

Civic Centre fiasco — special report

LIVERPOOL has spent nearly £3 million on a building which will never be built. That's the amount wasted on the Civic Centre project.

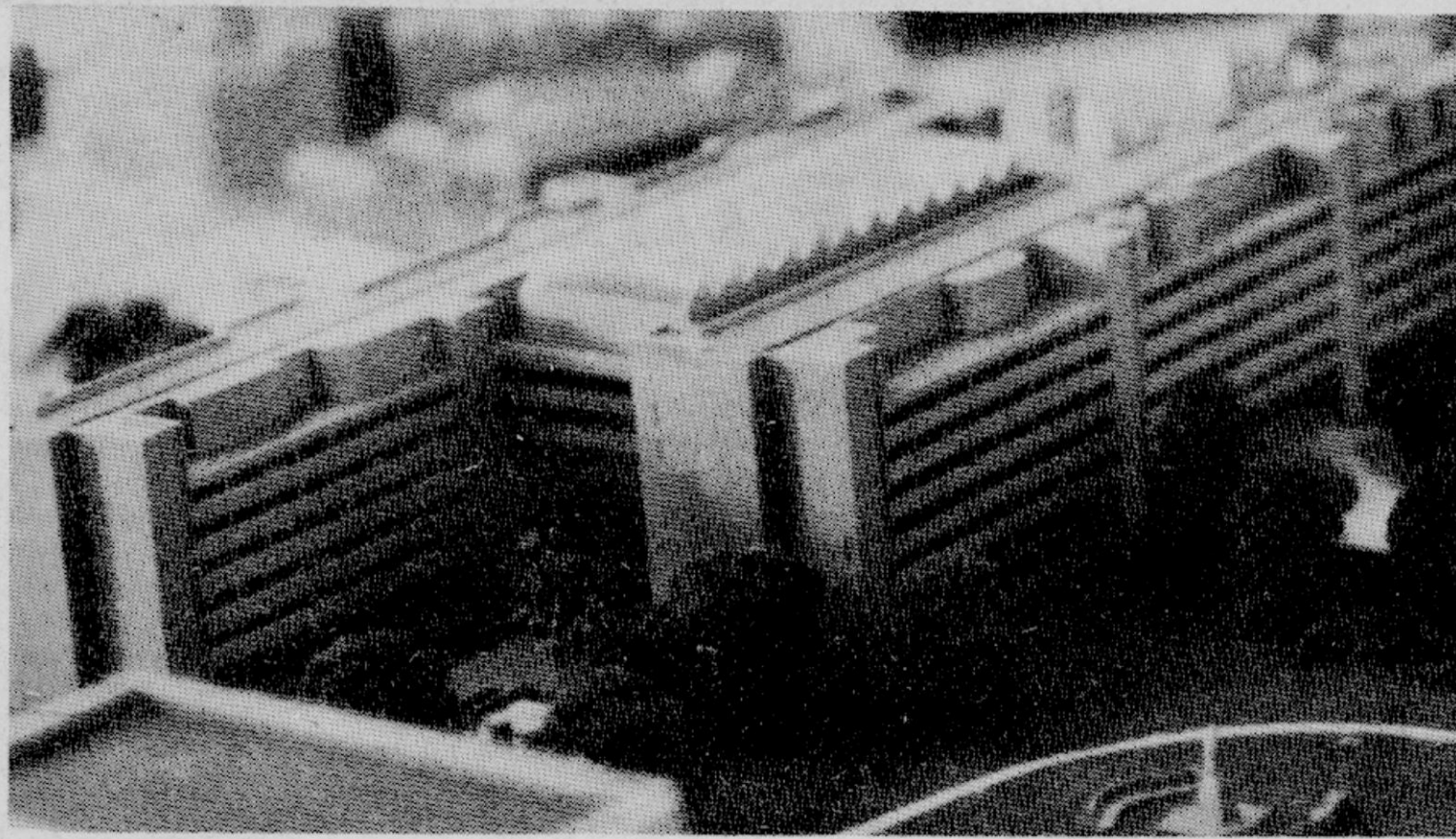
It's easy to blame the architect for his monstrous design. It's easy to blame the officials for not being sure of planning permission long before the builders were ready to start.

But the story of the rise and fall of the £17 million Civic Centre is not just a record of individual mistakes. It is far more than that.

It shows where power lies in this society, and how decisions are made.

It shows the role of influential politicians who, like ancient Egyptian emperors, have grandiose plans for reshaping cities... without consulting the people who have to live there.

And above all it shows the influence of big business, like the construction industry, urging politicians to press on with their wild schemes for motorways, airports, offices and municipal buildings like the Civic Centre.



Fall of a fortress

LIVERPOOL is not going to have a Civic Centre — or at least, not the mammoth glass and concrete fortress that was planned.

Thankfully, the Government have turned down the scheme. Thankfully they realised that even St George's Hall would be dwarfed by the municipal block planned for the adjoining 13-acre site.

The Government inspector who held the public inquiry agreed that "the proposed building, because of its alignment, overpowering bulk, scale and severe uncompromising regularity, would be oppressive and tend to overwhelm the elegant assembly of neo-classical buildings in their setting in the conservation area."

In short, he agreed with the Free Press, with individual planners and architects and community groups — everyone who had taken a considered look at the scheme.

It would be pleasant to report that his victory shows how democratic and open British Government is, and how small groups can challenge the power of politicians and economic interests. It would be pleasant, but unfortunately it shows no such thing.

The £17 million scheme was turned down, not for economic or social reasons, but for architectural reasons. Luckily for the objectors, the Corporation and politicians chose an architect who saw "the architectural tradition of Liverpool as big, bold buildings, and who had "a strong impression that Liverpool has a sense of doing things big and grand." This was the Corporation's downfall.

Also, the timing of the scheme was nothing short of ridiculous. The inspector pointed out it was nonsensical to start a huge Corporation office block just when the whole pattern of local government was being changed.

THE END OF SEFTON'S DREAM



POLITICIANS

TOO OFTEN projects like the Civic Centre are seen as "planners' dreams". More often than not they are the fantasies of politicians.

The Civic Centre was first suggested by Graeme Shankland, the planner who was given the task of replanning the city centre. But it was enthusiastically taken up by Ald Bill Sefton, leader of the Labour party in Liverpool.

Sefton is a replica of so many other Labour leaders. He started off in the 1930s with Trotskyist leanings, and even today likes to describe himself to journalists as a Marxist.

If he is, then he's a superb actor. All his actions and decisions are typical of Labour politicians who decide to make the present system prosper rather than implement their early socialist ideas.

He crawled up the Labour party in Liverpool by his sharp, witty and radical attacks on the right-wing Labour leader Jack Braddock.

But when he took Braddock's place he merely walked in his footsteps. His view now is that if you're a socialist you don't join the Labour party — you get out onto the streets and organise. This may be sound advice, but Labour leaders like Sefton have helped to make it necessary.

Sefton has had one over-riding ambition since he first achieved power. He wanted to rebuild the city centre, to tear down the old and replace it with the new. And to some extent he's already achieved it.

He is now ready to knock down the Albert Dock and give it to a developer. The site is too valuable to be used for anything but offices, he says. He has said he would gladly demolish Speke

Hall, Liverpool's oldest building, if it stood in the way of the airport runway extension.

The Civic Centre would be the largest, the most expensive and also the most prestigious part of Sefton's new city centre. It would be a massive monument to Labour's achievements.

Throughout, Sefton has said the plan wasn't grandiose, and justified it by pointing to the overcrowding in Corporation offices. At present the Corporation is housed in about 40 buildings and half the staff work in offices which are more than 60 years old.

This is a real problem, but one mammoth office block isn't the answer, especially when informed opinion is pointing out the need for the Corporation to decentralise as the population is constantly shifting away from the inner areas.

Working conditions may be poor but what about the one-third of the people in Liverpool who have only sub-standard...often slum-like homes?

As Jim Hunter, an architect and chairman of the Merseyside Environment Group said at the inquiry, "At least Corporation employees are able to walk out at 4.45 p.m."

Sefton has always claimed that the priority he was giving to the Civic Centre wouldn't mean other projects would suffer. Well, they have suffered. Money hasn't been found (as he promised it would).

Although the youth services in the city are on the point of breaking down,

Labour have given them only another £100,000.

Expansion plans in fields such as further education, libraries and the number of teachers have been cut back.

And the leadership have deliberately delayed over their original plans to introduce a direct works department.

One question stands out. Why was Sefton able to force his plans through? Part of the answer is that few people, even councillors, knew the real cost of the scheme, how much money had already been spent on it and how far it had progressed.

Sefton has been careful to surround himself with 'yes-men' who, although they may have been incompetent or unimaginative, at least wouldn't challenge him.

From the start, a special and powerful sub-committee of the Policy and Finance Committee (itself the council's most select committee) was set up to push the project through.

The committee was kept in existence by Tories as well as Labour. Powerful figures like Sefton, MacDonald Steward and Smyth (in his Labour days) sat on this committee and gaily railroaded decisions through.

It was isolated from the public as well as from other councillors. No journalists were allowed to attend, so its decisions were rarely reported.

The Civic Centre was stopped at the twelfth hour, just because the scheme was so vast, the design so oppressive.

But every day other decisions are being taken about the future shape of the city by politicians, business interests and senior officials. No-one hears of these.

The great steamroller

IT'S SCARCELY surprising that there were gasps of astonishment and worried expressions among Corporation officials when they heard the Government had refused planning permission.

For nearly ten years, they had nursed the project along. Although their task is to advise politicians, not once did they suggest the hair-brained scheme should be dropped.

When the Government inspector's report came out they saw for the first time — with horror — the huge commitment the Corporation had made to the project. Its full influence and weight had been used to bludgeon the scheme through. Planning permission, they presumed, was a mere formality.

The result was chaos, and an unbelievable waste of money and resources:

- Fees for the architect and consultants had already cost nearly £1 million.
- Two bridges leading to a non-existent building were costing £227,000.
- £1,489,000 had been spent on buying the vast 13-acre site. Firms and shops had been bulldozed down... needlessly.
- There was now a huge space with nothing to fill it.
- Although the Civic Centre would never rise from the rubble, the politicians and officials had wasted nearly £3 million. This debt would last a generation, land alone costing about £2,000 a week over the next 60 years. Eventually the officials, struck by

CORPORATION OFFICIALS

the calamitous situation, were reduced to making jokes about their prize project.

Everyone was ready to disclaim responsibility, but the truth is, until then, no-one inside the Corporation dared to try and stop the scheme.

Partly this was because of the nature of the Corporation's structure. It is a vast bureaucratic machine, with immense power. And like any major private corporation, it is innately conservative.

You don't get on by having radical ideas. Above all you have to play safe. You're given a project to work on — it could be a motorway or a planning application — and your task is to see it through to its final stages... not to criticise it.

One man who did break the rules was Mr Francis Amos, Liverpool's chief planner. In private he called the Civic Centre "a bloody awful building" and at one stage seemed certain to refuse to appear at the public inquiry.

Eventually he did appear and gave a strictly factual analysis of Liverpool Corporation's need for modern offices.

The objectors later asked for Mr Amos to be recalled and asked what his personal view of the design was. In moderate language he said it was too dominating and maybe a better solution could

be found.

Some time later, the new Merseyside County Council were looking for someone to appoint as their top planner. Mr Amos, a former president of the Royal Town Planning Institute, might reasonably have expected to get the job.

But Alderman Sefton is leader of the County Council. And Amos, whose mildly liberal views have earned him the nickname "Radical Jim", has never been on very friendly terms with Sefton. His misbehaviour over the Civic Centre was probably the last straw.

The job went to Miss Audrey Lees, Liverpool's Director of Environmental Health and Protection, and was hailed as a victory for women's lib. Some Corporation employees think differently. They suggest it was the politicians' revenge.

The only other person to query the project in any fashion was Mr Jim Boddy, the city's chief architect. He wasn't against the scheme, but merely worried about the huge fees which were being paid out before a brick was laid.

He pointed out that while the scheme was being designed, the RIBA reduced their fees from 6% to 5½% on contracts costing more than £1½ million. This would have reduced the Civic Centre architect's fees by thousands

BUSINESS

Power & wealth

THE CORPORATION is probably the largest distributor of wealth on Merseyside.

Every day huge contracts are given out, varying from orders for stationery to contracts for housing estates and schools.

Naturally there is a close link between business interests and the Corporation.

A look at the role of architects and the construction industry in the Civic Centre scheme shows just how incestuous this relationship is.

ARCHITECTS

The wealthiest architectural practices in Liverpool are those with large Corporation contracts.

Naturally they try not to offend the senior officials or politicians, and some even go to the lengths of holding special dinner parties or receptions for them.

So when the Corporation wanted to find support for their Civic Centre scheme they turned to the architects. Support from them was essential.

Now many of these architects intensely disagreed with the design drawn up by Colin St John Wilson, but they could hardly say so. They could hardly chop off the arm which feeds them.

One letter of support was signed by Mr Norman Kingham, chairman of the Merseyside branch of the RIBA. He welcomed the scheme and said it was a shame the social side was not being built.

This letter was taken to mean that he had the support of Merseyside architects generally.

Mr Kingham certainly favoured the project himself. But because his architectural practice does a large amount of work for the Corporation, he would have been in an unenviable position had he wanted to oppose it.

Almost the only architects who voiced their opinions openly were those maverick architects who have few Corporation contracts.

BUILDERS

Another group who supported the project... surprise, surprise... was the Chamber of Commerce.

When Sefton went along to meet the Chamber's Building Group, he was met by just four people.

One of these was Tyson, director of the company most likely to be awarded the contract, and another was Norman Kingham the architect (He is also chairman of the Building Group).

The group sent a letter supporting the scheme, and this was read out at the public inquiry. This was again signed by Kingham, and naturally no-one mentioned how many were present when the scheme was explained.

Another success for Sefton. He had won the business group to his side... or had they really won him to their side a long time ago?

THE PRESS



WOULD YOU pay £¾ million for this building? Sorry — but you already have. For more about this and the role of the Press in the Civic Centre scheme, turn to back page.