Senses of Place: Conflicting Cultural Identities within Birmingham’s Bullring Development

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Summary

Birmingham City Council pressed for the inclusion of public art within the city’s Bullring development in the belief that, together with the design of the buildings, it helped to create a unified sense of place. In practice this has proved problematic for a culturally diverse city with a rapidly changing role in the world.

The City Council sought to present Birmingham as a modern, cosmopolitan and forward-thinking place. Within the Bullring Development, two contemporary works of work – a water feature by the landscape architects Gross Max and Laurence Broderick’s Bronze Bull – accord well with this image of the city. In Gross Max’s work, the choice of materials and the simple geometric shapes reflect the same modernist aesthetic as the buildings. Broderick’s Bronze Bull, whilst alluding to Birmingham’s origins as a cattle market, also references the city’s European links – including its twinning with Barcelona. However, a third piece of public art is much older: Westmacott’s statue of Horatio Nelson was first unveiled in Birmingham in 1810, when the country was at war with France. Its nationalism is at odds with the desire to be seen as a forward-thinking, more cosmopolitan city. Seen from one angle against the backdrop of Selfridges, the conflict between the two very different senses of cultural identity is particularly striking.

To conclude, while public art reflects a very real sense of cultural identity, it is one that is specific to a particular time and group. The inclusion of art works from different periods only highlights this issue.
Between 2000 and 2003, a major retail development providing 110,000 square metres of shopping facilities and a new markets complex for central Birmingham was undertaken by a private developer in collaboration with the City Council. Earlier, in 1998, the Council had set out their guidelines for such a development in the Planning and Urban Design Framework for the Bullring and Markets Quarter. Among their objectives for urban design on such a large scale was that it should ‘identify and express the unique role and special character of the area’. The careful design of building frontages and features would, they felt, help to create a sense of identity by defining public spaces, creating focal points and defining landmarks. Public art had an important role to play in this respect, and developers were to be encouraged to integrate it within the Bullring complex early on in the design process.¹

The Council’s policy must be seen as part of a wider programme of economic regeneration. Since the early 1990s, its strategy has been to encourage international capital to invest in the city by promoting it as an attractive place in which to live and work. In one of their publicity brochures, Public Art and the Private Sector, they make the statement that:

Birmingham City Council supports the promotion of public art as good planning practice, bringing cultural, environmental, educational and economic benefits to new development and to the community at large.²

In the wake of the Arts Council’s claim in the late 1980s that the arts were making a substantial contribution to the revitalisation of Britain’s cities, they adopted the view that investing in art was worthwhile because it attracted businesses to the city centre.³ Clearly, if it was to be successful in doing so, it must not challenge the interests of European, American and Far Eastern developers, but seek to demonstrate that Birmingham was a desirable place in which to invest.

Through the promotion of the Bullring development, the City Council sought to present Birmingham as a modern, forward-thinking place. Their ideas are encapsulated in the tiered shopping malls, their chrome and glass, their sharp lines and, above all, the futuristic flagship store belonging to Selfridges, its curved shape covered with 15,000 aluminium discs recalling the world of space exploration. The architects, Future Systems, based their design on a dress in chain mail by the European designers Paco Rabanne, thereby alluding to the international world of high fashion and consumer capitalism.⁴ The further addition of pavement cafes and wide European-style squares within the development helped promote the idea that Birmingham had become a more cosmopolitan place.

The inclusion of two of the contemporary works of public art within the Bullring accords well with the image of the city promoted by the modern architecture. In one piece, a water feature by landscape architects Gross Max, water cascades down the sides of three gigantic glass cubes, lit internally at night in changing hues of pink, yellow and blue. The modern materials, clear lines and simple geometric shapes of the work fall within the same modernist aesthetic as the buildings themselves. By night, its brightly coloured lighting recalls the neon advertising signs of the nearby stores; by day, when the work is not illuminated, it appears somewhat bland, almost as if it were smoothing over the social divisions that might discourage developers from investing in the area. In this respect, it fits well with the anonymity of the chrome and glass buildings – modernistic and functional, but lacking in any real sense of humanity. The second piece, Laurence Broderick’s Bronze Bull, alludes primarily to Birmingham’s medieval origins as a cattle market, with bulls being tethered to an iron ring set into the ground next to a row of butchers’ shops.⁵ Records show that bull baiting took place on the site up until the late eighteenth century, when it was effectively outlawed by the city authorities.⁶ However, Broderick’s work makes reference to the city’s European links as well as to its earlier origins – not only its twinning with Barcelona, but also, by means of its allusions to the sculptures of bulls produced in ancient Greece and Rome,
Renaissance Italy and nineteenth-century France, to Birmingham’s cultural links with western Europe.

The similarities between Broderick’s piece and a statuette of a bull by the late nineteenth-century French artist Paul Millet are particularly noteworthy: both show the animal in movement, swishing their tails and with their heads lowered and turned to the right. Neither of these two pieces of contemporary public art clash with the aim of portraying Birmingham as a European city, comparable to urban centres such as Dublin and Barcelona.

By contrast, the inclusion of a third and much older piece of public art has proved problematic. Richard Westmacott’s statue of Horatio Nelson, first unveiled in Birmingham in 1810, has recently been restored and resited within the new Bullring. This work recalls Britain’s imperial past, harking back to a time when the country was at war with France. Nelson is shown in naval uniform leaning against an anchor, his medals upon his chest, and with the flagship Victory (in which he commanded the English forces at the Battle of Trafalgar) beside him. He stands upon a plinth overlooking a vast open public space below, almost as if he were standing on the quarterdeck of his ship, surveying the scene of battle while commanding his forces. A contemporary pamphlet reports that, at the time of its original unveiling, ‘the whole of the day was marked with patriotic festivity’, with crowds of more than 5000 people gathering to give three cheers for Nelson and join in the band’s rendition of ‘God Save the King’. Today, despite the loss of the original drum and its bronze relief of the Town of Birmingham mourning his death and the
absence of the railings in the form of pikes linked with a twisted cable, with upturned cannons supporting a cluster of pikes and a ship's lantern at the corners, its nationalism is at odds with the Council’s expressed desire for Birmingham to be seen as a forward-thinking, more cosmopolitan city.7 Seen from one particular angle against the backdrop of Selfridge’s store, the conflict between the two very different senses of cultural identity is particularly striking.

It is this statue, not the contemporary artworks, which has attracted the most attention in the local press. One controversy has centred upon the positioning of Nelson with his back to shoppers approaching the Bull Ring markets from the city’s High Street by means of the pedestrianised street that runs through the middle of the development8; another argument has focused on the desirability of re-instating the original railings. The developers, the Birmingham Alliance, have rejected this possibility on health and safety grounds, but members of Birmingham Civic Society believe that, in the interests of historical accuracy and of safeguarding the city’s heritage, the railings should be restored. Their views are yet to be accepted, and the railings remain in store.9 Nevertheless, they provide some indication of the strength of feeling on the subject, no doubt fuelled by this year’s bicentennial celebrations of Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar. This narrower sense of Birmingham’s heritage, with its accent on what it means to be English rather than European, is very much at odds with the city’s stated aims for the Bullring development.

Moreover, neither the Nelson monument nor the contemporary works of public art (with their references to British naval history and European art traditions respectively) reflect the values
of Birmingham’s black and Asian communities, and any sense of place the works foster, however beset by internal contradictions, must thereby exclude them. Those without a detailed knowledge of Western art history may also fail to appreciate the artistic references to modernism in Gross Max’s work, or those to the European art tradition in Broderick’s *Bull*. The sense of place they help to create is thus one that privileges the viewpoint of the professional white middle class, albeit one fraught with contradictions. This flies in the face of the City Council’s stated aim of pursuing socially inclusive policies that meet the needs of all racial and religious groups within the city.

The Bullring’s most recent piece of public sculpture, Lorenzo Quinn’s *Tree of Life* memorial to the victims of Birmingham’s war-time bombing, at first sight appears to overcome this problem in that it not only focuses upon a more universal message of God’s love in the face of human suffering rather than upon English nationalism, but does so by means of an image that can be readily understood by those unversed in Western art tradition, namely a pair of over life-size hands emerging from the trunk of a tree to cradle the globe. Nevertheless, the piece privileges a Christian viewpoint, since it both echoes the forms of the Gothic windows of St Martin’s Church behind it and draws upon specifically Christian ideas concerning the incarnation of God. Arguably, such an image could alienate other religious groups: it is certainly one that cannot be said to be truly international and cosmopolitan.
It has clearly been difficult to create a unified sense of cultural identity in the face of the conflicting and changing values of different groups within the city, some turning towards a future within Europe and others looking back towards a more narrowly-defined national heritage. Nor are those conflicting senses of place confined to the Bullring development: they can be seen also in Birmingham’s Victoria Square, where a statue of Queen Victoria as Empress of India stands alongside a water feature that dominates the space, namely a work by the Indian sculptor Dhuvra Mistry that incorporates eclectic references to both the European figurative art tradition and to those of India and the Middle East, and which is intended to reflect the multi-cultural nature of the city. To conclude, while public artworks reflect a very real sense of cultural identity, it is one that is specific to a particular time and group. Creating a unified sense of place will always be problematic, particularly in those cases where older statues have been incorporated into more recently built squares and shopping centres.

Notes

Public Space, the battlefield for Public Art

Dhuvra Mistry
River and Youth known as The Ninfa on the Jacuzzi

Monument to Queen Vitoria