

A Decade of Design

This month, Manchester-based designer Ben Clarke writes his first column for Concept For Living, contemplating the ways in which the city has changed since this magazine first hit the news stands almost ten years ago...

Casting my mind back to 1998, nine years seems a relatively short space of time, but there's been a seismic shift in attitude towards design in the North during that time.

I arrived in Manchester in 1996 amidst 'Cool Britannia' (New Labour, Oasis and Damien Hirst etc). However, visually, Manchester was more akin to Beirut – three months previously the IRA bomb had literally rocked its foundations. The centre had developed a protective skin of scaffolding, but there was already a tangible feeling that this single event had galvanised the people into a renewed sense of local pride and direction.

Across the country, 'Changing Rooms' had just exploded onto our TV screens and, whilst easily vilified in hindsight, at the time it reached out to a market of would-be Handy Andys, and brands such as Ikea and B&Q owe much to the spark of creativity the programme instilled in its viewers.

Back in Manchester this optimism and renewal fed through every channel of design. The architecture and masterplanning in the wake of the bomb was initially focused on the Millennium, then onward to the Commonwealth Games of 2002 which led to massive re-development of Piccadilly, Eastlands and large areas of Salford Quays.

The successful staging of the Games pushed the 'new' Manchester onto the world stage, giving the city a confidence that resonated in the increased scale and quantity of projects in progress – the Hilton (Beetham) Tower and the Royal Justice Centre are two major realisations of this.

Hand in hand with the architecture has come the massive influx of people drawn to live at the core of the city. There is no doubt that pulling people in to live in the centre is the lifeblood of any modern city – creating a demand for housing/apartments allows so many more aspects of the city to develop. Sure enough, the bomb-damaged Marks & Spencer re-emerged with fresh new neighbours (Selfridges, Heals and Harvey Nichols), providing the ultimate lifestyle shopping for city dwellers but also luring in the style-conscious from out-of-town at the weekends.

Working in furniture retail at this time,

much of my motivation came from chatting to customers who were keen to learn about design and suggesting new products for their homes. This advice obviously came in varying scales but, personally, it was as much of a kick selling a single chair as it was to develop a complete interior scheme.

Hundreds of projects have gradually changed the face and attitude of the city. Unfortunately, some will date badly and others have trampled over important historical icons, but those that have succeeded reflect the character of the city and have enhanced its existing features.

For me, a building that encapsulates the renewed passion for design in Manchester is the Urbis. Billed as a museum for the modern city, this strange ski-slope of a building initially struggled to find its audience, but by making its permanent exhibition (which sets Manchester in context within other world cities) free of charge it has stabilised itself and now boasts a loyal fanbase.

Located in Cathedral Gardens, it somehow manages to look perfectly at home surrounded by historical jewels such as the Cathedral and Corn Exchange (now the Triangle).

In its relatively short life-span the temporary exhibition space has showcased many facets of international design - graphics (The Peter Saville Show), architecture (Will Alsop & SuperCities) and photography (Mick Rock and his Rock 'n' Roll Icons).

However, slick marketing and idealised imagery could have lead Urbis down the route of being detached from the city it reflects. It has balanced this design-led schedule with thought-provoking, socially motivated exhibitions (such as the recent 'Islamaphobia') exploring the different cultural elements of the city, backing these up with seminars and downloads to provide an ongoing dialogue.

Whilst not the tallest or the grandest project undertaken over the last nine years, the Urbis has, for me, become a symbol of the changing personality of Manchester and on visiting I always feel a little less cynical, and walk out with a little more purpose and civic pride!

Attitudes to design in the North of England are changing so fast. It is true to say that when this happens mistakes are made – but in my mind, to stand still is to go backwards - so here's to the last nine years and roll on 2016!

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