

IDENTITIES AND THE CITY

Ieper and Coventry
how reconstruction created and
reflected the identity of the city.



Illustration 1- Ieper(copyright <http://www.battlefields.co.uk>)



Illustration 2 - Coventry – Photograph by Eric Hall July 2006

Identities and the City

Introduction

The cities of Coventry (United Kingdom) and Ieper (Ypres) (Belgium) have an important factor in common, in that their centres were both devastated by German attack in the course of world war. Ieper was destroyed by long-range heavy artillery in the spring of 1915ⁱ, whilst Coventry was destroyed by air attack on the night of 14 November 1940ⁱⁱ.

The citizens of each city shared a common identity in that they had been blown out of their city by enemy action and were to all intents and purposes "refugees". Once the "all clear" had sounded, they returned to their homes to pick up their identity. Both sets of civilians were anxious to return to the city that they remembered. In Ieper, the planners shared their wishes and did all they could, whereas in Coventry, the planners had a different agenda.

The purpose of this project is to examine the fashion in which the cities were reconstructed, and to identify factors that may have given rise to the assertion of any identity that can be associated with the reconstruction.

History

Ieper

Ieper is an old city, known in Roman times. It underwent rapid expansion in the 12th Century due to the arrival of the wool trade, and a major market was established in 1180. At this date it was said to have a population of 40,000 (the present-day population is 36,000). The town paraded its wealth by the construction of extravagant buildings, such as the Cloth Hall, the construction of which began in 1260. By the 15th Century however, decline set in, interrupted by a brief spell of prosperity at the end of the 17th Century when imposing fortifications were built by Vauban.

In 1914, following the defeat of the German army at the Marne, the British and German armies tried to outflank each other to the coast. They clashed in the outskirts of Ieper, and the Germans came to a sudden stop. The situation of the British army was perilous, enclosed in a salient surrounded on three sides, but it was decided to defend the city at all costs for political reasons – a symbol of plucky Belgian resistance against the hunnish hordes. This fanatical defence of the city led to the death of hundreds of thousands of British, German, and Empire soldiers in several major battles, during the second of which the city was destroyed.

Coventry

The identity of Ieper can be paralleled to some extent by the rise of Coventry. The city was founded in the 7th Century and grew slowly until the Middle Ages, when it underwent rapid growth based on the cloth trade, and many important buildings such as the Guildhall were constructed. There was however no decline, and by 1881 the population had reached 45,000.

Engineering, particularly the motor industry, gave a boost to the city. By 1901, the population had reached 69,978; by 1911 106,000. In 1940, an estimated 242,000 people resided here. Motor and engineering works were crammed into the old medieval streets between shops and houses. Coventry was a prime, legitimate military targetⁱⁱⁱ, and on 14th November 1940, the Luftwaffe sent 509 aircraft to destroy the industry.

Pre-war aims

The cities had, however, different pre-war aims. Ieper was content with its legitimising identity as a centre of tourism for its architecture and history. There was no talk of modernisation.

For Coventry, the situation was different. At the turn of the 20th Century there were complaints that the city's narrow, constricted medieval streets were no longer able to handle the population of the day. In 1910 the Council set out to obtain powers to sweep away part of the city centre and to construct new modern thoroughfares.

There was a great deal of opposition to the scheme. A poll on 31 January 1911 showed a clear majority against the proposals^{iv}, and many people registered their disapproval that the city would lose its legitimising identity as a centre of medieval history in favour of the City Council's project identity of a new 20th Century city. Despite this, the city fathers forced through the issue and work began in the late 1920s. Despite the most hypocritical assurances^v, such historical treasures as the "Black Bull Inn", where Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned, and the city's "wonderful half-timbered"^{vi} first Jewish Synagogue, "rich in ... handsome carved panelling typical of the 16th and 17th century"^{vii} were ruthlessly demolished.

This however wasn't enough. A subsequent plan produced by the city's architect Donald Gibson in May 1939^{viii} left citizens aghast. Gibson proposed the demolition of much of the remaining city centre and the building of boulevards and open spaces to match those of Haussman in Paris. This was a bold project identity – a clear statement of the abandonment of the city's medieval identity, and a huge leap into the future. Cynics could be forgiven for thinking that the visit of the Luftwaffe was not wholly unwelcomed by some of the council, as the German bombers demolished parts of the city that not even the planners dared touch.

Rebuilding

Ieper

While the inter-war controversy was raging in Coventry, the rebuilding of Ieper was going ahead. The British government had proposed purchasing the entire city as it was, and turning the ruins into a memorial to the British dead^{ix}. This was summarily rejected by the citizens. They had no plans other than to return to their homes, no matter that nothing remained, and the decision was made to rebuild Ieper as far as possible after the fashion of 1913.

The inhabitants saw in Ieper their own identity, and this was the one they wished to retain. This could be seen as resistance identity, in that despite the destruction of the city by the best that the German army could throw at it, Ieper would rise intact from the rubble. They began to move back into temporary wooden huts at the beginning of 1919, and in 1921 reconstruction began.

It should be said that the city was not undergoing the same pressure of expansion that was affecting Coventry during this period and that maybe if this had been the case, another decision might have been reached.

The magnificent Cloth Hall, symbol of the pre-war identity of the city, had been destroyed in the bombardment. Architects Coomans and Pauwels started work on its rebuilding in 1934. They followed as faithfully as possible the original design, but encountered many problems. Most of the external statues were destroyed and there was insufficient evidence to enable many to be reconstructed. Accordingly, they used their imagination in several cases, and even added a statue of Albert I, Belgium's "soldier king" who led the Belgian resistance to the Germans during the war. Such remains that were rediscovered and which were not incorporated into the original fabric were placed on display within the Cloth Hall.

The Cloth Hall, completed in 1958, represented the best that could be done in recreating the legitimising identity of Ieper as a rich medieval city, and to incorporate a resistance identity countering the *de facto* project identity of a city destroyed by the Germans.

Coventry

For Coventry, the idea was completely different. On 8 January 1941, representatives from Coventry City Council met with Lord Reith, the Minister for Works. Two ideas were discussed - whether to continue on a larger scale the process of modernising the city or to disregard the ancient plan of the city and aim at a comprehensive development on modern lines. There was no third idea - that of reconstructing the city according to its ancient plan.

Lord Reith later wrote "... I told them that if I were in their position I would plan boldly and comprehensively - and that I would not worry at this stage about finance"^x <Reith p 424> - the second part of which came back to haunt both Reith and the Council.

The City Councillors committed to create a new project identity for the city, and sweep away the old identity^{xi}. Gibson's controversial plan was wheeled out again, and suspicions were roused. The Midland Daily Telegraph fired off a warning about the city's project identity: "We all admire the capabilities of the city architect ... but ... the future city, we hope, is to be a place to be lived in and shopped in, not a showpiece"^{xii}.



Illustration 3 - Medieval city wall demolished to make room for a flyover support – Photograph by Eric Hall July 2006

The city's planning application^{xiii} made no bones about its intentions^{xiv}, and was met with howls of indignation^{xv} by many. This was not the city with which they identified. Although Gibson's plan was watered down, once reconstruction began, not even the medieval city walls were spared.

Priority was given to the construction of a shopping centre on an area previously covered by buildings. The architect had made a bold declaration, echoed by Lord Silkin that "what Princes Street gives to Edinburgh, The Parade gives to Leamington, the Royal Crescent to Bath, ... the Precinct will give to Coventry"^{xvi}. Here were to be shops on two levels as a deliberate echo to the "rows" of Chester (the irony of a bold, modern project identity being based on a medieval idea seeming to have completely passed them by), a feature multi-storey department store, and a broad open space clearing the view to the spires of Trinity Church and the old cathedral.

The city's project identity in the shopping centre had many avant-garde ideas, most of which fell flat. A mosaic was commissioned and assembled in 1953. Later, it was seen necessary to place an inscription to identify it, on the grounds that "in the 5 years that the mosaic has been on view there must have been thousands ... who have looked at it and wondered"^{xvii}. A fountain was installed in 1961 and was rebuilt on several occasions over the following 5 years due to the savage criticism that the original design and each of the rebuilds received. In 1962 an erection representing a bombed-out house was placed in the precinct in a bid to capture for the failing precinct some of the legitimising identity of the older historic Coventry, but two years later, in a savage and ironic indictment of the City Council's efforts, the erection crashed to the ground. Faulty mortar rather than divine retribution was blamed.

In their enthusiasm to develop their project, the council overlooked many of their own design constraints^{xviii} and their own lack of forethought^{xix}. They approached the project with the most shameless spite and mendacity^{xx} and were swept away in an eternal optimism that blanketed a great number of problems that they were unable to face. A group of businessmen from Bolton, who were keen to try out the idea of a shopping precinct in their own town, were given a guided tour. One is reported^{xxi} to have said that the precinct was "like Aberdeen on a flag day". The chair of the retail sector of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce however was reported^{xxii} as saying that "we are getting nothing but praise now", but added enigmatically "in the Upper Precinct it is the stairs that are the trouble – avoid steps".

A ballroom was opened in the new precinct in 1960 by the Locarno company. The comments of the Bolton traders were underlined by the Coventry Evening Telegraph, which remarked^{xxiii} "this will bring life back to the city centre". Where had all the life gone?

The citizens launched their own inadvertant resistance identity, often unconsciously, by changing many of Gibson's ideas to suit their own aims. Barriers erected to divert pedestrians through more aesthetic routes in the Shopping Centre were ignored as they took a more logical "short cut", and these were eventually removed. The large lawned square that was said to be the showpiece of the city became the favourite place for citizens to relax and eat their lunches, no matter how many "keep off the grass" signs the Council could erect^{xxiv}.

By the late 1950s, funds ran dry, and central government was unwilling to help, Lord Reith's comments of 1941 notwithstanding. Rents were increased, and shops began to abandon the precinct^{xxv}. Those that remained fared little better. The owner of Orme Brothers remarked that "things were grim". An unnamed shopkeeper whose shop had closed commented that trade was "hopeless from Monday to Thursday and fair on Friday and Saturday". Another observed that since moving to the precinct "more trade has been done but not enough to justify the additional expense"^{xxvi}. On 30 October 1968 there were 40 shops unoccupied.

When the writer visited the centre in July 2006, many of the shops in the upper level were empty.



Illustration 4 - empty shops on the Upper Level of the Shopping Centre - Photograph by Eric Hall July 2006

This is despite the installation of a ramp and an escalator to overcome the problem of the stairs. So much for Gibson's idea of "the vista presented by the cathedral spire"^{xxvii}.



Illustration 4 - left: artist's impression of the vista as planned - from "The Future Coventry". Right: - the vista today - masked by trees, an overbridge, shop canopies, escalators and a ramp - Photograph by Eric Hall July 2006

In 1963, with the feature multi-level department store empty for over a year, the Corporation applied for planning permission to turn it into offices, but this was refused.

Meanwhile, by 1958 and despite the intervention of another world war, the reconstruction of Ieper was practically complete. It had been the aim of the city to make it a "centre of pilgrimage". People

flocked in their millions to see where their sons and husbands (and later, their fathers and grandfathers) had died. And whether it was to Tyne Cot^{xxviii} or to Langemarck^{xxix} to which they went first, they all came to Ieper. Many people are astonished to learn that there is almost nothing in the centre that dates before 1921^{xxx}. Despite the hordes of tourists, the quiet reverential atmosphere and the magnificence of the town square belie the fact that it is in certain places as modern as Coventry's Shopping Centre.

Paradoxes

As well as the Broadgate Shopping Centre and the Cloth Hall, it is interesting to consider two other buildings that symbolise the identity of the cities.

Coventry's old cathedral was all but destroyed in the bombing. A decision was taken the very next morning to rebuild it, "not (as) an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world"<Coventry Cathedral website 25/08/06>^{xxxi}, restoring some legitimacy to the medieval identity of the city and promoting a resistance identity that the cathedral had overcome the worst of man's inhumanity. Nevertheless, the plans of the church's architect Gilbert Scott (architect of the 20th century gothic Liverpool Cathedral and of the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament) were rejected as not being in keeping with the project identity of the modern city, and the planners commissioned a new cathedral of modern design. This was met with "outrage", "horror", "abuse" and "insult"^{xxxii} <recollections of Howard and Spence, quoted in Longmate p255> by many who could not understand the will of the council to denounce the legitimising and resistance identity that the rebuilt cathedral could give to the city.

It was however decided to retain the remains of the original cathedral as a centre of peace and reconciliation. The rubble was cleared away and the ruins rendered safe. The roof had collapsed, and two charred beams had formed the shape of a cross on the altar. This cross was retained in the position in which the beams had fallen, and became the focal point of the ruins. The city reverted to a legitimising and resistance identity in the fashion in which it recalled its suffering.

In Ieper, a similar paradox had already unfolded. After the war, the city had promoted itself as a centre of pilgrimage, and the citizens decided that there should be a pivotal point at which pilgrims should congregate to remember the dead.

The fortifications of Vauban included a wall that completely encircled the town, but the gate that guarded the city on the Menin Road had been lost many years earlier. The British government engaged the architect Sir Richard Blomfield to design a gate in the walls at the Menin Road, and use it to record the names of the tens of thousands of British and Empire soldiers who have no known grave. No matter that it was totally inadequate for the task^{xxxiii}, it quickly became the centre of pilgrimage for visitors, and members of the local fire brigade each night blow the "Last Post" on bugles in

commemoration of the missing. The irony of the project identity of the modern Menin Gate as a pivotal point in establishing a legitimising and resistance identity of the reconstruction of the city and how it remembered the suffering of the defenders was completely lost on the inhabitants.

Conclusion

The city of Ieper remains as it always did – a centre of tourism. Just as many come to admire the historic architecture as did prior to 1914, yet millions more come to make their pilgrimage to the battlefields. They visit the Cloth Hall not merely for its architectural magnificence, but as a symbol of the phoenix rising from the ashes, and they visit the Menin Gate to pay homage to the missing. Ieper's attempt to legitimise its identity as a medieval city, its attempt to create an identity of resistance to the all-conquering German army, and the British-inspired construction of the Menin Gate, all of this has succeeded by accident in creating a project identity for the city as a symbol of the suffering of the ordinary man, who rushed with pride to the colours in 1914, and died a miserable and often unrecorded death in a hail of bullets, a cloud of chlorine, or drowned in a morass, or disappeared in a shell burst, and who found no grave in Tyne Cot or Langemarck.

It was clear by the late 1950s that Coventry's project identity of the "brave new world" had failed. Faced with criticism and derision, their ideas undermined and shopkeepers voting with their feet, the city lost its nerve and subsequent projects were quietly shelved.



Illustration 5 - "The City is unfinished" - "an incoherent unplanned mess" "the architectural chaos of the pre-blitz Coventry must not be repeated" – Photograph by Eric Hall July 2006

The city is unfinished, and Gibson's criticism of the Coventry of 1939 as an "incoherent unplanned mess" and his remark that "the architectural chaos of the pre-blitz Broadgate must not be repeated"^{xxxiv} are just as valid today.

The attempts by the Council to legitimise their project identity by adopting the ruins of the old cathedral may have worked, yet the idea to repeat this in the Shopping Centre was doomed to fail.

60 years on, the planners are still trying to right the errors of the Gibson Plan. In 1999 the Council published a "Final Report"^{xxxv}, a new project identity for "an urban design strategy for the city centre". This document is prefaced by a quote "A City is not simply an amalgamation of buildings, roads and open spaces – it is also people and their activities".

This is a damning indictment of Gibson, who tried to manipulate the shoppers around his masterpiece.



*Illustration 6 - Feature multi-level department store
- now the Council offices. Photograph Eric Hall July
2006*

The Locarno ballroom that would “bring life back to the city centre” is now the city library. And the feature multi-level department store? Planning permission for office use was eventually granted, and this is now the offices for the city council – with access from the upper level of the shopping precinct.

Those who made the bed are well and truly lying in it.

- i MacDonald L (1997) *1915 – The Death of Innocence* ISBN 0-14-025900-7 London, Penguin quotes at length the unpublished memoirs and diaries of Aimé van Nieuwenhove (secretary of the Provisional Committee of the city of Ieper under British occupation) and Father Camille Delaere, curé of the Church of St. Jacques, who remained in city throughout the bombardment
- ii Longmate N (1976) *Air Raid – The Bombing of Coventry* ISBN 0-09-127900-3 London, Hutchinson & Co likewise quotes many personal and unpublished memoirs recounting in great detail the destruction of the city, including by coincidence those of Lucy Moseley, daughter of the incumbent mayor, and Provost R T Howard of Coventry Cathedral.
- iii A Flight-Sergeant Handorf, a bomber pilot who participated in the raid, quotes his briefing from a senior officer as including “(Coventry) is one of the chief armament centres of the enemy air force and has also factories which are important for the production of motor vehicles and armoured cars. Quite a collection of factories for engines, engine parts and motor cycles are also situated there”. Henze CGP (undated) “Experiences of the Crew of a Junkers 88 in Operations Against England” in *War Books of German Youth* vol 84 – translated by Dean EH, Coventry Technical College 1945. There can be no doubt as to the truth of the senior officer's statements.
- iv 1,638 in favour, yet 4,566 against
- v The writer discovered, in Coventry City Library, an undated press cutting from the “News Chronicle” but which appears to the writer to be from approximately 1931, which reported Councillor Brandish as stating “... and be sure of this – there are relics in Coventry that will always be guarded and kept. We have plenty of these and we will never let them go. There is not a man on the Council who does not recognise their beauty and historic value and who would not safeguard them”
- vi Midland Daily Telegraph, January 1936. See appendix A
- vii Midland Daily Telegraph *ibid.* See appendix A
- viii See appendix B
- ix Among many comments are those of Winston Churchill, who is reported as saying to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that ““I should like us to acquire the whole of the ruins of Ypres...A more sacred place for the British race does not exist in the whole world.”
http://www.forbes.com/fyi/2000/1113/WesternFront9-27b_print.html accessed 22 August 2006
- x Reith JCW (1949) *Into the Wind* London, Hodder and Stoughton
- xi See appendix F
- xii Midland Daily Telegraph 23 January 1941.
- xiii Dated 3 April 1946 and submitted under Section 1 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1944
- xiv “The streets were narrow and in many cases tortuous” “in general, the area (to be covered by redevelopment) is that of the medieval city” ... “(road traffic) congestion particularly in the immediate City centre – is serious” “it is proposed to group various various civic buildings east and south-east of the present Council House” (i.e. On the site of much of the medieval city plan)
- xv Humberstone Tl (1947) *Coventry of the Future* Coventry Parbury Bros criticises the expense and the wanton demolition of historic buildings and concludes by asking “Why attempt to out-Goering Goering?”.
- xvi Reported in the Coventry Evening Telegraph 4 May 1953
- xvii Coventry Evening Telegraph 19 March 1958
- xviii Smithfold Street was closed in 1947 to permit the demolition of a damaged building. It never reopened and the Coventry Evening Telegraph of 2 February 1948 lamented that this “caused critical comment that there was no indication that this was likely to be permanent”. Its continued closure was reported in the edition of 8 February 1956 as being “continually opposed by market traders as a reversal of the original plan”. They had taken their case to the Minister of Housing and Local Government who “told city traders that their objections do not justify interfering with (the city's revised) plan”. The same newspaper reported on 8 February 1964 that the City Council's “no-traffic plan for ... Market Street, strongly opposed by local traders, is a reversal of the original plans”
- xix The Coventry Evening Telegraph reported on 26 January 1952 that it was “not certain whether the tenants for whom (the multi-storey department store) was constructed will occupy it”.
- xx At the public enquiry into the redevelopment of the city in June and July 1946 the Town Clerk responded to the complaints of citizens who had had their undamaged property sequestered by saying that “it was not advantageous to the Corporation to leave 'freeholds standing in a sea of leaseholds” (speech by E H Ford, City Surveyor, to the Public Works, Roads and Transport Congress, 24 July 1947) whereas the Coventry Evening Telegraph of 29 April 1949 records council minutes of the period as recording that it is “desirable for the Corporation to acquire all outstanding interests in the area because the value is likely to appreciate in consequence of the redevelopment of neighbouring land”.
- xxi Coventry Evening Telegraph 1 February 1962.
- xxii Coventry Evening Telegraph 1 February 1962.
- xxiii 30 July 1960
- xxiv In the 1990s, the Broadgate Square, considered by the Council to be essential to the aesthetic design of the city (it is mentioned in all of the plans from 1939, 1941 and 1946) and considered by many citizens to be the only thing that the planners got right (a poll was conducted on <http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk> and recounted to the writer by the site's webmaster in July 2006) was built over with another shopping precinct.
- xxv Hepworths abandoned their first-floor premises in September 1953, the Home and Fashion Store abandoned the feature multi-storey department store in December 1959 and their successors followed in August 1962. Littlewoods

and the Coventry Vacuum Services withdrew in January 1963. It is clear that many other shops changed hands during this period.

xxvi Coventry Evening Telegraph 19 January 1963

xxvii "The Future Coventry" published by the Coventry City Council – date unknown but all indications are that it dates from almost immediately after the cessation of hostilities in 1945. See appendix E for an artist's impression.

xxviii The principal British cemetery in the Ieper salient

xxix The principal German cemetery in the Ieper salient

xxx The writer worked in the tourist industry for a number of years and has taken parties of tourists around the city, and can recount this from his own personal experience.

xxxi <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/History.html> – accessed 25 August 2006. Furthermore, the plan produced by Gibson in the aftermath of the bombing and referred to above clearly shows the destroyed cathedral as being rebuilt (see appendix C), makes several references to its future, as well as referring to the fact that "a large area to the north of the Cathedral has been planned as a park" - the area which subsequently became the site of the new cathedral.

xxxii Provost Howard is quoted in Longmate *ibid* as remembering comments such as "concrete monstrosity", a "horror", an "aesthetic outrage", a "super-cinema". He is reported in the "Sphere" magazine 10 October 1953 p59 as admitting that "it may not at first look like a cathedral". Spence is quoted in Longmate as having received hundreds of "abusive or downright insulting" letters. In 1967, an engineering magazine (quoted in Longmate *ibid* but unnamed) voted the new cathedral the "ugliest building in the Midlands ... and the sixth ugliest in the country".

xxxiii The walls designed by Blomfield were totally inadequate to record the names of all of the soldiers who were posted missing, and overflow panels were provided at the huge Tyne Cot cemetery on the outskirts of Passendale. In fact, 54,896 names are recorded at the Menin Gate, and 34,984 names are recorded at Tyne Cot cemetery

xxxiv Both quotes from Gibson's report of 1941

xxxv www.coventry.gov.uk/ccm/cms-service/download/asset/?asset_id=13755038 - prepared by the City Council in 1999 - accessed 22 August 2006