

The urban renaissance of Nottingham

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Futurism is a dangerous game to play, 1984 seems a long time ago - but here goes.

Nottingham in 15 years time will, I hope, be just the same but very different. The city centre based on the mediaeval town plan still has most of the streets and the square of the mediaeval village, but only a handful of its buildings survive.

It is the Georgian and principally the Victorian buildings (or even the memory of some, the Black Boy Hotel), that still form the image of most people's Nottingham. Of course there are some 20th century buildings, notably the now listed Council House (1929) and the Newton Building (1956-8), both by T Cecil Howitt, and there are the Victoria and Broadmarsh Centres, hated or loved, but significant nevertheless.

The other major legacies of the later part of the 20th century are the tower blocks and Maid Marian Way, "the ugliest street in Europe" as Professor Arthur Ling described it on the 26th February 1965. Hopefully ugly, unsympathetic and badly related buildings will be demolished and go the way of the Trent Building on the old General Hospital site, now the Arena, creating opportunities for exciting modern buildings in scale and in context with the historic city and we humans who inhabit it.

High buildings can be fantastic in the right place, but badly or thoughtlessly located with profit as the sole criteria, they are a disaster. The roads and pavements are not big enough to service them, they cut out sunshine and the sky, create unpleasant eddies at their base and obscure views of significant buildings which make up Nottingham's historic skyline.

Nottingham has one of the largest proportion of listed buildings per capita in the UK, remarkable for an industrial Victorian city and the whole of the city centre is part of a Conservation area. In my view the pressure to retain quality historic buildings in the city centre will, in most cases, increase and balance commercial pressure for large scale redevelopment. The sites which should be redeveloped are those developed in the 60s and 70s with slab blocks and boring repetitive cardboard architecture. Love it or hate it, the richness and depth of our Victorian heritage becomes increasingly precious and recognised as a cultural and economic resource. Just think about the regeneration of the Lace Market, saved by the Nottingham Civic Society in 1974, who persuaded the City to abandon their plans for more new roads and redevelopment in favour of conservation.

The future of our historic city centre is in my view assured. It is currently under tremendous pressure, but is assured because the people of Nottingham like most other people, do not like rapid change of what gives their city its special identity - skyline and landmark buildings, human scale, variety, character and beautiful and interesting buildings. So what will happen to all the development pressure and how will we be able to improve our city and confirm its position as Queen of the Midlands?

For years Nottingham has turned its back on the river; this is where the necessary, though sometimes nasty things happen - waste paper, reprocessing, scrap yards, the incinerator and warehousing, garages etc. The land is underused because of past zoning policies and is in decline like many immediate post war industrial estates. Travelling through it you have no idea the river is nearby and it looks just like any other industrial estate in a hundred other cities.

Here is a wonderful opportunity to start the process of urban renaissance - drive a boulevard from the Island Street site to the river and redevelop with mixed use on the Rogers' model as illustrated. The parallel with Edinburgh where a new town of streets, squares, places and parks was created in the 18th century because the mediaeval town on the hill was fully developed, is a fascinating one. Nottingham's centre can expand in the same way into the New Town Greater Nottingham which would connect the old town to the river. The whole development could be phased provided the concept is strong and has wide acceptance and ownership. It should be linked to the new riverside strategy

both physically with footpaths, cycle way, waterways, public transport and access roads and visually by boulevards and landmark buildings which have a real function and are strategically placed for the best visual townscape effect.

The reasoning behind the need for redevelopment of our cities is now more widely and fully understood. The main reasons we must stop the suburban sprawl into the countryside are as follows.

1. We need the countryside to heal our spirits, act as a contrast to urban areas, provide clean air, pure water and grow healthy food locally which is marketed locally.
2. The very low density of our cities, brought about by the flight to a better life in suburbia and the ability of the motor car to transport us, is uneconomic to run and will not provide enough revenue to support and maintain the infrastructure. In addition it will not support a rapid transit system of public transport essential for the modern city, if the density is too low.
3. The built form which results from sprawl has no urban design; no identity, no squares or places, no significant buildings and because of the low density, you have to travel long distances to school, shops, entertainment, sports facilities and cultural activity. It does not promote communities or co-operative activity. It promotes and is an expression of the cult of the individual - my garden, my house, my computer, which makes me completely independent, my car (usually cars) - a complete world of virtual reality, a protected, cosseted environment. The children particularly lose contact with the real world and its challenges in the cause of safety - driven and collected from school, chauffeured to any activities, a miserable reflection of a real world.
4. Strategic planning in the last half of the 20th century has been controlled by builders and more recently by the House Builders Federation, an extremely powerful lobby - every Structure and Local Plan enquiry in the UK has been dominated by a small army of expert planners, surveyors, quantity surveyors, engineers, in the employ of the House Builders Federation who have persuaded the Inspectorate that the demand is for their product. Their profits have largely come from planning gain. A field worth £2,000 per acre becomes £200,000 or more per acre. This is the game that has been played and won by the House Builders Federation (on our fields) in our countryside.

The amenity movement - Council for the Protection of Rural England, Civic Trusts, green belt defenders, Wildlife Trusts, Friends of the Earth, Ramblers etc have nibbled at the edges of the arguments, but have until very recently usually lost.

Now they have taken the high ground and found a new champion, Lord Richard Rogers, who is close to Government and has just published the Urban Task Force Report - Towards an Urban Renaissance. PPG3 has just been published. The Transport White Paper 1999 and PPG2 published in 1999 are all a prelude to the Urban and Rural White Papers now to be published in the autumn of 2000. They all seriously challenge the developers' case for more building at low densities on green fields and in green belts.

If the Government holds firm, these policies will stop the sprawl around Greater Nottingham and promote the redevelopment of the underused, very low density conurbation. Builders will be forced to look to existing urban areas for their development sites.

Re-focusing of local authority planning to spatial development plans rather than land use plans will assist in the process of renewal, particularly if design becomes an essential element of planning applications. There will be little or no profit in land and therefore the product will suddenly become the most important component of development. Added value will come from good design, the Edinburgh New Towns of the 21st century.

The need is to do more with less, save energy, recycle, provide pure water, grow local fresh healthy vegetables, recreate markets - in a nutshell be SUSTAINABLE. This green approach will shape developments in the future.

Eighty percent of the demand for new households comes from single people, a growing proportion of them being elderly. The four bed executive house is by and large not needed and the filter down philosophy discredited.

A new form of housing with car parking largely underground with much more open space, squares, crescents, circles, large balconies big enough to use as an outdoor room, large comfortable flats which require little heating if any and all designed for zero CO₂ emissions, will be in demand in our new developments. Roofs will be green either literally or covered with hi tech panels and thermal stacks, creating the equivalent of the interesting skyline of Victorian chimneys but without the smoke and pollution.

The infrastructure which supports the housing will be incorporated in the built form. Ground floors on main routes will be shops, cafes, libraries, offices, studio workshops and all buildings will be very flexible. Why do offices have to be designed to look like offices? They do not and the notion of large floor plates stuffed with 'open plan burolandschaft' is well past its sell by date. Nottingham will get a couple of pioneering projects which demonstrate it is possible to look forward to going to work. This sort of work place is burgeoning in the e-mail sector. Employers are competing and young mobile talented people are becoming very design conscious and are demanding a better and different working environment.

As with all visions of the future, the future in terms of 10-15 years will only be a little bit different from what it is NOW because of the sheer volume of the existing built environment, but it could be very much better if we husband our resources and involve everyone in the process of urban reform and regeneration. The areas most likely to change are the post war industrial estates and the interwar and post war housing estates.

Not every new scheme can solve all our problems all at once. Currently we have more houses with gardens than we need. The proof is that so many are neglected and are in urgent need of upgrading or rebuilding. This should be seen as an opportunity and not as a problem - builders have got plenty to go at and they will earn their keep and house builders will either largely disappear or adapt to new margins and investment patterns.

Public expectations driven by television and internet images will eventually change the homes we live in. Ideas of conversion or new build of two in one and the extended family home are common place in Germany and could transform our existing housing estates.

It is crazy when you think about it - cars, computers, wrap around sound and vision, digital everything, clothes, advertising, imagery and yet what do you get when you buy a house, a mock Georgian or Gothic with all mod cons. The panelled front door opens when you say 'good morning house' and the garage works without a word. The reason for this ludicrous situation is a lack of confidence by developers in new market ideas and a virtual no go in terms of aesthetic education for the population as a whole.

I believe that until ethics and aesthetics are part of our general education - as important as the 3Rs - then we will continue to flounder. The top down approach of the architects and planners of the 60s and 70s giving the people what will be good for them in prefabricated socially engineered utopias is over. BUT for the bottom up approach to work, the client (and that means you), must be discerning, demanding and above all driven by a desire for a beautiful as well as an efficient and sustainable environment.

In practice there will be many forms of partnerships where people and organisations get together with local government, developers and investors to create new homes which add up to more than just 'the ideal home' and create a place, a square, a street, where the community is just as important as the individual. This is not a pipe dream; it is beginning to happen in the UK and has been happening in isolated places and all over Europe, where creative people are once again taking an active part in creating our cities and we are once again putting people back at the heart of development.

In the UK new ethics and the Government's commitment to sustainability have changed pessimism and despair to optimism in many thinking people - a few more won over to

creating a beautiful green environment and Greater Nottingham could really become a wonderful place in which to live and work in the next generation. We must think positively and creatively.

The resources at our disposal are greater than ever. It is not our ability to change, it is our will to change. Money has to take its place in the order of things - after all it is only the medium with which we control transactions. By and large we are all fed, watered, own a television and washing machine, have a car or access to one and only 20% of the population actually produce anything; just think if 40% of us were producing.

This leads to the final political crunch. How much should Government intervene and how much should private initiative be prompted to solve our urban dilemma? It is this balance which will determine whether we are successful or not. How much stick and how much carrot? In urban design a stick will be needed to assemble land, promote sustainable development and improve standards BUT individual enterprise, flair and creativity must be promoted to design and construct new forms of housing for the 21st century.

Review of Structure Plans and Local Plans, and even more importantly, the latest East Midlands Development Agency and Regional Planning Guidance documents, to accord in full with the thrust of Government policy as set out in PPG3, will be a priority. The main investment will be in the cities of Nottingham, Derby and Leicester to fuel their renaissance, and while strategic development at East Midlands Airport may be beneficial, massive, unrelated industrial and commercial activity there will be seen as development of a previous era when economic criteria were paramount.

If the Nottingham LRT goes ahead, a great development opportunity is opened up along its route. Developers in the know have already bought up options - ambitions for excessive land profits will always be with us, but this is where investment should be encouraged, not speculation. The development along the line could be a model for future routes to illustrate how densities and open space can increase and initiate a network of footpaths and cycle ways, linking to stations as the nucleus of a local centre. These ideas are not new and untried and suggestions of how this can be developed are in the Urban Task Force Report. The key is density; unless it is high along the route and is linked, it will not be sustainable.

Linkages are essential - house to school, community and shops - easy access to cultural and regional facilities and routes which are pleasant to use in themselves.

Before leaving the question of the form of cities and their densities, I would like to quote a short section from Lord Richard Rogers' article in the Observer on the 13th February 2000.

"The British are extravagant with land. We insist on building as if we lived in the American Midwest or the Australian outback. The US builds on average 40 dwellings for every hectare (roughly the size of a football pitch); in Britain we erect 23 new buildings for every hectare, even though we are an overcrowded island where land is scarce."

We are awakening to the urgency of placing an embargo on further releases of green belt and green field land and revising the Structure Plan. Investment in our cities is long term and our only opportunity to improve Greater Nottingham in 2010-2015 is now, otherwise we will have to wait another ten years.

I would now like to turn to a deeper and more fundamental question - survival! In 1974 as a result of the international oil crisis and an increasing awareness of green issues, the State of Oregon became the first Green State in the USA. It has maintained and improved these policies and is today one of the most sought after places to live in the States. The film made in 1975 by the BBC Horizon team explained what they had already achieved and how it was possible in the market economy of North America. There was interference in the market place, broadly by consent and persuasion plus the occasional state law.

A major new power station was planned to cope with anticipated growth. The state team were able to persuade the Power Company to delay building the power station by doing

home energy audits. The Power Company supplied free insulation and low energy light bulbs to reduce demand - thus controlling the demand side of the equation. This saved millions of dollars of investment for the Power Company, saved electricity and reduced bills for occupiers. Lateral thinking at its best.

Another campaign was to tidy up the freeways which were littered with cans by charging a very high deposit. All cans went back to the factory and were reprocessed. Any stray ones helped the seriously poor. The film of the freeway before and after was dramatic to say the least.

Another example was tackling river pollution. As Oregon is a major paper pulp manufacturer, large quantities of timber waste from the process were causing the pollution. The manufacturers were persuaded to reprocess the pulp waste which improved efficiency of the plant, saved trees and stopped the pollution. It also led to a successful secondary garden mulch industry which again increased profits and reduced the use of artificial fertilisers.

Greater Nottingham should declare that it is to become the first truly Green City in the UK. It should immediately start the process of helping industry, stopping litter and embarking on reprocessing and secondary industries as a result of increased profits from improved performance. This would quickly become a major economic driver for the increased prosperity of the conurbation as a whole, save precious energy and resources AND more importantly reduce pollution and CO₂ emissions, i.e. it would be genuinely sustainable.

The members of the Nottingham Green Partnership all know what the problem is and we all know how to solve it - what is lacking is a real understanding of the problem and THE POTENTIAL OF GOING GREEN by those who are formulating our policies. Many of the solutions are proposed in Lord Richard Rogers' Report on Urban Renaissance, which highlights the need

"to improve the performance of our urban areas by reducing the consumption of raw materials and the production of waste products, as well as serving to preserve and promote the natural world within the built environment. Nowhere is the implementation of sustainable products and processes more important than within cities If, as a nation, we are to contribute to alleviating the increasing global ecological pressures, our towns and cities will need to be more resource efficient. We must adopt the principle of sustainable development, which recognises the global environmental impacts of our urban settlements and the implications both for current and future generations. We should operate on a strict basis of reducing the use of natural resources and then recycling and reusing those resources wherever possible. Creating environmentally responsible cities means recognising the value of clean air, clean earth and clean water. This includes seeking to minimise air pollution from industrial and transport uses; avoiding the contamination of land and where contamination does occur, investing in remediation." So it is all there in Lord Richard Rogers' report.

Our Urban Renaissance can only happen and be sustained if the main economic driver of the first half of the 21st century is sustainability itself, going green in the fullest sense of the word. Healthy local food marketed locally, curtailment of the use of fossil fuels, development of alternative energy sources - wind, sun, wave, geothermal, geomass, water - combined with improved building performance - insulation, orientation, natural light and ventilation, emphasis on walking and cycling as preferred transport modes, use of our 20 additional years of life for constructive rewarding work; all have to become the norm.

The concept of doing more with less should underlie every decision - everything recycled, minimal packaging, reduction in the need to travel to work, for leisure, to schools, culture and development of transport modes which are non-polluting, safe and convenient.

Pollution in all its forms has to be reduced to promote civilised life. What effect will this growing awareness have on our lifestyle and the built form of our cities? Imagine a city without the petrol driven motor vehicle. In high density, well used areas only electric

vehicles or new non-polluting vehicles should be allowed. Electric taxis, cars and buggies would have a speed restrictor built in at say 20 mph, released automatically when you leave the area. Life would become immediately more tranquil, thoughtful and sociable. When you walk through some of the pedestrian areas in Nottingham today, you get a similar feeling where human noise is dominant and it feels good. This feel good factor would spread and make visiting the City Centre a much more rewarding experience.

I can feel so many readers saying "not in your lifetime you won't", but they said that about pedestrianisation. Whole towns and cities already work this way; they are usually extreme examples but they do work - Venice, Munich, Zermatt, Oldenburg, Sark and Lindos to name a few.

Thinking green challenges the ethics of current business which rely on growth as the route to success and profit. Business has to learn that profit does not necessarily spring from growth; eg if the building industry could halve material waste, profits could improve by up to 10% and if we eliminate waste, by 20%. Of course Egan and Government want this improved efficiency to lead to reduced prices but I believe it should be invested in improved standards which long term will significantly reduce the cost of living and reliance on fossil fuels. People should be encouraged to invest in a better product and provided it does not cost more and will save them money in the medium and long term, they may choose quality.

If in addition the Government can give incentives for going green - tax rebates, zero VAT - then 'quality of life' one of the catch phrases of Government, can become a reality. The Government could go even further to promote better housing and urban living by revising the method of financing building, reducing rates of interest on long term loans for low maintenance, quality green building.

So what does this vision of Greater Nottingham amount to and is it possible?

Possibly yes, probably no because vested interests will hold back the will and thrust of Government policy. New Labour are still a bit sensitive and insecure - remember they were out for 18 years. Given a fresh and overwhelming mandate in the next election, we could see strong unambiguous legislation and dramatic change with work on the vision commenced in earnest.

So I have gone full circle. What sort of city are we likely to live in 15 years time? In many ways just the same, recognisably the same hopefully, with its heritage intact and valued BUT very different in its atmosphere and how it functions. People will dominate and not the motor vehicle. New development will be very different, very green, very sociable, very functional and hopefully very beautiful. Urban design will be an important function of the community assisted by planners and architects and will include the streets, squares, parks and boulevards essential for a civilised and prosperous city.

In 1889 Camillo Sitte published his book 'City Planning according to Artistic Principles'. In it he condemned the late 19th century grand and inhuman city planning and he extolled the virtues of mediaeval towns; their human scale, character, variety, enclosure and their art, architecture and sculpture; which together created the places we all visit today. Here we receive our culture ration, refresh the soul and make up for what we have lost in the climate of commercialism which dominates our lives.

Ironically commercialism has been so successful that only between 20-40% of the working population need to work to obtain a reasonable standard of living. The rest of us organise, communicate, entertain, educate, play, indulge in cultural activity and now and again think, or sadly are out of work.

It is possible therefore economically to fund our Urban Renaissance, if we have the will and that should be assisted by using art and architecture as a tool for urban regeneration. In Bilbao, north east Spain, a great port and steel town of the past, 40% of the working population were unemployed and much of the town derelict. The Basque region, its capital is Bilbao, was Spain's Northern Ireland.

The City took bold steps with the help of funding from the EEC and the Guggenheim Foundation. They built a new LRT system, employed Lord Foster to design it and they built a fantastic new building designed by architect Frank Gehry, to house part of the

Guggenheim's modern collection of modern art and sculpture. They also employed Santiago Calatrava to build an elegant footbridge link and embarked on an ambitious programme of building. They initiated a programme of conservation of the historic core including the restoration of their Grand Theatre. These initiatives promoted the renaissance which has been an enormous success story. The atmosphere buzzes and poverty has been dramatically reduced. Bilbao is now a major tourist destination and the people are renewing themselves and their City. Incidentally it is almost the same size as Nottingham.

Frank Lloyd Wright in his illumination 'The Living City', (it would be insulting to call it a book), sums up for me what is possible and what is the essence of life - man's relationship with nature. We as a society are becoming aware that we can no longer just take from nature what we want and destroy by neglect or ignorance that which feeds us and provides the very air that we breathe.

'When a great Oak is to die, a few yellow-green leaves appear on topmost branches. Next season much of the upper part of the tree is yellow; next year the upper branches remain without leaves. After several following seasons we say the tree is "dry".

'But for many years to come, the frame of the dry tree stands erect, making black marks against the sky as though nothing has happened. Finally, rotted at the root, useless, the top-heavy structure falls. But then even the heavy frame must lie a long time broken upon the ground. Many years pass before it crumbles to soil and grass roots come; perhaps another acorn or two to give rise to other great oaks.

'What sap and leaves were to the great Oak a healthy aesthetic is to a People.'

Our language today is less poetic and we use new words and descriptions - ecological, biodiversity, air quality, ozone layer, sustainable. What they all add up to is rediscovering man's relationship with nature. We are part of nature but we now have the power to destroy it. We must learn to work with nature to find new solutions which are ecologically sound, without resorting to the old fashioned technical fix. Understanding our relationship with nature and the complex interactions we generate is called the new science of ecology.

The reason for change is driven by survival - the more evident global warming and deterioration of our health, the more pressure there will be for change. The next 10 to 15 years will be critical. Can we (and that means as many of us as possible), engineer change before the need hurts and can we use the problems we have as an opportunity to create our Urban Renaissance here in Greater Nottingham?

Most great flowerings of civilisation have sprung from success over adversity. Pericles' Athens was the result of victory over the Persians. Venice was created on swamps to avoid marauding vandals and Goths. It relied on sea power to survive and created a great city to express that dominance. Mediaeval cities were contained by protective walls which gave them their form and character, as in the case of Nottingham. The driver for New Greater Nottingham should be working with nature to produce a sustainable environment which gives us physically what we require and spiritually what we desperately need.

Nottingham has responded wholeheartedly to the Lord Rogers' initiative and has created its own Urban Task Force. It recognises that a flexible pragmatic approach which involves the whole of the community as well as developers is essential for success. It is social reform which underlies the need for an urban renaissance and a hunger for something people know they miss, but do not know what it is.

The warning note is that a vision for Greater Nottingham of the future as outlined in this essay will only happen within the right government framework in place. It has to enact legislation which is positive, unambiguous and creative and promotes sustainable solutions to our urban dilemma.

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The renaissance of Nottingham

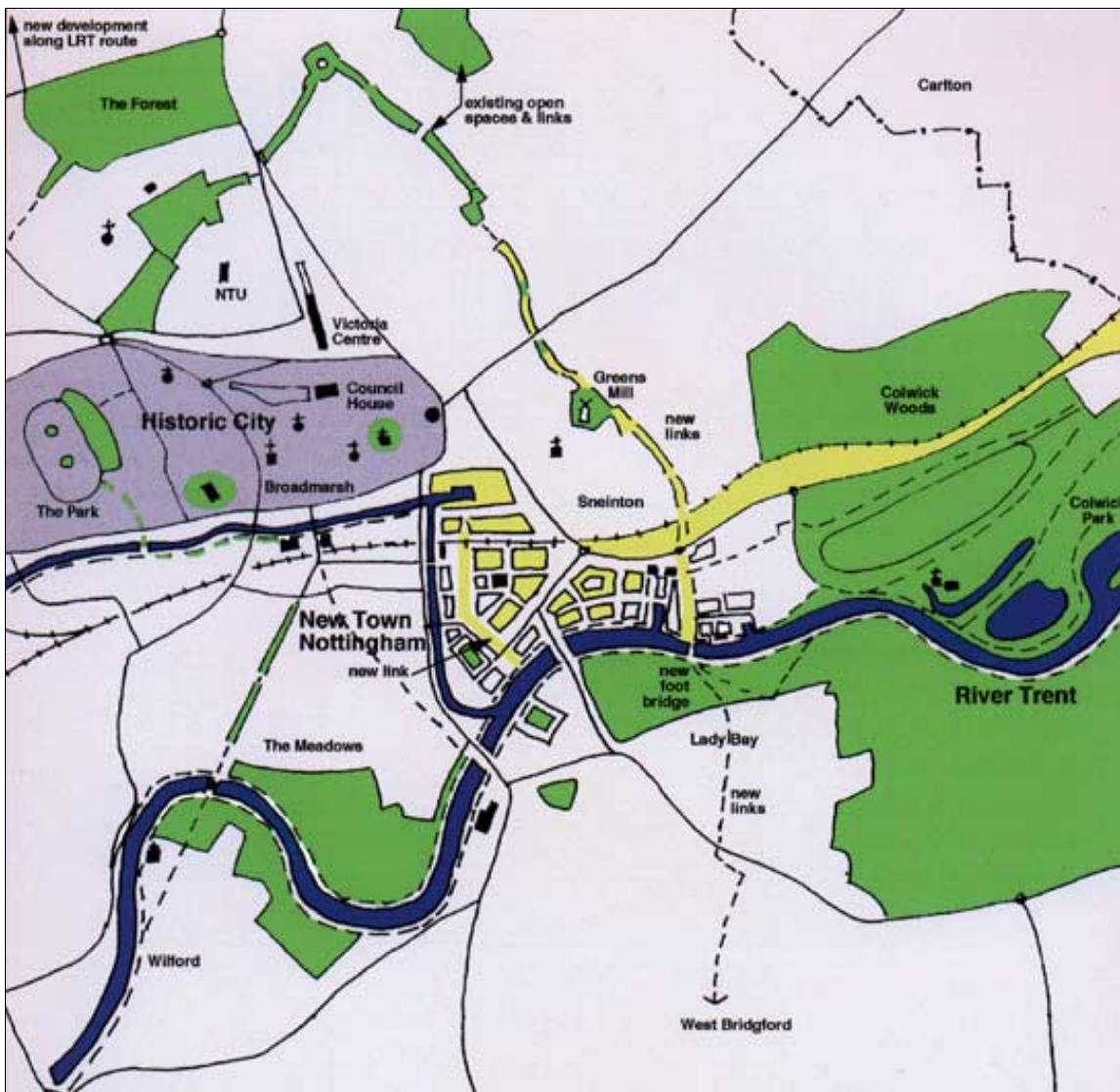


Diagram showing potential for linkages, extension of greenways and the Urban Renaissance of the riverside into 'New Town Nottingham'.



Art and architecture as a tool for Urban Renaissance, street scene with the Guggenheim Museum closing the vista.

Details of the Guggenheim Museum.





View of historic Nottingham with St Mary's Church in the foreground and some of its landmark buildings.

View from the same position looking south towards the River Trent. A problem and an opportunity.



View looking north across the River Trent towards St Mary's Church tower showing buildings with their backs to the river.