Liverpool1: Variety and Validation in Architecture

The Paradise Street Development Area sprawled over 42 acres, a vast site that straddled the docks, central shops, business district, and the warehouses of Rope Walks, but remained curiously vacant from the early 1980s. We’re not talking derelict or dilapidated properties here – there was nothing there, with only a grassed mound known as Chavasse park remaining. The former Customs House once proudly sat here, along with the city’s first dock built by Thomas Steer in the early 18th century. At the edge of the site The Eagle pub still displayed the US consulate eagle sculpture, and the ‘alternative’ shopping experience of Quiggins attracted the city’s glamorous subcultures.

A combination of poor economic performance and lack of political drive are perhaps too obvious to even state for the site’s demise. But more than this, it was a complex location with uncertain ground conditions, an 11m level change, neighbouring heritage buildings, landownership issues, as well as complex road and public transport issues.

In some ways it was too big, and remained too difficult to handle, but then again Liverpool’s petite city core has a penchant for big and difficult projects. There’s no shortage of ambition, design experiments, and a determination to produce monumental buildings – the place is filled with striking visions. Previous attempts to develop the site didn’t grasp this, and lacked the grand flamboyant gesture. The city council displayed good leadership here, and stuck to their vision for developing the entire site as a singular entity. In 1999 an advertisement was placed in the press calling for expressions of interest and garnered 47 responses. Grosvenor in a joint venture with fund manager Henderson Investors were selected. Henderson pulled out leaving Grosvenor to find new funders for the £650m estimated cost. Four banks put up £400m, the rest was from equity partners with Grosvenor shouldering a significant portion of the risk. To make matters worse (in a good way), Liverpool was announced as European Capital of Culture for 2008 leaving just five years to design and build the project, now rebranded as Liverpool One (L1). The pressures were intense, and the temptation to reduce costs and deviate from the design vision must have been almost irresistible.

The vision was to integrate the development into the existing city’s fabric, and certainly not an interior shopping mall that didn’t engage with the wider context. This firmly aligned with Richard Rogers recently published, ‘Towards an Urban Renaissance’ and a growing concern for place-making and street-craft. Whilst the entire development was to be simultaneously undertaken by one developer, the idea was to introduce considerable variety rejecting a homogenous aesthetic. The red line of the planning drawings was not to be visible in the street with the site seams and edges feathered into the city. This was a difficult mission – planning spontaneity is never easy and embracing serendipity is risky, especially when millions of pounds are at stake.

It would be contrived for a single designer to deliver this ambition, instead a buffet of 26 architecture practices were commissioned with BDP masterplanning and coordinating. The commitment was to making a new place, rather than treating buildings as objects and artefacts, with a desire for a consistent high-quality urban fabric. Iconic-all-eyes-on-me-ego-landmarks were judiciously resisted.

Does it hold together? Is it even supposed to? The stable of architects were not given their brief and then left to it, rather a highly controlled process, including how the drawings were to be set out, was pursued. Some of the buildings were designed to concept stage with BDP then responsible for the construction drawings. No doubt this did pasteurise some of the work, and it would be interesting to know how/if this translated into procurement, and standardisation to relieve time pressures and increase efficiency.

There is a common language derived from the materials, scale, and public realm treatment, but it certainly has distinct portions that stand aloof and deliberately contrast and even clash. The edges and thresholds of the site are particularly successful and clearly show a lot of care and delicate handling of materials to achieve confident but discreet adjacencies. There are still moments of giddy abandon, CZWG’s ‘Bling Bling’ cantilevered gold sovereigns hover over School Lane (and are entirely appropriate for its celebrity hairdressing client). Wilkinson Eyre’s illusionary bridge contorts to the point of almost vanishing – it’s impossible to weary of looking at this beautiful display. Other folded forms include Studio Three’s carefully resolved pavilion, whilst FAT’s kiosks, clad in ceramic chevrons of pink, grey and green, recall Galkoff’s butcher’s shop and the Victorian tiles of Doctor Duncan’s pub. There’s plenty, indeed huge expanses of brushed steel, cladding in Burnt Sienna, and butch commercial detailing – all carefully designed and of the expensive sort – but these smaller sassy interventions lighten things up, soften the commercial detailing (see Marks Barfield’s metal tubed coffeeshop for example), and bring the scale right down to the traditional shop window - and retail is what L1 is fundamentally all about.

By the 1990s Liverpool had slipped to number 17 in the UK shopping charts, from it’s number 3 high in the 1970s. With just 688 shops compared to 900+ in Manchester and almost 1500 in Glasgow there was clearly scope for expansion and pent-up demand from the estimated 4 million people in the wider region. The size of Liverpool’s shops was also smaller, and the strong linear axis of Church Street and Bold Street was suffocating expansion. Lessons had been learned from earlier attempts just a short walk away from the new site. The remains of windowless St. Johns shopping centre, long derided for its scorched earth erasure of the existing street pattern, and the more translucent Clayton Square arcade were to be avoided. Church Street was however integral to the new proposal and a perpendicular connection was made. There are many clever contextual tactics in L1, such as the framing of views, and integration of existing streets, but the culvert from Church Street is particularly good. The street façade is punctured leading to a vaulted arcade designed by Dixon Jones. It’s a brave, simple solution and neatly combines the new and old retail centres, drawing in the existing Marks and Spencer as the third ‘anchor’ store, complementing the new John Lewis (by John McAslan) and Debenhams (by Group 6). Unlike the out-of-town models and interior malls, L1 sought to increase visitors to the city rather than diverting traffic away from the centre. Once beyond the sensitive edge condition there’s a step change from the existing street pattern and an axis of multi-level shopping connects the two anchor stores. The stacked streetscape was an important commercial decision (and benefits the city council who receive 5% of all rental income), but also made good use of the site levels, and was possibly a nod to the Rows in Chester. This is the most mall-like portion of the development, it isn’t fully enclosed, yet has certain qualities of a large railway or transport terminal. It’s a new typology that isn’t entirely convincing or as enjoyable as the rest of the development, feeling more commercial, managed, and less civic. Carefully hidden here is a 14 screen cinema hall, and a dramatic zig-zag staircase leading to the 7 acre resigned Chavasse park plateau, that also conceals a subterranean 2000 space carpark. There are small intimate pathways here weaving through extensive planting, and the surprising possibility of tranquillity away from the crowds. Alternatively there’s a sandstone amphitheatresque staircase that descends from the park to a square between the Hilton Hotel (Squire and Partners + Aedas) and the residential One Park West (Pelli Clarke Pelli). One Park West caused planning controversary the time, including concerns by English Heritage over its height and the impact of the World Heritage Site listing (recently *unlisted* for other terrible decisions that followed). After almost provoking a third public enquiry a decision was made to reduce the height by three stories. It seems an odd argument to have now, even pedantic, did they not see the giant cathedral behind them, and even the sacrosanct Three Graces were once (not so long ago) insolent newcomers. The scale of One Park West seems entirely appropriate next to the six-laned Strand – still a major cleft, that despite recent attempts, manages to successfully isolate the docks from the rest of the city. One Park West was supposed to be the only ‘iconic’ element of the project and it’s dramatic curve and rhymical façade is intriguing, but rewards the photographer more than the casual observer. The form tapers to a point from one angle, whilst elsewhere its figurative reference to a ship is unsophisticated and corny (but hasn’t dented sales and ongoing occupancy). Glen Howell’s triangular, almost serrated blade-like afront to the corner condition on Manesty Lane is a more convincing combination of retail and residential. The materials, detailing and precision is excellent. There are many other examples of these strong solutions, and they leave the development’s only island site, the John Lewis store, looking slightly out of step and clumsy. At the point where John Lewis reaches the threshold of the development its curved façade faces four older existing buildings, which also have curved façades. This unison at a prominent junction feels reticent, and it lacks a dominant force. As the late David Dunster rightly described it, there is a ‘no, please, after you’ politeness to the juncture. This could have been the ideal place for a new version of Epstein’s ‘Liverpool Resurgent’, or an increase in scale of the John Lewis ‘corner’. The lack of public sculpture and artwork is perhaps lacking in the scheme – instead there is an earnest desire to keep referencing the history of the city through the water sculpture, a window into the old dock, the retained US eagle, the re-sited old Sailors’ Home gates, and so on. It’s trying desperately hard to be accepted as one of the family. It’s certainly achieved this, and feels a fully integrated and well-liked portion of the city even within the short period since it was completed in 2008. It takes time to settle, for a new building to become comfortable and familiar, even more so when streets and entire districts are rapidly constructed. A city built over time can endure the fashions and whims, it can adjust and reconcile aesthetic and formal misadventure, but when this process is compressed into a matter of months the scope for reflection and tuning is lost. This is not always negative, rapid decision making can halt the rational restraint that might otherwise stall a project, or entice a ‘let’s wait and see’. Grosvenor have leased the site for 250 years so none of us will know how the story ends, but the police headquarters adjacent to L1 is now being vacated, so perhaps that will form the next instalment.