BRADFORD'S VISION DRAINS AWAY

By Richard Wain

When Wil Alde revealed his revised proposals for Bradford last week it all seemed just a little less ambitious than his original, semi-shocking vision for the West Yorkshire city. The large city-centre lake, which made all the headlines when it was unveiled as part of Alde's Bradford masterplan three years ago, has become a pond – technically a drainable ‘mirror pool’.

A proposed ‘digital centre’, which was to stand on stilts over the pond and had been dubbed the Pike, is now firmly landlocked.

So has Bradford Centre Regeneration (BCR), the organisation driving the city’s transformation and the commissioner of Alde’s original masterplan, got cold feet and opted for a less adventurous approach?

Or is the reworked design a genuine and credible attempt to take the ambitious, science-fictional dream and make it both practical and financially viable?

It depends who you ask.

Some of the architects working in the city are not convinced by the latest efforts and feel the city’s design aspirations are being diluted.

As the borough said back in 2003, the Bowl – the flooded area around City Hall – was intended to become ‘the jewel in the crown’ and the showpiece of the three new neighbourhoods planned from it.

Philip Velt, of local practice Weller and Partners, wonders whether that ambition still holds true.

The latest images of the scheme for the Bowl are generally disappointing and at the risk of a bad pun, the lake is now a watered-down version of Alde’s vision, he said.

‘It’s a token gesture to a unique part of the masterplan, which could have been the most successful part of the regeneration, simply because it would have been the part we could least afford to do.’

Others, such as David Rodin, of urban and economic development group URBED, have been less critical of the changes. Rodin has been working with BCR, in a design-revise role and feels the alterations to the pond are welcome.

He said: ‘There was an argument that it was too big. When you look at the original lake, it was actually larger than Mosley’s Red Square.

If you are creating something that big in the middle of town, you want to be able to create something that is usable.’

In that respect, the new pond design will boast a plug, which can be pulled to allow the space to be emptied and turned into an event space. Overlooking the pond will be a new business district – a development of offices in a parkland setting.

Mind Muster, chief executive of BCR, is keen to emphasise that the redesign does not affect the full plan and the people of Bradford and not plagued with the masterplan.

She said: ‘The Mirror Pool in the city park is ambitious... and is central to the wider plan to bring water back into Bradford.

It marks careful consideration of the views of the people who live in and use the city and is a response to changing market conditions.

She explained: ‘When the masterplan was being prepared, there was little market demand for a new central business district and hence the opportunity to create a wet park in the city was seized.

The market has moved on since then and demand has increased.

She added: ‘The lake becomes the pond and the business district becomes the central business district, but still within very high-quality public realm.

Unsurprisingly, the debate about the changes to the Bowl has spilled into a discussion about how Bradford takes forward the rest of the masterplan – and whether the commitment to quality design will survive.

Adams Clark, founder of Shipley-based practice Halliday Clark, is in no doubt the ‘vision’ will suffer from the ‘amalgamated’ images unveiled at the start of the process. But that, he says, is not necessarily a bad thing. ‘It is inevitable that any masterplan will be subject to change and refinement as a result of several factors.’

The key success that the masterplan has achieved is to establish the zones of development and to stimulate developers and firms to obtain planning permission.

What he and many other architects fear is that Bradford will copy Leeds, developing a similar look to its neighbours’ much-maligned skyline.

Leeds-based architect Idris Buamum, of Buamum Lyons, has voiced her concerns: ‘What worries me is that Bradford is accepting poor development and is still taking the highest offer.

There is a very strong case in Bradford, a city which has much further to climb than Leeds, for using high-quality design as a regeneration tool. Leeds can carry out architecture, but Bradford needs to step up to the challenge.’

All eyes are now on the quality of the new wave of developments coming off the drawing boards, such as Careys Joesph O’Donnell scheme, Robinson Design Group’s Channel development and Piers’ Westfield shopping centre.

Only time will tell if BCR manages to find a successful balance between schemes that are visually appealing and those which are commercially viable but unimaginatively dull.

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