

CHANGING PLACES

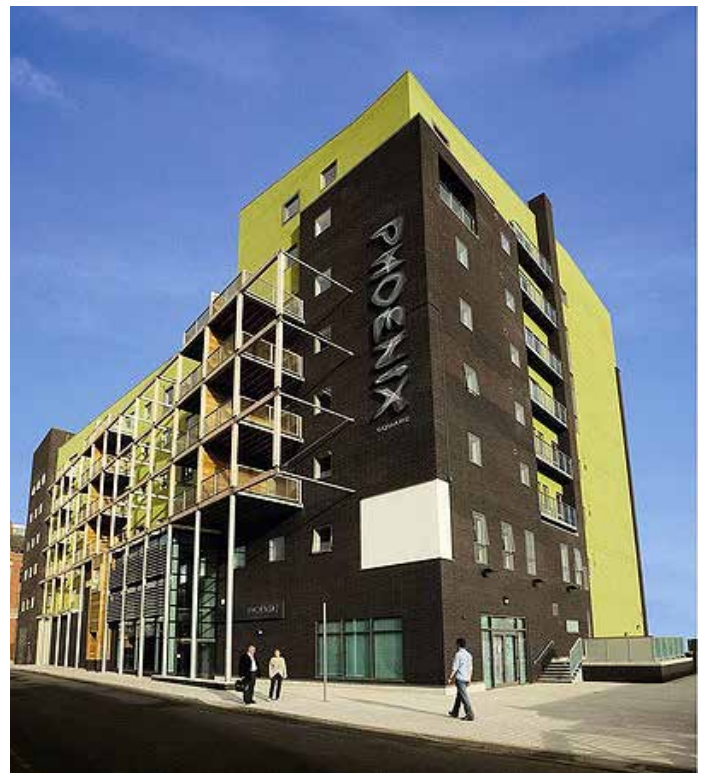
PHOENIX, LEICESTER

18.01.18 - 11.03.18

TEXT BY STEVEN BODE

By the time I get to Phoenix, I have seen all the pieces in *Changing Places* at least once – and several of them many times. It is nevertheless good to see them (or, at least, a trio of them) again, on what is now the last leg of a long eight-month tour, at Leicester's cinema and arts centre, Phoenix. At the end of any marathon run, it is always comforting to glimpse the finishing line in sight. And, in an echo of the way a marathon route travels round the houses before reaching the destination of the stadium, it is somehow apt that this final lap should take place in a gallery arena that is very different from the various industrial or heritage buildings that preceded it.

The works by Imran Channa, Desire Machine Collective and Yasmin Jahan Nupur are beautifully installed in the downstairs spaces at Phoenix, and their diverse meditations on colonial history, changing patterns of labour and the enduring legacies of international trade and industry are as resonant as ever. On this occasion, however, I am drawn to the immediate environs of the gallery, and set out to explore. I was told, before I came, that Leicester was *the* city for walkers, but



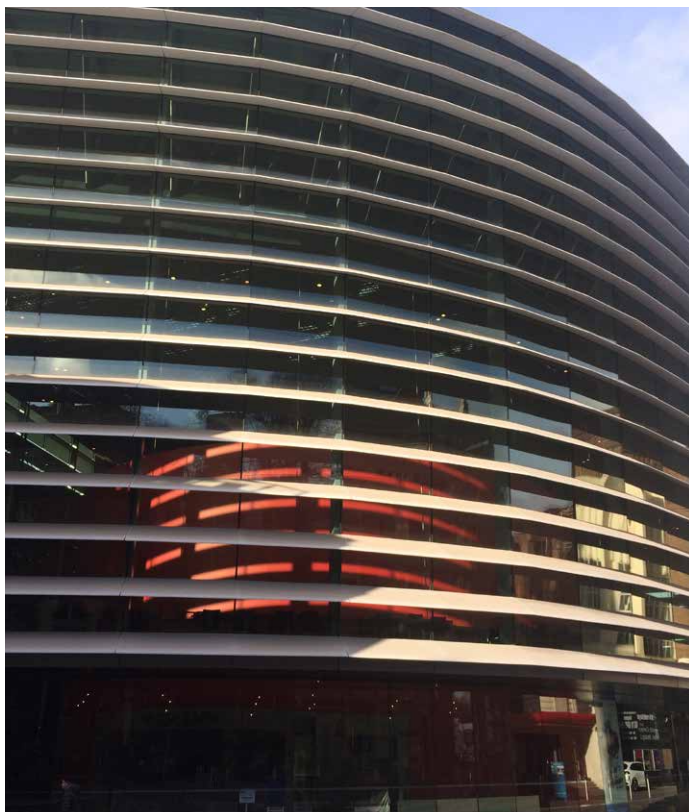
Phoenix Leicester



Residue, Desire Machine Collective, installed at Phoenix Leicester. Photo: Stephen Lynch

since the person winked at me as they said it, I took the comment with a pinch of salt. It is, however, a cold, bright February afternoon, with a tangible crispness to the air, and, with an hour or two to kill, I make my way around.

Phoenix is an emblem of the rising fortunes of an up-and-coming area of the city known as St George's – a cluster of streets around St George's church and park that has been designated (and branded as) a new cultural quarter. The brightly-coloured new-build of Phoenix, with its now-familiar mix of cultural utilities and private apartments, standing tall over Phoenix Square, is mirrored, around the corner, by Curve, Leicester's flagship, spaceship theatre, which opened to fanfare and controversy in 2008. Half lost in the building's shadow, Curve is abutted by a small patch of land called Orton Square, named in memory of Leicester-



Left: Curve Theatre, Leicester. Right: elsewhere in the Cultural Quarter. Photos: Steven Bode

born playwright and *provocateur*, Joe Orton. Of all the honorifics the City Fathers could have bestowed upon him, the word Square is the one that is profoundly least suited to his memory.

Around and between are old factory and warehouse buildings, some lying empty, many converted into offices and flats. In nearby Colton Street, I visit the Sai Baba Temple, which has taken up residence in the formerly empty Edwardian Guild Hall since 2013. I am greeted inside with warm smiles and an offer of lunch – a welcome that is spontaneous and genuine, and which also invokes the building’s history as a place of charitable refuge and sanctuary. Established in 1909 as a social centre for people with physical disabilities, the Guild Hall was a pioneering example of good and thoughtful design. As well as its splendid arts and crafts interior, it was one of the first places in the country to make full and easy accessibility a main consideration of its layout and architecture.

The temple, like the outline of the imposing Usman Masjid mosque on the horizon (one of a total of 73 mosques in Leicester), is a reminder, of course, of the growing influence, within the city, of people from the Indian subcontinent. These places of worship are far outnumbered by other places of hospitality and exchange, such as ethnic restaurants, cafés and shops. As you walk up Humberstone Road, at the edge of the Cultural Quarter, past the long row of restaurants along its length, there are reminders, too, that Leicester is not just Britain’s predominant British Asian city (30 per cent of the population is of Asian origin), but home to an extraordinary multiplicity of cultures.

In this, it seemed strangely symbolic that the church of St George, patron saint of England’s national day, and whose iconic red cross is emblazoned on the lilywhite background of the English national flag, should now be a place of worship for the Serbian Orthodox Church, who have conducted services there since the building was handed to them by the Church of England in 1983. Although the transfer was a shock and affront to some, it is strangely fitting when you consider how the cross of St George actually originates from mainland Europe, and was prevalent in Northern Italy and parts of the Balkans before becoming adopted by Richard I during the time of the Crusades.

On every corner of the Cultural Quarter, and throughout the city centre, are information boards, put up by Leicester Arts and Museums Service, affirming ‘The Story of Leicester’, as if the city’s ‘official’ history, in the face of its wider demographic changes, needs restating or reinvigorating. From these, I learn that Leicester was home to Thomas Cook – an enterprising local businessman whose innovative idea of running organised excursions for the general public encouraged the would-be traveller that he/she would find a welcome in places far from home. It is amusing to see this Godfather of the modern tourist industry featured in the City Council’s whistlestop ‘Cook’s Tour’ of Leicester’s history, but also, in the context of the works shown in *Changing Places*, to think of him as an early signpost for those subsequent generations of globetrotting travellers whose aspirations to complete the ‘grand tour’ of exotic, faraway places are parodied in the soundtrack of Imran Channa’s *Dust to Dust*.



Above: banner of Richard the Third, Leicester. Photo: Steven Bode. Below: *Dust to Dust*, Imran Channa, installed at Phoenix Leicester. Photo: Stephen Lynch



These days, the person bringing the tourists to Leicester is another King Richard: Richard the Third. Since his bones were exhumed from the dust of the old Greyfriars Monastery, whose original location had been forgotten and covered by a council car park, Leicester seems to be staking much of its revival on Richard's return, and subsequent rehabilitation. (I had always thought of him as a rather murky and sinister figure, based on Shakespeare's play, and his alleged involvement in the murder of the Princes in the Tower). Richard's remains have since been moved, and accorded a ceremonial re-burial in Leicester Cathedral – a change of resting place that has sparked a renewal of interest in Leicester's past, as if suddenly buoyed up by its newly proven royal lineage. A phoenix risen from the ashes he may be, whose facial likeness, too, has been miraculously restored through the marvels of forensic analysis and digital technology, Richard still seems like a strange figurehead for the face of contemporary Leicester: a man at the end of a dynastic line, who was the last English monarch to die in battle. Like the flag of St George, he is perhaps more a symbol of a past that is battling to stay alive, when all around it a very different, diverse, multicultural city is being born.

Find out more at fvu.co.uk

Changing Places is a Film and Video Umbrella touring exhibition, supported by Arts Council England, Canal & River Trust, National Trust, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Phoenix Leicester, Feltech, Links Signs and Heritage Lottery Fund. Curated by Mariam Zulfiqar.