

A VISION FOR BRIGHTON & HOVE



**In this his first of six
columns about the future of
Brighton & Hove,
Robert Stewart Nemeth looks
at the City's architecture.**



WHY BUILDINGS?

When Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in 1931, he ripped apart the utopian dreams of the period forever. The world of the future may have been portrayed as a fast and efficient paradise, but its inhabitants were empty. The irony of the title was not lost on critics of the day. In stark contrast to Huxley's classic, *Brave New City* written by Dr Anthony Seldon (whilst Headmaster of Brighton College), offered a soberingly unironic vision of what could and should be in Brighton & Hove. The finale is a wish list of around thirty ideas; each relating, almost without exception, to buildings. "Five skyscrapers should be erected by 2020." "Knock down Embassy Court." When our hospitals are ailing and our schools need examining, why would anybody suggest that buildings are the answer?

Everybody but the most aesthetically ignorant instinctively understands buildings. Not everybody knows the function of a buttress or the location of an apse, but the divine beauty of Westminster Abbey is clear to all. As a Researcher in Parliament, I am apt to have, well, geeky views on education. Yet, when I start telling others why the Swedish system of schooling is the best, eyes are guaranteed to glaze over. But, if I mention entering the tunnels beneath the Engineerium or negotiating the roof of the Pavilion, without exception, people want to know more. "To call a work of architecture or design beautiful is to recognise it as a rendition of values critical to our flourishing," wrote Alain de Botton in *The Architecture of Happiness*. This applies to the entirety of the built environment; from the colour of our pavements to the designs of our railings. As a coastal resort, a great proportion of local income simply relies on the City looking good. If the pavements are dirty and the railings rusty, businesses – and, ultimately, people – suffer. So many of our successes and failures relate to buildings. As for our schools and hospitals, let's not forget that bricks and mortar are the physical embodiment of these essential institutions.

Our generally very hard-working local elected representative's hold the key to unlocking a multitude of development projects, each able to transform a community. With this in mind, it is insane that the electorate has such little involvement in what gets done. This is by no means a local problem and, if anything, our system of a single tier of councillors means that people know their politicians here better than elsewhere. The detachment though is hampering progress.

Political energy, the type that makes real change possible, appears to violate the First Law of Thermodynamics – it can be destroyed. This energy can be dissipated by all manner of bureaucratic obstacles to nobody's benefit. The controlling nature of Whitehall may have theoretical benefits but, in reality, it is shackling local politicians, developers, businessmen and residents who wish to make a difference. I don't foresee Brighton & Hove ever resembling Huxley's utopian nightmare – it could never be tamed. We must be brave though. From rebuilding the Marina to simply getting to know our neighbours, getting the next step right is of profound importance.

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