



The Phoenix Initiative, Coventry

Linda Stevens

“Any mixed-use development with aspirations to appeal in the long-term must take the time and trouble to understand and integrate the heritage and culture of the surrounding area, so as to create a strong sense of ‘place’”, says Robert Rummey, managing director of masterplanners and designers, Rummey Design Associates. “In our experience, only then will people be attracted to live, work or visit a location.”

This overriding principle was put into practice in Coventry City centre. Rummey Design Associates were commissioned as masterplanners for Coventry City Council's Phoenix Initiative, a millennium project completed in January 2004 that comprised a mixed-use development including 80 apartments, offices and a series of linked public spaces through the site past the Coventry Transport Museum and beyond. The project aimed to help raise aspirations, by rediscovering Coventry's heritage, reconnecting the city centre with its hinterland, and applying investment creatively for regeneration.

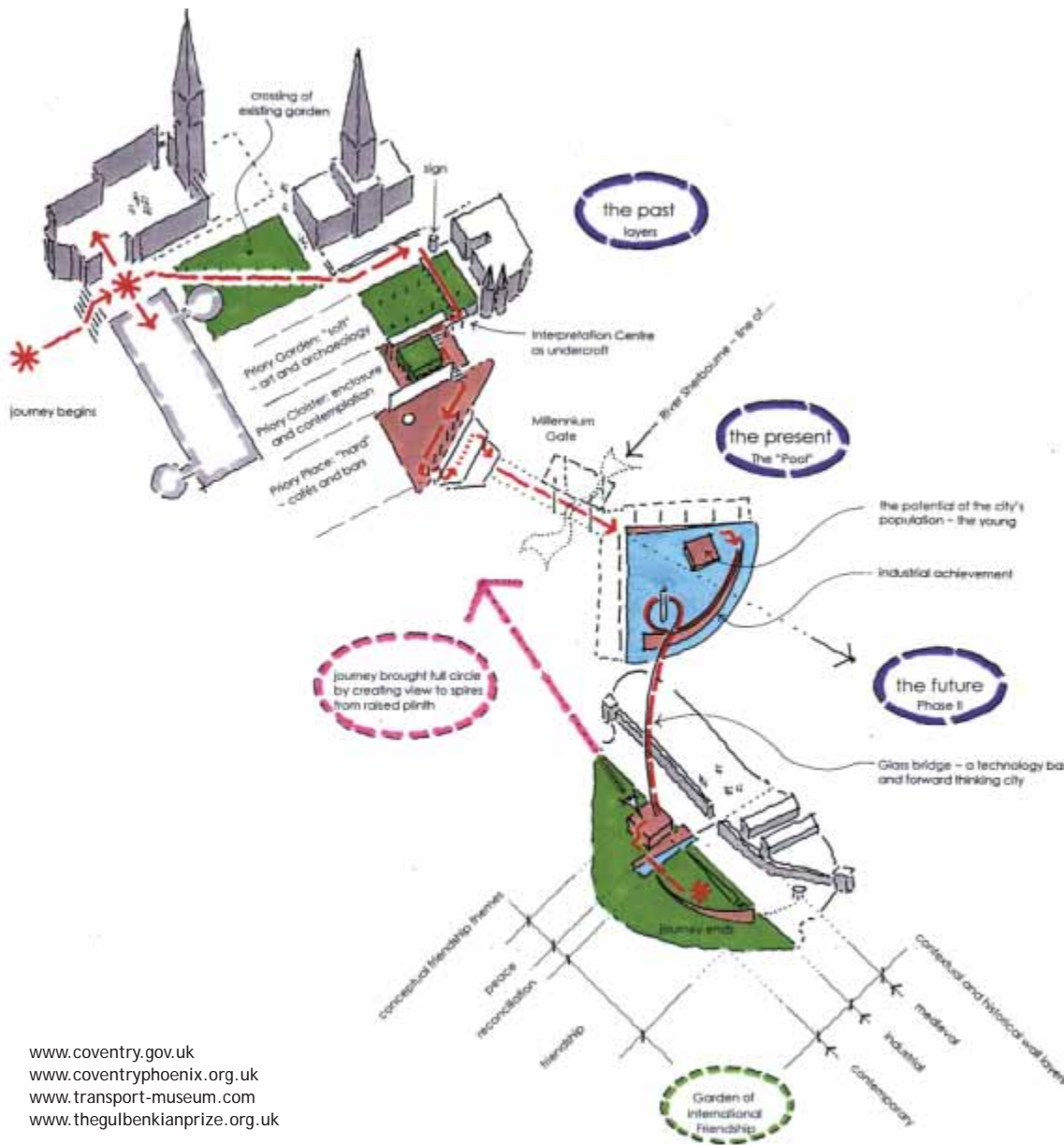
The overall vision for the project was the physical and cultural regeneration of the city centre. The project forged new connections: in space, with new routes and views opening up the rest of the city; in time, by reflecting the city's past and in the new spaces both literally through archaeology and metaphorically through artistic collaborations; and socially,

by creating places that would bring people together.

‘Time’ for Coventry has always been important; the city was the centre of the watch-making industry and recent archaeological finds revealed the multi-layered nature of the site. But this was a Millennium project, which needed to look forward as well as back and which aimed to satisfy the aspirations of today.

A narrative developed that drew together the various themes identified by the design team. The route from Priory Garden to the Garden of International Friendship was seen as a journey through time – from the 1,000 year history of the Priory below the spires of the cathedral, to the ever changing present embodied in the Transport Museum and civic events that take place in Millennium Place, to the hope for the future represented in the Garden of International Friendship.

Each space along the journey has a unique character reflecting its own position and role within the city, but linked by the recurring themes of time, memory, reconciliation and citizenship that are found in the landscape, art and architecture of each space. Light is an important linking theme defining and enhancing the principal route whilst revealing a new drama at night to ensure dynamic, exciting and safe places to visit at the end of the day. The scheme includes quiet, contemplative spaces to get away from the bustle of the



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 www.coventryphoenix.org.uk
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nearby shopping and stimulating places which take our breath away as we enter them. The journey is linked to direct pedestrian routes and accessible by public transport, essential to its success.

"This was not all about the creation of new spaces," says Robert. "In fact we took the opportunity to incorporate existing hidden courtyards to create venues for cafés and apartments on a smaller scale. The conservation of the former Ribbon factory was an important part of the project because it added another layer of time and industrial heritage to the project. It is a pity that there were not more buildings to be re-used."

The Garden of International Friendship is a contrast to the other spaces. But again, it is a quiet place, characterised by powerful earthworks and dramatic new walls reflecting the nearby medieval city walls, turning its back on the ring road and

facing the sun. This space doesn't just contain art, it is art at a large scale best appreciated from the commanding position the glass bridge offers against the dramatic backdrop of the three spires illuminated at night.

The Phoenix is working. There is new investment in homes and businesses on the site. Millennium Place is becoming a landmark for the city, and with the impending development of adjacent sites it will become a more enclosed and intense urban square. New initiatives are extending the vibrant urbanism of the Phoenix into the surrounding hinterland and the Coventry Transport Museum was one of the four finalists for the Gulbenkian prize for 'Museum of the Year' in 2005.

Linda Stevens is a Consultant at Rummey Design Associates

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