

Swansea – You Are Here: Gordon Gibson's manifesto

A contribution to the local paper on Swansea's current city centre consultation 'You Are Here', as yet another 'big idea' hits local headlines. We already have a fine city, we just need pride in it.

Let's design a city. What ingredients would you like? A beautiful sandy bay? A river? How about an industrial heritage, say of the greatest Copperopolis in the world – industry, canals, port? A hill to overlook these riches? I'd suggest some well established inner city residential communities as well. What's not to like?

I happen to know somewhere like that. In fact, I live here, right in the middle of it.

Yet our city still struggles with its identity, its character, even its ingredients – the bay, cut off from the city, first by docks and railway sidings, latterly by a souped-up 'boulevard'; the river, still ignored as a beautiful, rich and commercially valuable asset; and the heritage, hugely lost, some precious remnants salvaged. Swansea hasn't recovered from the terrible blitz of 1941 and post-war 'slum clearance'. The city's biggest loss of all was people – homes, children, schools, clubs, business – what is called now called 'footfall' or 'market demand'! All replaced by shops.

We lost real bustling communities in Garden Street and Orange Street, where the Quadrant and car-parks are now. Communities in Sandfields, Mount Pleasant, Brynmelin, Hafod and St Thomas were cut off with big roads. We lost Greenhill at the top of High Street and we lost so many people and homes in the city centre itself. Don't get me wrong, not all of it was the most savoury! Such is city life.

The first lesson is that shops and commerce follow people, not the other way round. Like cities all over Europe, let's prioritise homes and people in our city centre. Families and kids as well as students and singles.

Instead, we got bridges and boulevards, New Cuts and Westways, Castle Quays and St David's, Tesco and Sainsbury's. What have these roads and commercially led developments done for city regeneration? They've had a good run for the past 70 years and they haven't worked.

Now, another 'big idea' is being presented – a 'plaza in the sky' over Oystermouth Road. Another artist's impression! Stop it, all of you! Look at our great city, its assets. Start with them. Not more pie in the sky. There is no need to re-invent the wheel.

City centres can't be moved around like that. Show us where it has worked. Look no further than our own city. Decades have been wasted trying to move the centre from the High Street to here and there. And they are still searching. Or see Cardiff, that tried to move its centre to the bay. Or Llanelli that killed its heart with a 1960s shopping centre and then plonked a huge supermarket in the middle of the main road.

So focus on the existing qualities of our city. For quick results, the key is the Kingsway, badly in need of *people*. Connect jobs, homes and communities. Bring in better public transport, perhaps a free city centre step on – step off circular, a bit like the Christmas land-train. If current business in the Kingsway is anything to go by, that street is certainly not the 'Central Business District' being touted by the latest city plan. The former 'Kingsway Roundabout' should be our central people place rather than a road junction. I suggest we call it Maes Heb Enw, The Place with No Name.

While doing that, start work on our real assets. Let's join up the docks, the river, Copperopolis, an east side park, a river taxi, a cable car up Kilvey Hill, a 'Highline' walk and lots more. The amazing thing is, with only a little thought, the whole lot reconnects all these ingredients to the city centre.

Join St Thomas to the river and its city centre; realise the residential potential of Parc Tawe and the riverside, be proud of Kilvey Hill, promote an eastside nature route, Copperopolis, the river promenades and a Highline, all feeding to the city centre.

For those who ask "How much will it all cost?", think of the value of the land along the river, if we get this right. Development and city centre vitality will reap rewards. The first beneficiary of such strategic thinking will be the High Street, Dyfatty and Hafod, so in need of tlc these past 20 years or more.

So, concentrate on our assets and strengths. Put social and cultural activity back in the heart of our city. Throw in free high-speed broadband in the city centre. Make big efforts for children and young people. Think public spaces, trees, recreation and entertainment. We should be proud – a Fairtrade town, a City of Sanctuary, Dylan's Birthplace, culture and vitality. Go up Kilvey Hill and look over our river, our bay, our history, our city, our people, maybe even the lagoon. Proud.

Gordon Gibson is an Urban Designer with Trilein Ltd, the Swansea regeneration company. <http://www.Trilein.com> (January 2015)