

The lack of BIG plans for the city has meant lots of opportunities for little plans

BLM talks to Nick Childs – co-founder of Childs+Sulzmann about Bristol and its future



How have you seen Bristol change as a city?

“Enormously. There was a time when Bristol really wasn’t a very attractive location for property investment. It was thought that the planning context here was just too difficult; but that changed rapidly in the mid-90s when the city decided it would become open to development.”

What do you believe sparked this change?

“It was the change in the Chief Planning Officer at the time; at Bristol City Council. The city’s focus shifted and its attitude to inward investment and business improved. Changes were happening that we would never have seen under the previous administration.”

What does the city need to do to keep to its roots but also develop and grow – and manage the tension between growth and conservation?

“For 35 years, we have been good at looking after our old buildings. The Conservation Act came in 1976; and we’ve got 19 conservation areas and hundreds of listed buildings. Bristol was very keen to grab the opportunity to protect its history and heritage because they had been through

that horrible period, like many cities did, when engineers and planners were wanting to drive motorways through the middle of the city.

“The city objected to most of the proposals that were coming through and since then we have had a conservation guided policy. Now, we have all those important buildings and areas protected and Queen Square is looking beautiful and there are plans for St Mary Redcliffe and lots of nice parts of Clifton.”

“But it (conservation) is starting to get in the way of developments. If we are going to be a really thriving economic city then we need to build some big, new buildings to make that happen.”

What do you think needs to be done to bring more sites forward and get the city building?

“Leadership from the Mayor and Metro Mayor is important. Marvin Rees has shown his colours in areas such as the Redcliffe Quarter, where developers were planning to build a tower. Far from saying he didn’t like the idea, he is proposing to get it built and built big. He asked the developer to make

the tower taller. His view is, if you’re going to do it, do it properly. That’s leadership.”

Bristol has grown rapidly – however people abroad ask, ‘where is that?’ – do you think it matters that Bristol isn’t as well known?

“It’s difficult – it’s known very well in certain areas. In the media and culturally it is well known – in the music industry, the film industry, the creative industries – Bristol is an absolute focus of attention. It depends who you are asking. Nationally I think it is very well known.”

What makes Bristol different to other cities?

“Interestingly, the lack of leadership over time and lack of big plans for the city has meant lots of opportunities for little plans. If you take a city like Manchester or Birmingham, they tend to make a master plan and say, ‘this is what we want to do’ – lots of funding, lots of energy and commitment and go ahead and do it.

“They build the new bull ring or they re-create the middle of Manchester with real commitment, real fast. Bristol has never done that. Bristol has small plans and doesn’t implement them all at once. It is incremental.

“That leaves lots of opportunities for small entrepreneurs and creative industries to fill in the gaps. So, a lot of what’s going on here is not new shiny tower blocks in the middle of town – it’s in Stoke’s Croft or the back streets of Bedminster, where small businesses are doing well.

“Birmingham was a city built on production lines, whereas Bristol goes off in different directions all the time, experimenting and changing its mind – because it’s a highly-educated place, we are always self-critical.”



Projects Nick has been involved include: The Engine Shed & Thornbury Castle