Can a new Bradford emerge from a hole in the ground?

Once a booming textile capital, Bradford has long fallen on hard times. Regeneration efforts have been patchy, but a new shopping centre opens this week. Can it help to overcome the austerity and lazy racial stereotyping that dog the city?

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For most of the past 10 years, the centre of Bradford has been dominated by a vast empty space. Some locals called it “the hole in the heart” or the “Bradford Hole”; others knew it as “Wastefield”. It was a huge expanse of rubble and dirt left vacant when the credit crunch and subsequent crash meant that the shopping-centre giant Westfield decided to halt its plans for a huge new development.

Part of the site was eventually used for a temporary “urban garden”. In the summer of 2012, it was also briefly home to a small protest encampment. Now, though, a new Westfield centre called The Broadway - which is around a third smaller than the original design - is finally about to open.

It looks absurdly incongruous: the standard-issue Westfield mixture of Lego-brick architecture and illuminated brand names plonked amid the city’s grand, 19th-century buildings, with apparently little effort to harmonise the new architecture with its surroundings. From the street that snakes past it from the town hall, you see only blank walls, done out in shades of turquoise. From an outsider’s perspective, it might suggest some kind of corporate civic vandalism. “Average people aren’t bothered about all that,” one passing twentysomething tells me. “Ninety per cent of people just want to go to H&M and Zara.”

Westfield’s doors will open on 5 November: another instalment of this fascinating city’s quest to overcome a host of stereotypes, and finally escape from the weight of its industrial past. Of course, these things are rarely easy - and in Bradford’s case, the odds stacked against any success are obvious. Its existing city centre has a smattering of empty shops at the foot of neglected Victorian buildings, and is noticeably short on big chains. It has problems with long-term unemployment, particularly among the young.

To to.COLUMN.OL. the pain, some perceptions of the city are still shaped by the convulsive riots of 2001 - which were initially sparked by hostility to the BNP, but essentially were aimed at the police, and which resulted in 200 local people being sent to prison. Meanwhile, national headlines about Bradford regularly feature stories about segregation, ethnic tensions and militant Islam - as evidenced by recent stories about local people relocating to territory controlled by Islamic State. All told, bringing in investment and sparking positive interest in the city was never going to be easy, but to...
the credit of people with a deep attachment to the place, it is starting to happen, even as austerity makes life even more difficult.

Three minutes’ walk from Westfield is Centenary Square, the redeveloped public space that now blurs into City Park, a huge combination of a shallow artificial lake and towering fountains. At lunchtime on an overcast Tuesday, it is busy with office workers visiting the new Starbucks, students taking a break from the university that sits on the city centre’s south-eastern corner, and people who have evidently come here for want of anything else to do.

The first person I speak to is Isam, who is from the Sudan, and has been in Bradford for two months.

Why is he in Bradford? “Home Office,” he says. “They tell me to come here.”

What does he think of the place? “Everything in Bradford is beautiful,” he says, with an arch smile. “Sudan no good.”

In imitation of the horrors that sent him away from his home country, he pretends to fire an imaginary gun at the smattering of people sitting around the lake. “Do-do-do-do. Dead.”

On a facing side of the square sit Paula, 36, and her partner Craig, 37. They have three kids, and the couple are both on jobseeker’s allowance: after 12 years on benefits, Paula has just come off the government’s work programme, and is trying to make a go of selling home-decorated vases online.

“When we were growing up, this was somewhere to come,” says Craig. “Now, you’ve got so many people struggling. People have got real problems.” He pauses. “There’s not a lot to ... smile about it, is there?”

“There’s no opportunities about, is there?” says Paula.

“It’s all retail, isn’t it?” offers Craig. “Some people can get a job like that, and live with it, but it doesn’t go anywhere, does it?”

Their opinions on the new Westfield centre suggest that, for them, it has probably come too late. They live in Ravenscliffe, three miles from the city centre - and rarely bother taking the bus to central Bradford. “I’d rather do online shopping than come to town,” says Paula. “I can’t see that changing.”

In a different universe from the one defined by benefits and bus fares, British - or, rather, English - politicians currently love talking about cities. As evidenced by George Osborne’s self-reinvention, “city devolution” is the acme of Westminster fashion, and being seen in the company of “city leaders” - wearing the obligatory hard hat and hi-vis vest - is a dependable way of proving that you have an ambitious vision of the future. The obvious embodiment of all these dreams is the centre of Manchester - revived as much by culture as economics, festooned with the cranes that constantly augment the city skyline, and the heart of what Osborne calls the Northern Powerhouse. Manchester was also, let’s not forget, the setting for this year’s Conservative party conference - where Osborne made a speech that included references to the “proud cities” of London,
Manchester and Leeds.

Self-evidently, though, these are not the only English metropolises. Though national politicians barely mention them, there is also an array of places whose prospects seem much more uncertain: Sunderland, Wakefield, Coventry, Portsmouth, Plymouth - and Bradford. It is only around 11 miles from Leeds, but in terms of reputation, Bradford has its own set of problems. Once a booming textile capital, it has long been in decline. And in July, David Cameron used a speech about extremism to claim that the city - 20% of whose population are of Pakistani origin, with 25% reckoned to be Muslim - was among the “most segregated parts of our country”. Bradford, he said, was the kind of place, “where community relations have historically been most tense, where poisonous far-right and Islamist extremists desperately try to stoke tension and foster division”.

Even if the problems he described were hard to deny, for the Bradfordians trying to remake their city, this was hardly the most helpful intervention. Racial and religious divisions, after all, usually have a deep economic aspect - something borne out in Bradford by both statistics (youth unemployment in the city was put at 25% last year, and there have long been concerns about joblessness among young Muslims), and the experience of driving around areas of town that combine a sense of being monocultural with grinding deprivation. If such poverty and exclusion are ever to be tackled, pronouncements about Bradford will surely have to be a little less hysterical than politicians and the press have so far managed. The most obvious point is this: that underneath the hysteria is another post-industrial Northern city trying to find its way in a world that offers no easy economic answers.

Before the crash, the proposed solutions to Bradford’s problems sometimes entered the realms of the surreal. Most notably, in 2003, London-based architect Will Alsop - who had already suggested the former coal town of Barnsley might be refashioned to resemble a “Tuscan hill village” - announced a new civic masterplan that would “make Bradford very distinct from Leeds”. He divided the city into four new neighbourhoods: “the bowl”, “the channel”, “the market” and “the valley”. The town hall was to be surrounded by a lake, far bigger than the one eventually built, and apparently designed to resemble a comma, or a speech bubble. His visions were sold to the city with modest pronouncements such as: “All Architects are magicians. Never forget that.”

Though some parts of the plan were modified and eventually realised, most of Alsop’s grander visions were killed by the crash, whose effects were felt all over the city. Another story of the downturn’s effects was played out in the hard-pressed Bradford neighbourhood of Manningham, where the Mancunian developers Urban Splash had announced a £100m plan to convert a former silk mill - once the world’s biggest - into 800 gated apartments. As things stand, two-thirds of the project remains unrealised, and even some mostly completed flats have been mothballed, as the company “reviews our options”.

Over three days, most of the conversations I have about the city’s future reflect this sense of ongoing uncertainty - not least when I talk to five young(ish) people assembled by Kamran Rashid, a social entrepreneur in charge of a new setup called The Socially Conscious Company, which works on “giving young people a stake in civic society”. All five are graduates, and locally born and raised.
“Bradford’s got all the hallmarks of a potentially very successful city,” says Rashid. “We’ve got a rich history, before the migration, before our fathers and grandfathers came here. It’s got a lot to offer. But for some reason it’s not been brought together well enough. I think there’s some sort of leadership deficit here at the moment.”

What does he mean? “To do with regeneration. Responding to market trends ... We’ve not really got a tech centre here: we’ve not capitalised on that. And rail connections. If you’re in Leeds, you can get to London within two hours. All the major cities have that.” A little later, he says: “There’s no industry here. This is what I’m saying. Where are the 21st-century industries?”

“All my friends work in Leeds now,” says Nabeelah Hafeez, 27. “Because they couldn’t find anything in Bradford. There’s just more opportunities.”

“If you took a wander around Leeds,” says 29 year-old Aqeel Waheed, “you’d see so much scaffolding ... We’re just way behind. And it always feels like they’ve got a head-start. Foreign investment: people start investing, and then more scaffolding goes up, and they get more investment.”

“People are very loyal to Bradford,” says Mohammed Atique, 26. “The amount of people I know who work outside of Bradford, but they refuse to move ... they’ll do that 40-minute commute, to Leeds or wherever. And they’ll be like, ‘Bradford’s home.’

“Especially being from an ethnic minority, there’s a sense of security here. You can go into any restaurant you want as someone who eats halal meat, and you don’t even need to ask if it’s halal. Whereas, the minute you step outside Bradford, just to be sure, you’ve got to ask. And I feel a sense of loyalty, personally. It’s a unique place.”

It may say something about Bradford’s straitened circumstances that, whereas some city leaders hold court from palatial offices, the leader of Bradford district council’s HQ is comically modest. Its reception area needs vacuuming and a lick of paint; in the main office, the most noticeable feature is a fake coal fire.

David Green, 57, came to Bradford from London as a student. He became a councillor in the early 90s and, before taking office in 2010, watched as grand plans and “big bangs” distracted people’s attention from what reviving the city would have to involve: “hard yards and small steps to getting sustainable employment”.

The Alsop masterplan, he says, was “the biggest bunch of garbage I’d read in a long time”, though he quickly tries to moderate that view, saying the plan “was very interesting” but “theoretical”. He says the Westfield hole was a “huge hit on people’s morale, a laughing stock, and no one likes being laughed at.” Among the first priorities when Labour took power here in 2010, he says, was bringing Westfield’s plans back to life, albeit on a smaller scale - though the company still has planning permission to expand, “should the world turn into a warm, wonderful capitalist heaven.” Even if it doesn’t, the council now has a 10-year city plan, built around the insistence that, “We have to stop just thinking about shops”, and aimed at starting “a decade of regeneration and growth”.

Our conversation goes on, through the legacy of the 2001 riots (“For a while, it was a real
block on getting people to come into Bradford - that lasted five or 10 years, in all honesty”), and on to the three-year reign as MP for Bradford West of George Galloway, some of whose election hoardings still adorn buildings on the fringes of the city centre. “That was a disaster,” says Green. “Basically, it was a struggle to get anyone to take us seriously. Galloway was one of these politicians who didn’t help Bradford’s reputation, because he spent all his time saying how crap the council was, or this was, or that was. How long was he the MP? Three years, roughly? He never came to see me once.”

More recently, what did he make of Cameron’s segregation comments?

“I wasn’t surprised,” he says. “I mean ... there’s lazy journalists and lazy politicians. And that was a lazy political comment.” He goes on: “Is there an issue with segregation? Yes. Is it wilful? Not necessarily.”

A pause. “If those communities become more monocultural - white, Asian, whatever - their schools become more monocultural. God Forbid that a politician should ever say, ‘I don’t know the answer,’ but I don’t know the answer. Some people have said we should bus people across the city to encourage that mix. And, on the surface, that might be attractive to some people. But would you want your five-year-old son or daughter to be put on a bus for an hour every morning before they start school?”

What if segregation is an impediment to people investing in Bradford?

“But they’re not investing in a particular street, or a particular community - they’re investing in a city. And what I would say to any investor who has that point of view is: walk through Bradford city centre. It is not segregated. I’m not going to sit here and try to claim that neighbourhoods are not monocultural in parts of this district. But in other parts of this city, they’re multicultural. If you then walk into a place of work, you’ll see people of all races, all cultures, all religions and no religion in one place.”

Bradford is the centre of a metropolitan district with a population of around 500,000, which runs out into surrounding rural areas, most of which are firmly Tory. Indeed, the Conservatives ran the council - with the support of the Liberal Democrats - until 2010, and the ruling Labour group now has a majority over other parties of a single seat. Green assures me this is less of a problem than it looks: seats held by Galloway’s Respect party will soon be up for grabs, and Labour expects to win them back. Which only leaves the biggest difficulty of all: trying to revive the city when the money available is being savagely hacked back.

In Bradford, £170m has already gone from a council budget that in 2010 stood at £480m. For all Osborne’s talk of boosting the North, Green says that, looking ahead to this month’s spending review: “My gut feeling is that he’s going to decimate local government.” His only hope, he explains, lies in Bradford’s shared bid for a chunk of Osborne’s new devolution - complete with a new elected mayor - as part of a Leeds city region, covering a whole swath of West and North Yorkshire. The key point, he tells me, is that by pooling resources, an area with a population of 2.8m and combined annual economic output of nearly £60bn might hold back the worst effects of austerity, meaning that he can somehow press on with boosting his city. “If we don’t go down that route, I think local government is going to struggle to be a partner in regeneration, because I don’t think...” He pauses. “Look: you are not going to have the staff and
expertise to do it. Because what do you do: do you have an urban planner, or do you have a social worker? If you put that to a vote out there ...”

On my second day in Bradford, I spend an afternoon with Irna Qureshi, 48, and Syima Aslam, 41. In 2014, they organised the city’s first literature festival, hosting 25 events over two days. This year, they staged 150 events over 10 days. In 2016, having got new sponsorship, there will be 200 events, put on in what they grandly call “the literary hub of the north”.

Having met at the National Media Museum (once devoted to photography, film and TV, but renamed in 2006, in line with the digital age), we drive around the university that serves a student body of nearly 14,000, and Bradford College, which has just opened its new David Hockney building. We flit through a new independent quarter, whose businesses include a new shop and cafe that sells - but of course - both vinyl records and cooked meats, and pass the Odeon: an ornate former cinema saved from demolition, and now the focus of work to turn it into a 4,000-capacity music venue. The whole thing is a breathless exercise in what the Americans would call boosterism, and their shared drive to overturn what Aslam calls “the overall misery picture”, and get over the sense that the city is at last gripped by “a real sense of excitement, that things are happening and ... lifting.”

“People know Bradford for all the wrong reasons,” says Aslam. “It doesn’t matter where you go: those are the reasons it’s known for. It’s about time that narrative moved on.”

“This is where the media come to gauge the temperature of the Muslim community,” says Qureshi. “This is where they come for their vox pops. And that’s the picture that some people have of Bradford who’ve never been. They don’t see those green spaces, the wonderful architecture we have, or the different communities who live here.

“That includes Muslims,” she says. “But there’s not just one Muslim community. There are many different ones, from many different parts of the world: Bosnia, Somalia, Gujarati Muslims, people from Bangladesh. That gets lost.”

Two minutes later, we glide past the new Westfield centre. Not for the first time, I wince. But with no little chutzpah, Qureshi even finds a way of folding that turquoise-coloured eyesore into a story of civic wonderment. “Oh no, it’s very symbolic of Bradford,” she says, straight-faced. “You know - many different cultures, sitting side by side.”

Festival of the Future City is part of the Bristol Festival of Ideas, 17-20 November 2015. John Harris will be speaking about the future of British cities on 18 November, debating immigration on 19 November, and discussing cities and places with Jonathan Meades on the same day.

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