Seaport. John Foster's Custom House, an
earthen-grander edifice, was more unpopular
in 1947. Both Duke's King's Dock and
Custom House are now sites of huge con-
stuctions. After much delay at King's Dock,
Wilkinson Eyre's £290m Liverpool Arena will
open later this year, with £150m of accompa-
nying developments to follow. The arena's
70,000 square metres of exhibition space,
and two auditoria for 9,500 and 4,000 spec-
tators look promising, though the same cannot
be said for its ambience, hotel and residential
schemes. Here as elsewhere along the water-
fronts, opportunities for good public realm
design and transport have been betrayed.
But it is around the Custom House site, the
city's 'nose' where in 1709 Liverpool opened
the world's first commercial wet dock, that
there is now airing the largest development
for a hundred years. The Paradise Street
scheme on, as its developer the Growser
estate brands it, Liverpool One, will open
to shoppers during 2008. There will be:
Lewis and Debenham, scores of smaller
shops and apartments, plazas and a park
above cavernous number car parks across a
45-storey extension to the city centre. With
eight streets and 40 individually designed
buildings procured with an unusual level of
architectural awareness, there are high
expectations for a good public realm.
Except that it won't be public in the fullest sense;
effect its an outdoor mall, whose legal and
civic implications have been questioned.
Greater disputes over civic interest and
public realm, however, could scarcely follow
than those that have blown for decades across
the Pier Head itself, and continue to the
projects now arising there. Uniquely along
Liverpool's riverfront, public access to the
Pier Head has been legally guaranteed for
centuries, not least because it was the place
where all the ferries converged. Yet it only
attained its present 'iconic' status in the early
twentieth century, when its three great com-
mercial towers went up on infilled docks.
Even then, its profile was formidable rather
than planar, and indeed deplored by critics
such as Charles Reilly, charismatic head of
the Liverpool School of Architecture. Over
the years however, as civic parade, rendezvous
for travellers, and not least (though obliterat-
ed by the MDC) as political arena, the Pier
Head became the very countenance of
Liverpool, gathering monuments and memo-
rials like lodges and medals on an urban vet-
eran. When the liners went, though, and
after them the trains and buses, the Pier
Head lost its function. At one point its north-
ern half was claimed by a ferry company as a
marshalling yard for ferries - a threat fought
off by civic champions led by Quentin
Hughes. When the MDC took over, it demol-
ished the red brickclad strikers' rostrum
built at Cunard Line's shipyard, but it
commissioned a repaining and pavilion from
Allies & Morrison, who added a proposal for
a fourth monumental edifice beside the
Doaks Building. This phantom 'icon' was re-
sumed seven years ago by regenerating
quango Liverpool Vision, as The Fourth
Grace - a silly name for a row of bridgelike,
if showy, business palaces. LR wanted some-
thing, but it was unsure what that should be,
and indeed how it would be paid for. Part of
it was to be commercial and part, some kind
of cultural marquee. This content deficit was
never filled out. So if Will Alsop's grand
proposal for it eventually looked something
like a half-filled balloon, Alsop can hardly be
Liverpool One: Paradise Street took a break-ended by two large
department stores, John Lewis (by John McAslan and Partners)
(left) and C&A (by OMA, above right). The retail sector pictured centre left is
by BDP, with upper level along by Allies & Morrison, which has also
strapped the Sainsbury's Store building pictured left. C-Hill's Armour
House (north of the Honolulu Pier) is known locally as the 'Bing Building'.

54 • AT1722
54 • AT1727
blamed, for that was exactly the truth of the project, which of course, duly deflated.

Another spike in Alsop’s balloon, however, was a campaign against any big building on the site. This was especially so concerning the view of the Three Graces from the south – a view that was never intended, as more buildings were always expected there (as in Shenann’s plan). The view that counted was from the river but these days, of course, few see it. And here, we note a strange feature of opinion in that ‘contrary Mary of a city’, as Stanley Reynolds dubbed Liverpool. For on one hand, the city has dreamed Atlantic visions ever since it connected to New York; yet on the other, recent proposals to build high have met with a chorus of anxieties not to obtrude on familiar shibboleths that were themselves built by the brassiest of businessmen. That an even more unsuitable project for big black monoliths (by Broadway Malyan) will now go up on the Fourth Grace site is an irony of the kind visited especially upon the wilfully naive. Fortunately the other project there – 3X Nielsen’s Museum of Liverpool Life – may prove to one decently architectural survivor of this monumental procurement bungle.

In a brilliant sketch of Liverpool, made while introducing the work of James Stirling, Colin Rowe described the city at its height as displaying ‘a characteristically local and enlightenment mix of information, elegance, and megalomania’ – a mix that perhaps Stirling, the best architect that Liverpool never had, alone could manage. Clearly, the megalomania is back; will the information and the elegance follow?

Brian Hatton is the London correspondent of Latz International and teaches at the AA, Greenwich and Liverpool John Moores University.
buildings, new shops, the dockland heritage site and more housing. However the quality and aesthetic success of this building boom is patchy. The boldness of this highrise gesture suggests a more confident city bent to be seen as progressive and looking towards its European counterparts in Holland and Germany for inspiration.

The building itself comprises 15,000 square metres of office space and 161 residential units expressed as two towers, both with stepped sections towards the river, sitting on an L-shaped plinth. The architecture is a striking contrast to the neoclassicism of the Liver Building and the art deco facades concealing vents to the Mersey tunnel below.

Here we are presented with a geometric series of patterns made from horizontal and vertical grey and black cladding panels. A massive two-storey penthouse box perches uneasily atop the residential tower, daringly cantilevering over the edge.

While the office floor plates are neutral within, the residential units offer surprising variety. It is unusual to find duplex apartments and double-height spaces in developed projects, and both parties should take credit for their presence here. The one bedroom apartments make good use of the deep plan, providing decent-sized living and bedrooms with service spaces furthest away from the window.

Allford Hall Monaghan Morris explains that the meta-narrative behind its design relates to the painting of camouflage onto naval boats moored in the docks during the first world war, which were known as 'dazzle ships'. This was also the name of a 1988 experimental electronic album by local band Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. The band's earlier mainstream album had been named after 'Architecture & Morality', the 1977 book by David Watkin. For Watkin the notion that architecture can represent a zeitgeist was flawed, resulting in a rejection of classical architecture as old-fashioned and impractical.
In many ways Unity is a ‘pop’ building and represents the architects’ own exploration of experimental themes and the popular. The comfortable and accomplished compositions that characterise their earlier work give way to this take-it-or-leave-it architecture. It is too easy to criticise such games as ‘facadism’ or just fashionable gymnastics. Indeed it seems a peculiarly British trait to worry about reconciling the rationalist language of modernism with decoration, wilfulness and individuality. This is a building of our time. Although this architecture is awkward in parts, slightly ungainly even, it goes a long way towards establishing a new language for our impoverished urban fabric. It is bold and popular, colourful and characterful – just the sort of thing Watkin would revile. As Liverpool comes to terms with its World Heritage status and the albatross of being named a City of Culture, it can get on with the business of bravely regenerating itself. Unity is definitely in its architectural top ten and could even get to number one… for a time.

James Scone is a director of Project Orange, whose current projects include a kasbah in Morocco.

Paul Monaghan writes:
The checkerboard patterning of the elevations derives from the stepping nature of the apartments in the tower. This motif extends as a series of pergolas to the stepped penthouses. It also manifests itself on the office facade as a 1.50mm raised panel. The colour palette for the linings of the balconies and pergolas came from ‘dazzle ships’ – Great War naval vessels decorated by Vorticist painters in a camouflage pattern to confuse U-boat captains as to the range and direction of the ship being targeted.

Many of these ships were painted in Liverpool. These dazzle ship patterns became more pronounced at the entrances to each building and occur on the lift lobby walls to each floor.

Unity was designed in 2004 and was actually a radical redesign of an earlier scheme for which planning permission was granted. Halfway through the design process, Liverpool was made 2008 European City of Culture and attention was suddenly focused on the building’s potential to be a

Left/above  Influences on facade: LT 9ES rug designed by Paul Monaghan for ARAR at 40, 2004; Bauhaus textile; Dazzle ships in Drydock at Liverpool by Edward Alexander Wadsworth, 1915; Unitted by Donald Judd, 1984.

Top/centre  Elements of the facade have depth as well as pattern (pls: TS).