

Castlefield, Manchester: 24/05/2007

Mark Rainey: What influenced the design of Urbis?

Ian Simpson: I think it was something that just came to me very quickly once we had been shortlisted to the competition to create a very sculptural building in that space. Both to position the building adjacent to Corporation Street and in doing so to define a sort of triangular space with the Corn Exchange and Chetham's School, together with obviously the Cathedral. But rather than sticking the building right in the middle of the site, which I believe is what most of the other competitors did, we positioned it to one edge. It was quite simply to have a building that rose up to the city centre and then slope down in scale to relate to the smaller scale Chetham's building. It needed to be a very soft and flowing form. That's what I had in my mind. And one in which the roof was an important part and the whole thing was almost like a sculptural object.

Was the exhibition centre of city life a notion in the design?

The brief at the time when we were doing this was really to try and get Millennium funding which meant it couldn't be a museum and it couldn't be an art gallery because they were funded in different ways. So it had to be something else. But at the time when the competition came about there wasn't really a brief for the interior. It was about creating a series of flexible floor plates which is what I think we've been able to do and let the brief and programme of exhibitions change because at the end of the day the building will always remain the same but the exhibitions will be constantly changing. We needed a building that was not built around a collection but something that was flexible with open floor plates. . .

Which is what it has become now ... Were there any elements of the original design plan for Urbis that had to be changed in the final product . . ?

Yes, in the final iteration. Our original scheme showed the roof sloping down and extending down into the garden to give a landscaped space on the roof of the building which would have been a fantastic thing to achieve. But I think there were certain anxieties from a health and safety point of view. Primarily, to do that would have caused far too many risks to the public and would have been very difficult to manage. So we had to take that out. So the whole of the roof access was taken out at that time. But other than that, not really. No.

That's a bit unfortunate, not having roof access.

Well, it is unfortunate, but then again it would have been quite dangerous and probably very expensive to do. And this building had to be built from a budget that was very tight. And we designed it without knowing what the budget was. And it was only after we had won the competition that we were told we didn't have enough money to build the building. So we then had to work very hard with the city and the contractor to find some kind of solution that was deliverable.

Does Urbis make sense to you?

Urbis does make sense to me. It's a building that occupies and defines a series of spaces. External spaces are important issues as well as internal spaces. How those are inhabited in my mind is something that can evolve and wants to evolve and constantly change. To me it was about creating a special form in that position in the city -to the north of the old

heart of the city, which was very much a part of the Master Plan aspirations to regenerate the north part of the city. So it makes sense in its urban context and its relationship to the buildings around it. But also in providing an asset and facility for the city to do with what it wants really – a building that's embedded in the way that Manchester uses its buildings for the next few years. These things take time . . .

The Urbis building was a defining moment in your practice. How has your practice developed since then?

Yes it was. When we won this we were working on much smaller projects. We had won the Master Plan for the city centre but there weren't any new buildings from that. This was a very special building, it was a very bespoke public building. Everything was sort of hand-crafted. It was special. Most of the projects we work on have to do with proprietary systems. You don't have the luxury of development in that sense. So we are obviously building a lot of buildings around the country and looking at schemes abroad. And Urbis was an important milestone in breaking into that sort of scale of projects. Now it would be considered a small project.

That's amazing to think. I'll just focus on regeneration now: "Regeneration" is a used and abused word. What does it mean to you?

It is an abused word. But I do think Manchester understands the word. To be honest, it all starts on political will and that the city council want to improve the city. I actually don't know what that means. But what I do know is to do that we need to get new jobs into the city. We need more people in the city. We need to change the perception of the place internationally as well as nationally in order to lever in that investment. That underpins everything in my mind – regeneration. We as architects then, support that ambition by trying to produce buildings that create beautiful spaces and beautiful buildings. That allows the city to go out and sell Manchester to those who want to invest in it and in the process create a much better infrastructure and a much better city context and offer than we have previously. I think Manchester is half way through this sort of end of the twentieth century piece of regeneration in order to position itself for the future and certainly for the rest of this next century. And I think we need another 15-20 years of intensified and ambitious approach to redevelopment and jobs and people. And I think we will have a fantastic place and I think it's important that we, as architects, support that political ambition.

Is this about giving the city a new identity?

It's very much about giving it an identity that . . . obviously it was a very important place at one time and very powerful. Now it has started to become perceived as a great place for a whole variety of different reasons and not just the manufacturing of cotton which is what it used to be. It is quite interesting to see how this recent Lonely Planet guide had Manchester as being potentially the capital of the country. We would never have had that had the city not undergone changes in the past 20 years. Changing the perception and that identity is really important when someone is sitting in the Bank of New York saying "Where shall we invest our next £100 million and 200 jobs?". We want them to think of Manchester, not Coventry or Leicester or somewhere like that. So you are getting into that city-state where Manchester has to fight for itself and fight for the future. I think it is doing a great job at that.

How would this intensive redevelopment compare to cities like Dubai and Shanghai, or some North American cities?

Well, I don't know enough about North American cities, but it is a different sort of

problem there. You can't compare it with any sort of global city – I mean Shanghai is just on fire. And you can't compare it with Dubai which is about trying to create a sustainable future for a country. Once the oil's gone what's it going to do? So at least they have made the hindsight to invest in buildings and people – investment on a much larger scale than in a place like Manchester. We're on a sort of European scale. We are just trying to create a city that is tangible to Europeans really . . . and North Americans. But it is a tangible scale. I think that is working really well. I think it is certainly light years ahead of any other city in this country.

Are you working with anyone to develop a “tall building” strategy in the city?

Well, we are working on a number of tall buildings and there are other tall buildings proposed. The city council has a very strong feeling on. . . whilst it doesn't have a policy on piece of paper, it does have a policy where it will only give approval to appropriate schemes taken on its merits. In a city on the scale of this, you can't be overly prescriptive. You've just got to see what comes forward and make sure the quality of what comes forward is suitable to Manchester.

Some of your designs invite controversy. How do you deal with that?

I'm quite happy if they invite controversy. I don't see any point in me designing buildings that just sit there as backdrop buildings because the buildings we design are somebody's special projects. And anybody wants to do something special we're working with. So we have to rise to that challenge in a sense. And yes, they are controversial. Half the people hate the Hilton and half the people love it, but I would rather that it engaged with people. I think it's important that these buildings do that. And I think they can lift the spirit. And in the end I don't think that half the people hate the Hilton. Most people are inspired by it. We see other buildings coming along and we see a 21st century city, not one reliant upon its Victorian past. But we are just at the beginning of that really. As I say, in twenty years time we won't think twice about a building like the Hilton.

So it almost becomes second nature . . .

Yes. It will be and I think we will just have a lot of other buildings that everybody will be encouraged by the ambition to do something like that in a city of this scale where it's never been done before.

Would you understand people's concerns with your buildings being put up on Whitworth Street – the Gay Village? I'm speaking of the West Properties development.

That was a very contentiously fought scheme. I don't understand the anxieties really. The Victorians didn't have any problems building whatever they did. They drove viaducts through Roman forts. Now, we're not as insensitive as that. I just think it's all about timing and I think that there is a danger that the Heritage lobby, which was only invented in the 1950s, is something that we've got to be very careful about -that it's all about preservation quite often. Cities have got to be constantly changing. We are not dealing with a city like Siena with a beautiful medieval infrastructure. We are dealing with a quite rough, damaged city that was just an industrial place. And it has to be part of the Victorian buildings but they didn't think about that at the time. We've got to be as ambitious as they were, but still sensitive to those buildings and I would never demolish or remove a good quality building. In fact, we've spent ten years working with existing buildings. We did Manchester Museum which was a reworking of an old Waterhouse building. In certain areas you need to be ambitious and need to have something that

compliments what's already there and doesn't pretend its part of that. But it will bring about a perception of change and will bring about investment and life and vitality to an area that has been run down over the past 10 years.

Going on from that – how would you see your buildings reflecting their surrounding architectural context?

Well, I think our buildings are very contextual. In a way that is appropriate for me – not in some sort of pastiche like “we have to use brick here and a pitched roof there”. It's an interpretation, whether it's through colour, form, scale or contrast. I think the scheme we are doing on the Princess Street / Whitworth Street corner is a very contextual scheme. But it's a very different interpretation. It's probably what the Victorians would have done if they were around now if they had the technology. But I've think we've picked up certain references, certain colours and the use of lines. So I think it's very embedded in the location and context. But it's quite clearly a building of the 21st century and not the 19th.

You mentioned Waterhouse earlier. Do you think there is a parallel between the work of Waterhouse, who made his name in nineteenth century Manchester before becoming national, and your practice which has become national?

[Laughter]. There are some parallels. I mean, the way I look at it, unlike Waterhouse, where you have to detach and move your whole business to somewhere like London, we can operate with Manchester as our chief base. We have an office in London, but Manchester will always be the hub. This is where I will live because communication and transport are so much easier these days. We can work internationally from Manchester where in the past you had to be in London to work internationally. I would like to think that if we did anything as good as him over time we would like to contribute to the body of work that they have done and I would be very pleased. I do think that we are at the beginning rather than the end of anything.

It's been over 100 years since his buildings went up and they are still taken to heart by the city. How do you think your practice will be viewed in a century's time?

Probably better than it is now. [Laughter] Because we are pushing boundaries and we are asking people to think and changing preconceptions and challenging them. Inevitably people react against that. The next generation that live in this city will have those buildings around them and I believe will start to develop an affection for them. My buildings are here for hundreds of years and not 25 minutes so hopefully they will embed themselves in the interpretation of what Manchester is.

So you spend more time in Manchester?

Yes, I spend about a day and half in London. But this is where I live, this is where I will live and this is my home. I'm from Manchester so I have a passion to try and make the city a better place.

You're moving from No. 1 Deansgate to Beetham Tower. What's the best thing about your new flat?

There's more space. [laughter] What I really like is volume – it's a double height space so I've managed that fortunately.

And the view . . .

It's a great view. You really do see how small the city is. It's very interesting and you

can get quite a quick grasp of the relation of space where at ground level it would feel quite distant.

Personally, I like going up to the roof of Shudehill Carpark because of the amazing panorama of the city from up there.

With your buildings becoming symbols of the city's redevelopment, to some extent your personality has also become a symbol of Manchester's redevelopment. How much of your personality is reflected in your buildings?

I guess so. I don't know what it is – perhaps I'm too close to it. I want our buildings to say something positive. But it can't be positive for everybody all the time and it never will be. If you're trying for that line down the middle you end up with a compromise in those situations. As long as I can put my hand on my heart and say "In those circumstances we've tried our very best to make something very special for the city". It is difficult because you are putting yourself out there and saying "this is what I think is good" and you get criticism. I haven't developed a thick enough skin yet – I don't like criticism, but I get it. But equally and fortunately, there are a lot of positive things as well. So it's quite a balance. But it is quite difficult when you are so personally associated with something that is a sort of a public representation of yourself because you yourself are criticized. It's not an easy role to fulfill. But I do think that over a period of time people will become less outraged and have more of an affinity with the new Manchester because we have to move beyond these red roofed zinc top buildings which fill our city.

[Ian points out the window at new block of flats.]

It's disgusting – they're just buildings punched with holes. Whilst I'm trying to create architecture out of the same programme, which we challenge financially and architecturally, at least I feel what we are contributing – we are trying to raise the bar a little bit than just something that has nothing to say whatsoever. But you have to accept that architecture is very subjective. You have to take the rough and the smooth.

You have a signature style with your buildings – namely the glass and the particular shade of glass. Is this going to be maintained?

There are themes that we try and work with and one of them is light. I haven't found another material that lets light in and allows a view out other than glass, unfortunately. When you're dealing with small apartments, to me, it's about trying to flood that space with as much light as you can so even though it's small it feels larger. Similarly, I like the way that light comes in and starts to model a space as well. So we do tend to use a lot of glass, but obviously we have to work within the realms of trying to create a very sustainable environment. So we have solid panels and glazed panels and very low energy systems such as double buffer zones and so on. All those things are part of a language but there are also fundamental basic reasons for using those things. Beyond the genealogy the important thing for me is the form of the building – trying to create something that is elegant, is beautiful, is slender where we can, actually creating something positive, rather than just a stumpy lump on a skyline. Some of the schemes we are working on now, we've always tried to do that as best as we can. So the form is quite important in the architecture we are involved with. To have something greater than the sum of its parts is the starting point really.

Do you think there is a balance between cultural/community works and luxury developments in your practice?

There is a reasonable balance. I don't go out of my way just to work with these hardnosed developers. It doesn't work like that. When these guys approach us they are going to build something whatever the case – we want to make it better than if we had not been involved. That's the starting point. To push the boundaries, to spend more money, to do something more interesting. I would like to have more cultural buildings. I would like to have more hospitals and surgeries and other buildings like that. We are not adverse to working with those programmes, but it is whoever turns up at our door. We've worked on Manchester Museum, we've worked on the Museum of Science and Industry. We've worked with universities and we've got office buildings. Most of the developments are actually bits of cities and they are totally mixed use. Ok, there is a lot of residential and a lot of commercial – that's what cities are really as well. There may be one or two special cultural buildings, but very few and far between. It will be nice to do one or two more of those – to work on those programmes. But it all depends on who asks us to work with them.

Was it a conscious decision between you and Rachel Hough to take the name Ian Simpson Architects?

It was at the time. I think we are reviewing that now. We may well change the name of the practice as Rachel and I set the practice up together. And we have to think of how other people are involved in the practice and how the practice might grow between the two offices. It is quite a big practice and there are a lot of really talented people here and we need to just think about how the practice acknowledges that – and certainly to give Rachel the credit that she has always deserved.

Architects often have to enter competitions, such as Urbis and the World Trade Centre. Are their competitions you have entered and thought you should have won?

[Laughter] All of them! We used to do a lot of competitions -a lot of speculative competitions when you don't have any work that's what you do to get work. Now we do competitions that are limited competitions. Virtually every project we work on is a competition of some sort whether it's residential or an office building in Dubai – they've gone around the world and got other people to compete and we're putting ideas together. It's very difficult and all you can do is say, "if they didn't choose me then they chose the wrong scheme". You just have to have a self belief. I always remember a friend of mine who I went to college with, an Italian architect, who had massive confidence. He used to do competition after competition after competition and never won anything. And for us, the worst thing that's happened to us is that we won a competition – the first one I did- which means you're sucked into the idea that you can win everything. We've won quite a few, but my friend never won anything, but he never lost his conviction in what he was doing. I think you have to stand back from the process because the assessment in a competition is a very difficult and subjective thing. You've just got to be careful of which ones you enter and which ones are already stitched up, y'know.

The World Trade Centre must have been one of the most politically and socially sensitive ones . . .

Yeah, again, we didn't get through to the last 6 on that – we came seventh or eighth. But that would have been great to have done that. I would like to do another anonymous large scale competition. Intellectually, it allows you to compete with your peers around the world. I know that what we are doing is as good as anything else out there because I've beaten most of these guys. So, I don't have any anxieties about that and I actually

enjoy beating the Banks or the Fosters or whatever it is out there. But it's just all about time and at the moment everyone is very busy. A great deal of time needs to be devoted to those sorts of things. They are very very speculative.

Are these competitions good for architecture?

I think it can be because you can probably get a better product out of it – as long as it's not the only thing you have on or at least you win some. A lot of buildings need to be reinvigorated. There is still a lot of buildings and architecture that is decided around the golf course. It needs to be more forcibly defined and competitions are one way of doing that and get the developers who are out there to think beyond their usual group of quite boring people.

I know you have to catch a flight soon, so just one more question. Is this the original sketch for Urbis? Rumour has it was sketched on a flight from Manchester to New York.

It wasn't a flight actually – the sketch was done in Cambridge. It was when I first learned that we were on the shortlist for the competition. It was the idea, as you can see, that the edge would rise up to the city and then begin dropping down.

It's in the *Shaping Manchester* hardback book. It's interesting how these myths develop. . .

. . . well, its more interesting then Cambridge.

I think that's everything. Thanks for this.

And thank you. Those were good questions.

