

# A Major UK Developer Talks Place-Making

## Experiences in city changing projects

**Sean Young, MD of Locum has been working with the leading UK developer Hammerson plc, on their plans to transform the city centre of Swansea, Wales and connect it to a revitalised seafront. In Delivery & Branding in Destination Development, Simon Betty, Development Executive at Hammerson plc looks at examples of successful place-making and identifies some of the key components that make thriving, sustainable and lasting destinations.**

There are places which you visit that instantly make a lasting impact. Pinpointing the elements that combine to create that impact is however, more complicated.

For the place-maker, having a clear and distinct vision from the outset is critical. Delivering successful destinations is a complex art, requiring a range of differing ambitions, skills and expertise. A great deal of work is required to build support and consensus from stakeholders and investors and it is vital that both public and private sectors collaborate throughout the planning and delivery process. Local authorities must be prepared to offer strong civic leadership and support to the private sector who must, in turn, deliver challenging, exciting and innovative masterplans.

Key to success is the role that urban landmarks play in regeneration. Their significance in terms of making places 'memorable' should be, and often is, one of the simplest elements to identify. Successful icons - cultural buildings, skyscrapers, public art, bridges or parks - often become 'postcard' images helping to define destinations. The Sydney Opera House, The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro or Central Park in New York are all internationally recognised landmarks with an overwhelmingly powerful association with their city.

A particularly relevant example closer to home is the city of Birmingham. Here, the importance of creating a landmark is well illustrated by the impact of the Selfridges building at Bullring - a recent development success by the Birmingham Alliance, a joint venture between Hammerson and Land Securities.

Since its opening in 2003, the Bullring has become recognised as one of Europe's most outstanding examples of retail-led regeneration. To date, over 100 million people have visited the Bullring and it has received over 200 industry awards worldwide. Acknowledged as setting new international design standards, the scheme has triggered vital investment throughout the city. It is an excellent example of how high-quality building design can create truly special places. In just a few short years, Bullring has become synonymous with Birmingham, and the iconic Selfridges building is now a symbol for the continuing aspirations of the city. It has, almost single-handedly, changed perceptions of Birmingham which is now recognised as a leading visitor destination and a major European centre for business, culture and leisure.

Thoughtful place-making often encompasses a mix of uses, and as the regeneration of city centres evolves, strategic thinking to ensure the optimum mix of uses is crucial. As an industry, we have embraced the phrase 'mixed-use' with the term often becoming synonymous with urban regeneration. However, we need to ensure that we are delivering truly 'mixed-use'. By this, I mean a thoughtful scheme with a natural flow between the uses and open spaces, as opposed to multi-use, that simply provides a variety of uses with no tangible or positive relationship between one another. Such schemes often fail to integrate with adjoining city regions.

Spitalfields in London, with the recent addition of Bishops Square, has successfully mastered the complexities of providing a thriving



**Bullring Fact Box**

- 1 Developer: Birmingham Alliance  
*(Hammerson, Henderson and Land Securities)*
- 2 Concept architects: Benoy
- 3 Capital cost: £500 million
- 4 110,000 sqm of retail space and over  
140 kiosks and units
- 5 Key tenants: Selfridges and Debenhams
- 6 Jobs created: 8000 jobs
- 7 Visits in first year of service: 36.5 million



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place to live and work in and visit. This scheme was delivered by Hammerson in partnership with the City of London as a new covered street, lined with shops linked with the listed nineteenth-century Horner buildings of Spitalfields Market. The 1920s buildings along Brushfield Street have been retained and market stalls and independent boutiques sit alongside the new internal headquarters for Allen & Overy. Spitalfields combines corporate presence with quirky experience and the diversity and vibrancy of the area is undoubtedly at the centre of its appeal. The 'tenant-mix' strategy that places independents and smaller multiples alongside national retailers has ensured the scheme enhances the area's individuality and the public realm, provided as part of the Bishops Square development, has become a focal point of the area.

With recent examples of successful place-making and the current recognition of its importance in urban regeneration, it is easy to assume that place-making is a modern concept. However, many of today's regeneration schemes draw their inspiration from the past, including, for example, the square. In urban planning terms, the square has been a successful feature of towns and cities for many centuries, traditionally set within the heart of the community, hosting markets and festivals. Take Piazza Navona in Rome. This is a great example that reminds us to learn from past successes. It brings together cafés, cultural facilities, public art and high-quality urban planning to create a place that succeeds as both a day-time and night-time destination for locals and tourists.

## Creative destination asset management

It is important to understand that the physical buildings created as part of the built environment are only one element in creating successful places. As developers, we recognise that both urban design and building design can be loved or loathed, with everyone having their own tastes and preferences. Nevertheless, all of us as visitors to or residents of a place expect good service and demand that the places we visit offer a safe and clean environment. People's desire to spend both time and money in a destination is the acid test by which the destination will either succeed or fail. Although this seems common sense, these issues are often overlooked. One of Hammerson's strengths is the importance it places on the ongoing asset management of its destinations. It is imperative that this is given appropriate weight in the initial vision and design of a new development scheme. The consumer should be able to come away from a destination with a positive experience; quality of the infrastructure and quality of the service are fundamental in creating that experience.

One such example which demonstrates positive place-making through active asset management is Disneyland. The resort is unlikely to feature in any architectural top tens, yet Disneyland succeeds through the quality of its management. The customer experience is created through excellent customer service, high-quality infrastructure, a clean and safe environment and efficient transport. The vision for what has undoubtedly become the world's most famous theme park came about following a visit by Walt Disney with his daughters to Griffith Park, a large public park at the eastern end of the Santa Monica Mountains. Following the trip, his idea was to create a park which both adults and children could enjoy. Since Disneyland opened in 1955, over 515 million visitors have experienced the unique sense of place. I'm not sure there is another destination of this type that can claim such successful visitor figures.

The attention to detail placed on the visitor experience and customer service at Disneyland is a reminder that skilled staff can significantly enhance a destination. At Hammerson, we have invested significantly in the creation of tailored pre-employment training programmes prior to openings. While not on the scale of Disneyland, we have long understood the importance of skilled staff. Following the success of training schemes during the development of The Oracle, WestQuay and Bullring, pre-employment training programmes have been set up in both Highcross, Leicester and Cabot Circus, Bristol which have enabled retailers to recruit well-trained staff and provide consumers with a positive retail experience.

I am sure that people's thoughts on the elements which contribute to a successful place are as wide-ranging as the places which people would pick as successful. Successful place-making cannot be defined by a single element and neither should it. Creating thriving destinations requires long-term vision, determination and commitment, and if delivered well, the rewards both in urban design and commercial terms are considerable for both public and private stakeholders.

The greatest compliment a visitor can pay to a place is to leave it and think "I'd love to go back".

**Simon Betty**

Development Executive, Hammerson