



SIR BERNARD ZISSMAN

EVEN years ago, in April 2008, a group met in the offices of Network Rail to discuss the selection of a winning design to rebuild New Street station and what is now called Grand Central.

Sitting around the table eagerly waiting the presentations from six of the world's finest architects were representatives of those bodies who were funding a dream to build a complex which, they hoped would excite, look superb, be welcomed by passengers, visitors and Birmingham citizens and would do the job. Our discussions were against the background of the near-collapse of the banking system across the world and as the black horse of Lloyds gobbled up Bank of Scotland and Halifax - some thought the world had ended!

During my lifetime I have witnessed the depressing image of New Street station and how poorly it welcomed the millions of visitors and commuters to a city which, following the decline of some of its traditional industries, was "pulling itself up by its boot-strings" to build a new economic base. We had built a host of regeneration projects plus developing a superbly professional centre of business excellence.

However, before you could experience the wonders in the box of Birmingham you had to get through the dirty and dismal packaging of a totally out-dated transport hub.

Those who had gathered around that table included Network Rail, Centro, Birmingham City Council and the former AWM. They were each looking for the same ending but had different expectations, a first class transport hub, an iconic building and value for money. I was honoured to be invited by Network Rail to chair these deliberations and ensure that the journey which would end with the spectacular opening, a week or so ago would start on the right tracks. I was looking for impact on the Birmingham skyline, benefit for passengers and citizens, affordability and ...would work.

The announcement of Foreign Office Architects winning design chosen from a range of architects who between them designed Berlin's train station, the International Airport at Carrasco, the Yokohama International Terminal and the high speed



► The new Grand Central shopping centre in Birmingham, which opened for business last week

Great cities need two ingredients - water and shopping...

complex in Florence - phew what talent - there came the usual cries from some of our citizens of "why do we need such a complex", "what a waste of money" and that lovely comment "another white elephant". I had been there before.

Having led the teams which developed the ICC, Symphony Hall and Millennium Point, I had faced the wrath of the 'doomsters' - some of them politicians, and those who would do nothing and just hope for the best. Well they have been proved wrong as Birmingham has driven itself forward reflecting the best of the vision of Joseph Chamberlain over a century ago.

There are always choices about spending and investment, at the end of the day those choices depend on a strong successful commercial foundation which throughout history our city has

enjoyed. We led our nation in the industrial revolution, we were market leaders in the building of the motor car and in every aspect of engineering expertise. But technology was ending the metal bashing foundation of the Midlands and whilst some of those industries have embraced change remaining a strong force, they will never again employ the vast numbers working the factory line.

Change is not something for someone else, it affects each of us, young and old and there is no better example of a hugely dramatic change than the transformation of New Street station.

It adds to the attraction of a compact and exciting city centre. It gives millions from miles around our region another reason to visit and enjoy the shopping experience in Bullring, in the shops on the streets, in Grand Central and very shortly in a brand new Mailbox.

We now need our local councillors across the West Midlands to embrace change and join together to build a municipal 'complex' around the core of a strong Greater Birmingham, bury the civic egos and give our region

the leadership it deserves and for which it is crying out.

Great cities need two ingredients - water and shopping. Look around the world and you will see how true this is. Our canal system has come alive again so there's plenty of water and the opening of Grand Central completes a shopping experience many cities will envy.

In recent months I have been a regular traveller to and from the station and am full of admiration for the skill and planning which ensured that it was 'business as usual' during the extensive building work under way. So if you are commuting through New Street, or travelling to and from Birmingham from across the nation or beyond our shores, to do business, enjoy a concert or attend a conference or just want to meet and greet, I hope you will share my pride - I didn't build a brick or do anything except be at the starting line, and we should congratulate the designers, the planners, the engineers and everyone who wore a hard hat, on "a job well done".

Sir Bernard Zissman was chairman of the New Street design judging panel