

SELF IMAGE AND SELF HARM

The Gorbals and Glasgow

By Johnny Rodger

There have been several so-called 'beginnings' or 'origins' in the Gorbals area of Glasgow. This is of interest because the area is so vital to the city's image both abroad and to itself. This piece seeks to examine what exactly is meant by 'beginning' here in an urban context, why 'beginning' in this zone of the city is so important, and what was or could be the role played in these 'beginnings' by architecture and works of art.

For what or for whom is there a 'new beginning' here? And what sort of change to an area of a city would constitute a 'new beginning', is it simply a question of the scale of the changes taking place? Does a new beginning necessarily entail a new urban form, like a new layout of streets, is it a new type of building, or building material, is it the introduction of new industries, new populations or new social classes, or an inevitably new relation between social classes? Will the 'new beginning' entail forgetting the past – will it be a planned urban development from a *tabula rasa*, or will it be an organic-type new development with new growth added to features which were already there on the ground?

These are all questions which come into play when we examine the past, present and future of the Gorbals. It seems, in fact, that the many different types of 'beginnings' of which only a few are named above, are all inextricably connected and all bring their own influence to bear. In effect there is no one beginning, but a pattern of relationships, personal, social, historical, economic, technological, political and so on, which are always interacting.

When we are dealing with the Gorbals however, it soon becomes apparent that the question of history, origin or beginnings is never one that can be left to be answered simply by the dry calculations of a social scientist or a historian. For somehow, in the context of the city of Glasgow, the area and discussion thereof always seems to carry an emblematic weight of *Glaswegianness*, which brings with it a heavy emotional and symbolic baggage. On the face of it this may seem strange: the Gorbals is neither the oldest part of Glasgow nor is it sited within the historic centre of the city. It is arguably not the poorest nor most blighted part of the city, yet its vicissitudes as a *quartier* are in some way very dear to the hearts of the city's population at large. Why is this? Unfortunately we do not have space to address this question fully here, but some few pointers by way of comparison with zones or *quartiers* that punch above their weight, as it were, in the self-image of other

European cities will be sketched out below. In the meanwhile however, we ought to note here, at *our beginning*, that when it comes to history, origin and beginnings *and* the Gorbals, the discussion will always seem to be somehow pervaded by nostalgia and sentimentality. Should the artist or architect involved in projects in the Gorbals be wary of this all-pervasive atmosphere of nostalgia? Or have they indeed already over-indulged the sentimentality which always comes with discussion of the Gorbals in certain contexts? Perhaps today's nostalgia is necessarily tomorrow's blight, and thus it is because of the over-indulgence – or at least the invocation – of nostalgia that new beginnings have always been necessary. Is nostalgia to be avoided at all costs then? – or would such an operation only entail another form of nostalgia in itself?



At any rate, some promotion material for the latest regeneration of part of the Gorbals – the Crown Street Initiative, and Queen Elizabeth Square, masterplanned respectively by CZWG architects of London and Hypostyle of Glasgow – cites the development as being the 'third new beginning in 100 years' in the Gorbals. Clearly the person who writes this publicity has in mind a definite idea of the types of change which may be described as a 'beginning'. Out of all the day-to-day changes in the civic and urban fabric over a century-long period, ranging from the most banal and personal to the most momentous and public, only three specific projects are qualified to be described as 'new beginnings'. Of course everyone understands that in order to analyse any phenomenon one has to start by making classifications and distinctions, otherwise, to invert the popular saying, one can't see the forest for the trees. Just so then, we'll take a leaf from that promo-writer's book and examine here just three simple but, we consider, telling beginnings from the complex and multifarious story of the Gorbals in all its manifestations. What, after all, could be more straightforward than beginning with one, two, three?

The first example is a personal one, recounting this author's observations and experiences as he attended one of the most impressive and decisive public events to take place in the Gorbals in recent years. The second will attempt to site the area in a typology of a wider European urban context, and the third is an examination of the contrasting backgrounds, aims and achievements of two of the 20th century 'new beginnings' cited in the promo. Hopefully by looking at these diverse and disparate aspects of beginning we can draw some lessons which may help us address some of those questions set out at the start of this piece.



In the first, personally observed example a beginning was in an end. It concerns a decisive urban event, namely the 1993 'blow down' of the Queen Elizabeth Square twin blocks of high-rise flats designed (1962-65) by Basil Spence. For the majority of the mass spectatorship which turned out to observe it, this event possibly gave no intimation of 'beginnings' at all. On the face of it the thousands of people – from all over Glasgow – turned out simply to witness an act of destruction on such a large scale as rarely seen in peacetime. Was this urban planning as a sudden death spectator sport? The day started out pleasantly enough, it was sunny, warm and the skies were clear. The spectators gathered – and indeed were encouraged to gather – on the vast wasteland to the west of the towering concrete blocks of Queen Elizabeth Square. This ground had formerly been the site of the low-rise Hutchison E-Blocks, another part of the same Gorbals replanning which had been deemed to fail by the 1980s (they were known locally as 'the dampies') and were cleared in 1987. The ground had lain empty all this time, but had recently been flattened and levelled so that the building of the 'New Gorbals' with the Crown Street Initiative could begin. As many if not most people there came from other parts of Glasgow, attracted by publicity for the event, they would more than likely have been unaware that this flattened land and the blowing of the towers were part of a new masterplan to rebuild. Indeed I myself met many friends, totally by chance, from all corners of the city, who had turned up simply to see the show. It was a regular little family day out, a good-humoured and leisurely Sunday afternoon, and as the day wore on the blowing of the towers seemed more and more just to be a pretext for a great social event. A Glasgow radio station had set up an Outside Broadcasting Unit, and some pop DJ was enthusiastically uttering banalities between playing some of the latest tunes.

I should point out here that few of the friends and acquaintances I met had anything to do with the worlds of architecture, housing, committed politics or the City Council. The atmosphere was overwhelmingly light, and people, in general, seemed not to have turned up with any agenda (although perhaps for some it was already too late for that) but just to be entertained.

This atmosphere gradually began to change however, as the afternoon wore on and delay after delay was announced to the big event. The DJ's voice also became irritating as he attempted to mobilise the crowd with his pop-music version of some sort of populist anti-high-rise agenda. As a result, the good-humoured and leisurely atmosphere was also undermined, not particularly because people were pro-high-rise (although no doubt some were) but because it was all simply too naff: kicking a housing-type when it was on its way down as it were. The mood of the crowd finally set however, when an announcement was made that at last everything



was ready. Needless to say this announcement was made by the indefatigable DJ. He then went on to say that he was going to lead a count-down – Apollo launch style, if you like – and he expected us all to join in. Never was a mood so misjudged. As he shouted out the numbers – in obligatory reverse order – the crowd stood silent and grim. There was rather a collective holding of breath, and frog in the throat. My personal feeling is that what suddenly struck home was something like the immensity of waste in this act of destruction, that in one moment a whole history, a concrete embodiment of years of people's lives, their endeavours, their hopes, their failures, their joy, their sadness, even their deaths, would be wilfully annihilated. Among all these people facing in one direction the DJ shouted on, ill judged, wrong, pathetic, a lone human voice. The blast came. A series of dull thumps and the building crumpled but did not quite fall completely to the ground. People stood on for a short while, then turned and started to walk away back over the wasteland.

Shifting whirlwinds of dust started to blow all around the area, obscuring the sun, and people started to cough as they walked off in small groups. Not much was said in the crowds, and it was only later that we were told that there may have been asbestos in those dust clouds, and that one woman spectator had been killed by the blast. Somehow we felt as we walked away in a gloomy silence that our hearts had just been exiled from something – what was

it? Were we all refugees from 'new beginnings'?

Perhaps the fact that so many people turned up to watch that event is in some way indicative of how prominently the Gorbals as an area looms in the self-image of the city of Glasgow. Most may even have come simply for entertainment value, but would such numbers have attended a similar event in Easterhouse or Castlemilk, in Partick or Maryhill? For the Gorbals is held to exemplify many of the qualities supposed as dearest, because most authentic, to the notion of Glasgow as a city with a rough, tough industrial past – namely poverty, violence, and as one recently published history' says 'all that was worst in housing conditions' in terms of sanitation, overcrowding and building standards. There are nonetheless some paradoxes in this idea of the Gorbals as a touchstone for Glaswegian authenticity. The Gorbals may be on one bank of the Clyde – the river that proverbially 'made Glasgow' – but as mentioned above, it is the wrong one, ie. it is on the opposite side from the historic centre of the city of Glasgow. In fact the Gorbals – known as a substantial settlement since the 14th century at the south end of the bridge furthest downstream on the Clyde (thus sometimes it was known as Brigend) – was not fully amalgamated with Glasgow City until the 1840s. The origin of the name, probably Gaelic, could be *Gort a'Bhaile* lit. famine of the town, or, *Garadh Bhaile* lit. yard or garden or boundary of the town.

It may seem then a paradox that such a late addition to the city should play so central a role in its identity. It is true of



course, to note that Glasgow is largely a 19th century city anyway in terms of not only its built form, but in the origins of the growth of its population, and the outlying districts incorporated within its boundaries. So perhaps it is no great surprise to find a 19th century addition to the city playing such a prominent role in its image. But there is whatsmore, in the wider European context, a recognisable (and paradoxical in the same sense) type of settlement to which the Gorbals may be said to belong. This sort of settlement, found not just outside the city walls but on the other bank of the river, was traditionally the site where those traders and populations considered too dirty or unpleasant for a place within the walls would settle. Thus the blacksmiths, cattle dealers, tanners, manure collectors, and also leper colonies (such as St Ninian's leper hospital instituted in the Gorbals in 1350) would be found here; and thus it is that the area would become known for its rough and ready, down-to-earth characteristics.

Two continental examples of this type of settlement which spring to mind are both on the Italian peninsula. These zones are associated with the authenticity and origins of their city yet their very names make manifest (like those putative Gaelic originals for the Gorbals) their anomalous physical location. In Rome, the pawky cynicism of the typical Roman sub-proletariat was traditionally and notoriously to be sought out in the *osterie* of Trastevere (lit. Trans-tiber, or, across the river Tiber) on the other bank of the river from the centre of the city. Further north, in Florence, working class restaurants are said to give you a flavour of authentic home cooking in the narrow winding medieval lanes of the Oltrarno (lit. Ultra Arno, or beyond the river Arno) zone which lies on the other bank of the river from the *amplae et rectae* renaissance streets of central Florence.

Both these Italian city *quartiers* did undergo some urban reconfiguration during the late 19th century – a widening of principal streets, demolishing of poor quality structures, and some rebuilding – but neither of them saw the wholesale replanning and building seen in the Gorbals at that time. And thankfully neither of them underwent the complete and utter transformations of their urban form as was seen in the post-war modernist and recent post-modernist replannings of the Gorbals. For if the sentimentality for the still largely medieval environment of the two Italian city zones seems a largely harmless or inconsequential parochial habit, then in the Gorbals it is not because the nostalgia hankers after an ideal which is at several removes from any real existing material environment that makes it seem at times a more active, or

even sinister or aggressive phenomenon? For is not each wave of destruction and rebuilding – or 'new beginning' – precisely an attempt to refine a lost idyll, such that one becomes locked into a cycle of 'nostalgia-new beginning/destruction-rebuilding'?

One can hardly blame the modernist planners of the mid-20th century for taking drastic action to provide the dwellers in Glasgow's Gorbals with modern standards of hygiene, light, air and space. In the 1950s after all, in the dilapidated,



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sub-divided Victorian housing of the Hutchesontown area of the Gorbals, 87% of the flats were of only one or two rooms, only 3% had a bath, and fewer than a quarter had their own WC. These are the sort of statistics which, although similar to those in some other districts across the city, gained the Gorbals its notorious place in history and its legendary status. Surely only an unimaginative fool could have nostalgia for the sort of grim, desperate poverty they represent. Yet why was the visionary, experimental urban design *à la Corbusier*, with free

standing high-rise blocks surrounded by open flowing parks, and with roads only for speeding traffic, seen as the only possible solution for such a community? One answer is that the post-modern rediscovery of the enlarged, sanitised and renovated tenement as an ideal mode of city living would not



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happen until the 70s in Glasgow, and was perhaps an unaffordable luxury here given the scale of the 50s housing crisis. At any rate the tenements were bulldozed and the Gorbals grid pattern of broad streets (hardly representative of Le Corbusier's criticism of the inefficiency of old city streets as the 'pack-donkey's way') was broken up as the rehoused population was expected to project themselves into a futuristic lifestyle of a fast, smooth, efficient rationality as constructed by the Enlightenment dream of modernism. The reality however was often at

some variance from the vision, as many of the cheap, poorly designed and quickly built high-rise towers were completed in 'package deals' with construction companies – Crudens and Bovis playing a particularly prominent part in some areas of the Gorbals.

But if the modernist destruction and rebuilding of the Gorbals which started in the 50s represents thus in some ways an albeit poorly worked out nostalgia for the future, then with the failure of that vision – and the demolition in the 80s of the Hutcheson E-Blocks and in 90s of Queen Elizabeth Square – where could new developers turn but to the past? Just so Glasgow, which once, in the 60s, had the largest high-rise building programme of any city in Europe,

now in the early 2000s has the largest high-rise demolition programme. And accordingly too, when in the 90s, after demolition, the Crown Street and Queen Elizabeth Square replanning took place, much of the original 19th century street pattern was reinstated (Cumberland St., Crown St., etc., which had disappeared 30 years previously) and housing subsequently was built on them largely in pastiche tenement style with colouring, massing and proportion to represent the long destroyed 19th and early 20th century originals. It is important too to note that we say 'colouring' here, and not 'material', for these buildings lining the 'broad boulevards' of the 'New Gorbals' are neither built from the same stone, nor with the same construction methods as their models, and the interiors are of entirely contemporary design: spacious, light and with up-to-date specifications. The facades and the urban environment that is to say, are consciously fake, an attempt to reproduce something of the past.

The question here must be whether through these reproductions the architects and designers are aiming at, or in effect able to cater for, anything other than nostalgia? Can they, or do they expect the inhabitants to instantly refind some of the social and community values allegedly lost in the 50s and 60s redevelopment simply by faking the urban form? What is noticeably different in this environment however is the prominent role played by original artworks. Are the artworks (the programme is billed as one of the UK's largest programmes of Percent for Art) supposed to interact with the architecture and the urban environment to counter this overwhelming atmosphere of nostalgia? In what way could the artworks do this? – By encouraging people to commune through spectating, meditating and appreciating? Surely such a frightful prescription would only expose the 'nostalgia trip' as in reality a version of the Situationist nightmare of the Society of Spectacle. And indeed some political commentators claim that the real motivation behind the destruction of working class zones in Glasgow in the 20th century was as part of a class war to destroy the cohesiveness of these societies and the perceived danger they represented to the Establishment by removing the infrastructure of their political activism and mobilisation, i.e. the crosses, the public houses, the streets, the public squares and so on.



even go to the toilet in private. The density of the Gorbals was over 500 people per acre whereas in typical suburban developments today it is around 30 ppa. In 1930s Gorbals there were over 130 public houses where people, mainly men, gathered together. There is only a handful now, and while the latest Crown Street development notably destroyed at least two more public houses, it is in fact the most striking anomaly that not a single new one has been built among the tenements in the reinstated street pattern. What can this public art be then, standing in the streets comparatively empty of population, but a substitute for real political life, between the fake facades of a pastiche *polis*?



But even if one were to reject such an analysis (as many if not most people probably would) as too politically extreme and fanciful, or as outdated according to the way we live now, the question still remains whether it is possible or desirable in the New Gorbals with its new and large homeowning middle class sector, with mass car ownership, with internet, DVD and home entertainment in spacious apartments, to have a cohesive 'local' community at all? Are communities as such not more mobile, or simply organised through other media now – eg. virtual and electronic. In that case what is the role of stationary public art? Is it relevant to real social interaction or does it only provide busy backdrops for the vacant posturing of the architectural and urban environment?



The number of artists involved in the programme in the Gorbals has ensured a range and mixed quality of work, but nonetheless a few examples of prominent and finely executed work can illustrate the type of role which art has played in conjunction with this urban environment. One



of the oldest buildings in the area, the six-floor, iron-framed Twomax Mill, built 1816-21 as a cotton mill and infamous for industrial disputes, was recently converted to offices and studios. Artist Adrian Russell Lamb designed a kinetic sculpture which is a representation of billowing smoke and sits on top of the tall disused industrial chimney of the mill, and also acts as a weathervane.



On the principal public but – alas! – publess street of the new development, Crown Street, Ken Currie designed four large stained-glass windows which run along the top level of a Page and Park tenement (built 1999). The windows depict faces of indeterminate sex and age (although close scrutiny is rewarded here) in a sombre, expressionistic style. These are powerful, moving images, as one would expect from this artist, but nonetheless they are recognisably in a tradition of representation of the poor Gorbals urchin, familiar to Glaswegians as seen most famously in the work of the photographer Oscar Reizler and the painter Joan Eardley.

The final example is an installation which has lately been added to the gable wall of a red sandstone tenement (built 1903) at the corner of Waddell Street and Ballater Street. This building was described – most erroneously – in the media coverage of the unveiling of the work as the ‘last surviving tenement block in the Gorbals’.² (This, of course, indulges the Gorbals myth as discussed above, but it is not the only one of the many tenements ‘surviving’ from the pre-modernist era to be hailed in such terms of uniqueness, authenticity and originality – for example the red sandstone British Linen Bank in Gorbals Street, an art nouveau tenement of 1900 by James Salmon, has also been singled out several times as the ‘last’ and as such has featured in a number of artworks and installations recently.) At any rate the installation here (already part obscured by the steel frame of a new building going up next door) consists of the exhortation ‘Keep true to the dreams of thy youth’ posted in neon lighting as a tribute to the 1930s world champion boxer Benny Lynch who had an upbringing of legendary poverty in the Gorbals. The work is by Ross Birrell, and is a quotation from the German Romantic poet, Schiller.

These examples speak for themselves – some louder than others. But the most worrying thing for this writer is that only the anonymous artist who pressed the button for the ‘blow down’ of Queen Elizabeth Square on that sunny day in 1993 was really able to effect a release (for him and evidently for thousands of fellow spectators) from the insidious parrotings of nostalgia (in its most obvious form that day, of a pop DJ). But release came at the cost of an apocalyptic

destruction. So is ‘the horror’ the only alternative to ‘the nostalgia’ for the Gorbals in its vital role in the self-image of Glasgow? And is there then no escape here; is this to be an endless cycle of destruction/rebuilding?

Footnotes

- ¹ Smith, Ronald, *The Gorbals*, 1999 Glasgow.
- ² See *Daily Record* and *The Herald*, of 22 November 2005.

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