 2015, Ferguson says he is placing a 'great emphasis on the development of a coordinated spatial plan' for Bristol (see interview, page 19).

Key to Ferguson's city plan are 'first impressions'. The main artery into the city centre, the M32, dumps visitors into the blank, defensive external wall of Chapman Taylor's shopping centre, Cabot Circus. And the main station, Temple Meads, through which 9 million passengers pass each year, is in an area of commercial development disconnected from the city centre by a mile of confused road and pedestrian routes.

With Edward Cullinan's Harbourside masterplan almost complete, it is this area around the station, located in the new, 70ha Temple Quarter Enterprise

The main artery into the city dumps visitors into the blank, defensive external wall of a shopping centre

Zone, that has the biggest potential for future development.

The cornerstone is the proposal to provide Bristol with a 12,000-seat arena on a former diesel depot site adjacent to the station. Ferguson intends to have the arena completed by the end of his first term in May 2016, and £250,000 of Bristol City Council funding has been approved for development. However, Bristol residents and architects are understandably cautious; plans for the arena were originally announced in 2003, with £13 million spent on purchasing and clearing the site. HOK Sport (now Populous) was chosen as the architect, before the scheme stalled in 2007 due to rising costs.

Plans to improve the Grade I-listed station itself are also under way, described by Patrick Hallgate, route managing director for Network Rail Western, as 'fundamental to the future success of the enterprise zone'. Electrification of the South-West mainline is set to complete by 2017, which, along with new Intercity Express trains, will reduce journey times to London by 20 minutes. Network Rail is also seeking government funding to provide 'platform accommodation for trains heading to London', with Brunel's Passenger Shed, currently a car park, mooted to be returned to its original use.

Outside the enterprise zone, major developments involve >>



Temple Meads enterprise zone

1. Bristol Temple Meads

2. Potential Bristol Arena site

Regional focus

Clockwise from right Temple Meads station; Cabot Circus at the end of the M32; Twenty/ten by Rob Gregory and Paul Halford; Colston's Girls' School by Walters & Cohen; Lakeshore, by Ferguson Mann; Stefan and Günter Behnisch's abandoned Harbourside Centre for Performing Arts



Smith Maloney Architects earlier this year says: 'It feels like there is real potential in Bristol. Within a week of setting up we had already been asked to quote for five projects.'

Shankari Raj Edgar, known as Shanks, agrees. She founded Nudge Group four months ago due to a 'massive gap in the market', as 'no one is doing anything innovative in the city'.

But Shanks also says changing the views of clients may be a challenge. 'The network of clients based in Bristol and the South-West willing to spend money [only] use well-established architects,' she says.

One of these 'safe hands' and the city's largest practice, Stride Treglown, is aiming to break out of this regional role. Chairman David Hunter believes that 'there shouldn't be any reason why we can't get this practice to the status of a national player', something that would surely benefit the city's architectural scene.

A true big-hitter, AHMM has located a 'satellite resource' in the Tobacco Factory, a mixed-use building saved from demolition by Ferguson. Ceri Davies, an

'It's not about conquering the South-West – it's a lifestyle choice'
AHMM's Ceri Davies on its Bristol office



both of the city's football clubs. Earlier this month Bristol City submitted plans for the £40 million redevelopment of Ashton Gate, designed by KKA, should Populus' Ashton Vale stadium be scuppered by a town and village green application. Bristol Rovers has received planning permission for an Arturus-designed 21,700-seat stadium within UWE's campus, which is also undergoing major works, masterplanned by Stride Treglown.

In addition, both of the city's hospitals are being redeveloped, with work continuing at the

Bristol Royal Infirmary and BDP's works at Southmead Hospital due to complete this autumn.

On the housing front, Phil Bevan, who heads up the residential sector at AWW (winner of the 2013 AJ100 Best Place to Work – South West award), has noticed an increase in the level of enquires in the past year, as has Mark Osborne, director at another of Bristol's stalwarts, Alec French Architects. He believes that writing-down by developers of the value of plots is opening up land for development.

Phase one of the practice's Wapping Wharf scheme on a long-term brownfield site behind the M Shed is due to start on site later this year, following a £12 million investment from the Homes and Communities Agency as part of the Get Britain Building programme. Attracted by Ferguson's 'can-do attitude to urban regeneration and, above, all, his enthusiasm for self-build', Kevin McCloud's HAB Housing is intending to open its first office in the city later this year.

Young practices are optimistic. Natasha Smith, who co-founded

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BEHNISCH ARCHITECTEN



associate based in Bristol, says the move was 'not about conquering the South-West', but a 'lifestyle choice'. The office has full ownership of projects, often in London, with Derwent's White Collar Factory in Old Street run from Bristol.

Now six years old and growing, AHMM's Bristol office seems to be proving that this relocation of resources can be managed without a reduction in design quality. It will be interesting to see if other London-based firms follow suit.

But Tom Russell adds a word

of caution: 'While Bristol is no longer a graveyard of ambition, the easy-going feel of the place does permeate the working culture here.'

With an thriving young architecture scene, revitalised architecture centre, a university growing in stature and an architect as mayor, it seems that, if ever there was a time for this 'ambitious city' to realise its potential, it's now. In the words of Stride Treglown's David Hunter: 'It would be a huge shame if Bristol doesn't grasp these opportunities.' ■

Q&A WITH BRISTOL MAYOR GEORGE FERGUSON



How will Bristol's built environment be improved by the end of your first term?

By 2016 we will have made significant improvements in housing, which has fallen to an all-time low. We will also have started the changes to Temple Meads Station and the enterprise zone, including construction of the arena. My real target is 2020, if I am re-elected in 2016 – by which time I hope to have repaired the centre of the city and to have re-connected the station to the centre. This is all part of a greater spatial plan for the city that I'm preparing. My greatest physical emphasis is on greening the city as the legacy for European Green Capital 2015.

How do you intend to make Bristol the UK's number one destination after London?

I am doing all I can to bring attention to Bristol's great history, environment, quality of life, creativity and diversity, and am working closely with our major institutions to make sure we develop the necessary skills to attract inward investment.

What is your main achievement as mayor so far?

Securing European Green Capital and changing the political dynamics by appointing a six-person cabinet made up of all four parties represented on the city council.

How do you respond to claims the city doesn't have an overall plan for its built environment?

I would largely agree – which is why I am putting great emphasis on the development of a coordinated spatial plan for the city.

Do you still believe in the X-listing of buildings, and which would you X-list?

Yes! There are a few buildings around Temple Meads Station that take the biscuit.

Do you still expect the Bristol Arena to be completed before the end of your first term?

We are on course for an end of 2016 completion, opening in 2017. Furthermore the two football stadium developments should also be completed, or be well on their way by 2016.

How important is bringing a high-speed rail link to Bristol?

This is vitally important – and what is more, electrification by 2017 is far better value than HS2. It will give us a regular 80-minute connection to London. I am working closely with Cardiff on strategic transport issues. We need high-speed electrification to Birmingham to connect us into HS2.

What are you actively doing to support architects in Bristol?

Encouraging procurement of local contractors and professionals as a more sustainable way forward, for instance in the construction of schools, with the intention of building the sort of regional architectural culture that Manchester has done so successfully – without excluding other national and international architects from involvement in key projects

What are the advantages to the city of having an architect as mayor?

Clearer decision making, greater confidence and greater national and international attention.

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