
The key to urban success live, work and play

Tom Bloxham MBE is not your average property professional. He might have been crowned Young Entrepreneur of the Year in 1999, but he has no vocational training in property development or business education. His company, Urban Splash, has dedicated itself to the types of projects that would make most developers wince, taking on inner-city wastelands and transforming them into vibrant places for 'live, work and play'. Along the way, he has earned himself a reputation as a 'restorer' and 'a one-man regeneration machine'. **James Alexander** and **Owen Burdekin** went to find out more about his pioneering vision, his business philosophy and his formula for successful, sustainable urban development.



'One of the keys to our success is that we don't like to spread ourselves too thin. We enjoy what we do, but we only take on what we know we can do really well!' So speaks Tom Bloxham, the multi-award-winning entrepreneur behind Urban Splash, one of the UK's most successful - and celebrated - property developers. The plethora of awards that adorn the walls and desks of his stylish Manchester office instantly let you know that this approach is working to spectacular effect.

Urban Splash was founded in 1993 by Bloxham and architect Jonathan Falkingham (pictured left). It was by no means his first venture into property development. In 1987, he took over the lease on two floors of Affleck's Arcade, a dilapidated mall in central Manchester, and sub-let the units to traders. At the time, he was a trader himself, selling posters and second-hand records for a living. He had decided that his market stall was no longer big enough to house the operation, and approached local property owners in order to secure bigger and better premises. When his efforts failed, on the grounds of insufficient security, he decided to become his own landlord. And while he was at it, he offered those around him, young entrepreneurs with a similarly creative outlook, the chance to share in his vision. The net result? A clustering of like-minded small businesses offering a range of products for the same niche audience. 'It was the most basic form of location marketing. By bringing together a whole collection of young retailers, geared towards a particular market segment, we created a destination where none existed before - not dissimilar to the Trafford Centre or Bluewater. It was all about creating pedestrian flows through the building on the back of the critical mass we achieved!' This early experience would have a formative effect on his career, and explains much about the Urban Splash approach to development: ethical but commercially driven; product-conscious but market-focused.

Urban vision, urban choice

In 1993, Urban Splash delivered its first major development, Concert Square in Liverpool. A blend of shops, apartments and hip new bars, the development was sited in one of the most neglected quarters of the city. Today, it is a hub of activity, one of Liverpool's most vibrant locations and home to a new generation of city dwellers. It was the first of many mixed-use destinations created by Urban Splash, in which people can 'live, work and play' (the lifestyle philosophy broadcast loud and clear on every beautifully crafted piece of the company's promotional literature). Many such schemes, encompassing residential, commercial and leisure elements, have



Concert Square, Liverpool



The Old Haymarket, Liverpool (exterior and courtyard)



followed in both Liverpool and Manchester. Would it be fair to describe such places as '24-hour' locations? 'I'm not a great fan of the 24-hour city concept. Let's face it. Not a lot of people want to go out at 4.00am. I much prefer the notion of the 18-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week city. That, to me, is entirely a good thing.' Certainly, he is opposed to the idea of segregated quarters within cities, which contain only offices, only homes, only shops or only cultural venues: 'It works best where you have a mix of uses in the same area. Within this, big attractions can act as magnets for the other elements. Without the new Urbis centre here in Manchester, they would never have got Harvey Nichols or Selfridges.' As in those early days at Affleck's Arcade, the critical mass of a destination remains a priority for Bloxham.

But why focus on urban sites? 'We were tired of being told by the property industry that people didn't want to live in cities,' says Bloxham. 'We knew that not everyone's vision of an ideal home was a newly built house on a cul-de-sac in the suburbs with front and back gardens. We were sure that innovative, well-designed properties with good facilities on their doorstep would be attractive to younger homebuyers. Particularly if they represented excellent value.' Over the last ten years, Tom Bloxham has been pushing his vision of carefully designed, fairly-priced city living and working, while the rest of the market has looked on. Now the market has caught up, and his style is flavour of the month. 'If you'd asked developers six years ago why they didn't do city centre stuff, they would say that there was no market. Now, you see buildings all over Manchester and other cities covered in scaffolding. But that's good. It shows that the concept is working, and developers are realising that people do want the choice of living in high-quality city-centre homes.'

Urban responsibility

It is not just on consumer choice that Bloxham takes issue with the property industry. He is constantly frustrated by the traditional industry approach to development, particularly of the mixed-use schemes so close to his own heart: 'It's about time there was a fundamental review of the planning and development process in this country. Why do we need the Use Classes Order? Why does the

property industry insist on passing on all the risk to tenants? I think that the whole industry is under the misapprehension that their customers are the financial institutions. They are actually the suppliers of the industry. The industry as a whole needs to separate the ownership of buildings from their usage. The tenants are the real customers.'

His other criticism of traditional urban developers is that too often they are anonymous, and as such can get away with murder: 'I get the same sense of satisfaction from good architecture as I do from any great art.' (Which can only be good news for Urban Splash tenants, given Bloxham's other role as Chair of North West Arts.) 'What's different about architecture is that it's compulsory. We all walk past buildings, and we can't not look at them. A lot of poor architecture is down to the planning process, which has been about use classes, rather than quality of design. I would make every building bear the names of its architects. Let's get some responsibility into the process.'

As for the challenge of financing his own developments at Urban Splash, things have become somewhat less challenging over time: 'We can fund our own developments now, putting our own money in first and taking responsibility for the risk. Finding third-party funds has also got easier for us over the last ten years, as we've built our track record. Banks are much more willing to back us now. We, in turn, take what we hope is a very simple, common-sense approach to development.'

This common-sense approach, and its dramatic results, have attracted considerable praise from the public sector. And the company has worked on a number of joint ventures with public sector partners, such as the Old Haymarket in Liverpool, a mixed-use scheme developed with the assistance of the City Council (who granted a long leasehold on the land, with geared ground rent delivering equitable returns all round). Perhaps surprisingly, however, Bloxham maintains that his most successful projects are those which have involved no public sector support. Why is this? 'It is certainly far, far easier doing projects without public sector involvement,' he explains. 'Many public sector projects are so risky and have so many challenges that the end values simply don't add up to the costs.' How, in his view, could the public sector involve itself in development in a more cost-effective way? 'Rather than rolling in millions and millions into a depressed area, the public sector is



Britannia Mills, Manchester

better off trialling one or two relatively small joint ventures, with one selected developer, which can establish whether there is in fact a market in the area. The key is choosing a developer and sticking with them, working and working on a project to see if it can work. This sort of graft is what produces real rewards. Too often, too much time is spent worrying what the reward split is going to be on a development. What really matters is that you work together to build a good relationship, and worry about the rewards further down the line. It's important to remember the length of time that some projects can take. Our projects take a minimum of three years, usually, but typically five and sometimes more.'

Urban innovation

The pioneering early projects such as Concert Square and the Old Haymarket were followed by similarly successful schemes. In 1996, Urban Splash became the first developer to bring loft living to Manchester, through its Sally's Yard project. At just £50,000 each, the demand for these first loft apartments far outstripped supply. The company's recent residential developments include The Collegiate in Liverpool, a Grade II listed former school transformed into a block of 95 apartments at a cost of £10 million. Having been gutted by two fires, the building, like so many targeted by Bloxham, faced demolition. Rather than tear down the stunning neogothic exterior that was left standing, Urban Splash used this original structure as the new building's shell. The end result is an ultra-modern environment, combining the best of the old with the best of the new.

Also released to the market recently was Britannia Mills, the first of three developments in the company's Britannia Basin project, located in the Castlefield area of Manchester. At Britannia Basin, Urban Splash is pumping £60 million into the transformation of a derelict industrial estate, which had lain vacant for seven years prior to its acquisition by Bloxham. Why was this particular location selected? 'Apart from the fact that the land was cheap, it is an historic part of the city, which had been the backbone of the manufacturing industry in Manchester. We wanted to create a new haven for urban dwellers, somewhere with a bit of peace and tranquility. The Bridgewater Canal runs right alongside the site, so when it's finished people will have the choice of walking to work in the city centre, along the canal, without crossing a single road!'



The Collegiate, Liverpool (exterior and interior)



Timber Wharf (architects model and interior)



The next two phases of the project are well under way, and being sold off-plan. The first of these, The Box Works, is an Art Deco warehouse which has been converted into 74 shell spaces, to be fitted out to the individual requirements of residents. Cleverly, Urban Splash created three different show apartments, all designed by different leading designers, rather than the conventional one. As a result, about half of all buyers have asked Urban Splash to go ahead and design the interior of their apartments, rather than bring in their own architects. The final phase of the Britannia Basin scheme is Timber Wharf, the first new-build development undertaken by Urban Splash. The subject of an international architecture competition judged by a panel of such luminaries as Lord Rogers, won by the Birmingham-based Glen Howells, Timber Wharf will house 170 residential and commercial units. Has it been as fun to develop as the conversion projects with which the company has traditionally been associated? 'Definitely. In some ways more so. We've been able to start with a blank sheet of paper for the first time, and see what we can come up with.'

Urban bequest

'One of my golden rules is that life is too short to work with people I don't like,' says Bloxham. 'At Urban Splash, I am surrounded by a wonderful, committed, multi-disciplinary team, and I love what I do. What keeps me motivated is that I am able to go out and spot a piece of run-down land, see if it's got some sort of potential, then work with the whole team here to turn it into somewhere that people want to spend their time.' There is no clearer evidence of the commitment to improving the places in which the company works than the oath sworn by the citizens of Athens, which has been adopted by Urban Splash as its motto: 'We will leave this city not less than greater, better and more beautiful than it was left to us.' Bloxham is quick to stress that this philosophy is as much about attitudes as it is buildings: 'The real skill is changing perceptions, telling people that somewhere is on the way up - and making it be on the way up. What we are actually creating are self-fulfilling prophecies. This is what the loft shop is all about. When you drive past it, it sends out a positive message.' The 'loft shop', situated on

"We will leave this city not less than greater, better and more beautiful than it was left to us."

The Urban Splash motto



Timber Wharf under construction



The Box Works

The Urban Splash 'loft shop' at its Britannia Basin site: "the world's most expensive portakabin"



the Britannia Basin development site, must be the most unusual sales office anywhere in the UK. Described by Bloxham as 'the world's most expensive portakabin', the office, a futuristic aluminium tube balanced on stilts beside the Mancunian Way, was strategically situated to draw the attention of passing motorists. 'We want people to see the care we've taken with our office and know that we will take the same care with their properties.' He applies the same thinking to his literature: almost collectors' items in their own right.

It comes as no surprise to learn that those Tom Bloxham admires are fellow pioneers in the often constricted property world, people who have pushed back the boundaries and overturned conventions, in the public and private sectors. He praises John Whittaker of Peel Holdings for his development of the Trafford Centre, 'for his determination in turning what was worthless marshland into valuable real estate. OK, his design tastes aren't really to my liking, but each to their own!' Jim Ramsbottom of Castlefield Estates is also held in high regard: 'He single-handedly created Castlefield, really. Despite people telling him it would never work, and that the area was only fit for prostitutes and scrapyards, it is now full of life and promise!' Bloxham describes Howard Bernstein, the chief executive of Manchester City Council, as 'a property developer disguised as a town clerk. He has that can-do, deal-making attitude. In the 1980s, while Liverpool would have nothing to do with the Tory Government, Bernstein and Graham Stringer [now MP for Manchester Blackley] would shake hands with the devil if it was good for Manchester.'

Until now, Urban Splash has stuck primarily to the local market it knows so well. But its horizon is widening. The company has committed itself to major new developments in other cities. In Bradford, it is redeveloping Manningham Mills: 'A very tricky project, very expensive, and in a difficult area - where all the riots were. But we believe we can transform this in the same way we have turned around parts of Liverpool and Manchester. It's a massive development: 23 acres of mill buildings, half a million square feet, creating a couple of hundred apartments and hopefully 2,000 jobs!' In Birmingham, meanwhile, The Fort beckons. This project, centring on the regeneration of Fort Dunlop, the former Dunlop tyre factory adjacent to the M6, is a £42 million venture, which will involve the creation of 300 apartments, shops, restaurants and visitor attractions. Elsewhere, Urban Splash is looking at the Royal William Yard in Plymouth, the fabulous collection of buildings that once housed the navy's victualling facilities.

On home ground, the company has been appointed lead developer of the Cardroom estate in Manchester by the newly-formed New East Manchester regeneration company. 'Some of the residents describe it as worse than Beirut,' says Bloxham with a barely disguised note of anticipation in his voice. If only more developers regarded such challenges with enthusiasm rather than apprehension. Surely it's only a matter of time, you'd like to think, until his brand of forward-thinking development catches on, and our cities are filled with budding Bloxhams. He has proved time and again that, with the right mindset, team and funding, it is possible to create landmark destinations in neglected areas, with a wide range of social and economic benefits, whilst earning a handsome profit. But, as Bloxham acknowledges, 'It takes time for any industry to change.' Will others dare to tread in his footsteps?

All images courtesy of Urban Splash except The Collegiate exterior which appears courtesy of Nick Hufton.