

BY ANTHONY SELDON  
GRAPHIC BY NICK READETT-BAYLEY, JOVAN COLIC (AROS)

AREN'T WE CLEVER?  
50,000 – THE APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF GRADUATES  
IN BRIGHTON AND HOVE, MORE THAN ANY OTHER CITY IN THE UK  
THERE ARE ALSO 20,000 STUDENTS

## LET'S DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Anthony Seldon, headmaster of Brighton College, is a political historian, biographer and author of *Brave New City: Brighton and Hove Past, Present, Future*.

Brighton has become sexy again. Brighton & Hove achieved city status in 2000 and suddenly there is no holding it back. Yet this once grand town, Britain's most elegant and popular seaside resort in the nineteenth century, had a dismal twentieth century.

There were bright spots, certainly, including, in the 1960s, Sussex University and the Brighton Festival. But far too much was dire. The architecture, compared with the work of Charles Barry, John Nash, and George Gilbert Scott, in the nineteenth century, was often fourth rate. The cutting edge and ambition was lost and the town simmered in the mediocrity of suburbia, local politics and insularity.

Now it is being talked about again as Britain's premier seaside city, with the prospect of becoming a city of international repute and importance. And so it should be, given Brighton & Hove's history, its distinctive heritage, its proximity to London and Gatwick and its position on the south coast.

Unprecedented activity and plans are being brewed in the city. A national park is proposed for the Sussex Downs, which will make the city even more prized, suspended happily between the Downs and the sea. The headquarters of the national park would be in the city, probably at Stanmer Park.

A large sports stadium is planned for the north of the city by the universities of Sussex and Brighton at Falmer, although a far better site would be where the A23/M23 hits the ring road, at Waterhall. This site could also enjoy a new station, Brighton Parkway, built on the railway line that runs adjacent to the A23.

A variety of transport systems have been proposed, including a monorail joining the marina to Brighton (formerly Palace) Pier, and a rapid transit system (RTS), using the existing railway line, to go underground at the station before emerging to divide into east and west junctions by Brighton Pier.

**'IF THE CITY IS BOLD, THIS WILL BE SEEN AS A SEMINAL PERIOD IN ITS HISTORY... THE EQUIVALENT OF THE ARRIVAL OF THE PRINCE REGENT AT THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY'**

The RTS's termination in the west would be at Shoreham airport, extended with runways into the sea to take international flights and renamed Brighton International, with the RTS calling en route at an extensive new development, Shoreham Harbour Village.

The West Pier has aroused especial controversy since it was closed 30 years ago. Many people, including me, favoured restoration of the pier to its full 1860s splendour – until it was burnt out in March. This likely act of arson changed everything. What is the point in an ersatz reconstruction?

The old pier, tragically, has gone for ever. I now favour a futuristic pier, ecologically sustainable, such as envisaged in the illustration above. The two piers would then exemplify the city's two great centuries – the nineteenth-century Brighton Pier, which captures and echoes the fine Regency architecture, and the twenty-first century West Pier, emblematic of what will be a great century now unfolding for the city. The new pier should have flats and offices, to give it a 24/7 life and to avoid having to build unsightly shore developments to make it economically viable. It should set the standard for seaside piers for the next 50 years.

Gatwick Airport's extension, if it

goes ahead, will provide a massive boost to the local economy and increase the city's attractiveness to large companies to relocate, or to establish, their European headquarters in the city.

New homes, from the luxurious to the affordable, are planned for all brownfield sites, given the problems of finding other land for development.

The seafront, which has benefited from extensive development in the area between the piers, is set for further, sorely needed investment along Madeira Drive, between Brighton Pier and the marina.

Plans have been aired to put the busy coast road underground, thereby freeing up the area above for leisure, parkland, restaurants and cafes, offering a mile-and-a-half of traffic-free seaside opportunities, unique in Britain. Most radical of all is the proposal to erect on Hove Lawns the Hove Pavilion, Chinese on the outside and Indian on the inside, inverting the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, and providing a symbolic as well as an artistic statement of the unity of the two formerly separate towns.

**But how much of all this will happen?** The city is at a crossroads. The efforts of many over the last decade have unlocked a window. If

it is now allowed to open, it will result in this being seen as a seminal period in the city's history, the equivalent of the arrival of the Prince Regent in Brighton at the end of the eighteenth century.

If the city is bold it will back major architectural developments in the pipeline. This will encourage other leading developers and architects to work in the city, and build up a cycle, from which all will gain.

The city may not now have one single visionary like the Prince Regent, nor one financier to match the Royal Exchange. Instead, it has a variety of visionaries and backers seeking to invest heavily in it.

Frank Gehry wants to put up four exotic towers in Hove, far bolder and more striking than his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Richard Rogers wants to build here, and so do Piers Gough and Chris Wilkinson, who designed the prize-winning Millennium Bridge in Newcastle. Terence Conran's name has been linked to the resurrection of the famous art deco Embassy Court on the seafront. Rab Bennett has designed Brighton's new library. Many top international architects have their eye on the city.

Money, too, is set to pour in. The efforts of many over the last decade have unlocked a window. If



**PIER INTO THE FUTURE**  
The old West Pier... and one architectural firm's vision of what a rebuilt pier could look like. AROS of London is proposing a floating structure, tethered to the sea bed but responding to the changing tide, with spaces opening and closing as the tide rises and falls, just as beaches change shape. Running 750 metres out to sea, the pier could offer commercial space, leisure facilities, a water taxi transport station, performance spaces, skateboard ramps, a windsurfing jetty and even a manmade surfing beach. At the end would be a 60 metre high viewing tower, with a cable car running the length of the pier.

major facelift proposed by Parkridge Developments, to be kicked off by a series of colourful towers designed by Piers Gough. St Modwen developers, responsible for the revival of the Brighton racecourse, are among the potential investors in the West Pier.

Meanwhile, ING, the international bank and developer that bought Barings, has formed a partnership with a local company, Karis. This is behind the Frank Gehry towers bid at the King Alfred site on the Hove seafront. A host of other projects, including an ultra-modern tower block at the Endeavour site at the south end of Preston Park, will set the tone of the brave new city for visitors, coming in by car or train.

The city's architectural tradition is fantastical and bizarre. It is the right site in Britain to put up brave new buildings, even if they are tall and even if they seem bizarre today to some eyes. So, too, did the Royal Pavilion when it was built in its Indian splendour in the 1810s.

Architects like Gehry are artists of the stature of Matisse or Miró. We might not always like now what they produce, but they tell us about the future before we arrive there. That is why they are artists rather than jobsworths, like the philistines

who designed the Brighton Centre, Sussex Heights, the Hilton West Pier Hotel and all other tall buildings in the city. These are bad buildings, not because they are tall but because they are ugly and designed by people of no architectural integrity.

**Will these visionaries and financiers meet a blank wall?** The decisions in the coming months over these projects are the key that will either open or close the window to the future. Rarely in Brighton & Hove's history will so much fall on the wisdom of a city's council.

If it plays safe and is swayed by the voices of over-zealous conservationists and others lacking in imagination, the great architects and major developers will take flight, never to return. They will deem the city a dead zone, and it will go the way of too many seaside cities in Britain – dull, drab and drug-ridden. Those who will lose most will be the underprivileged as they have the most to gain from the energy and enterprise that will be the city's if it moves ahead.

Is it really conceivable Brighton & Hove can be so stupid as to reject buildings by Gehry, backed by a company such as ING? Where