

MAN WITH A PLAN

Gerry Hughes is spearheading GVA's next chapter with major regeneration projects, raising the status of urban planning and making strides on gender and race equality. By *David Taylor*

Urban planning, says GVA chief executive Gerry Hughes, has a bad reputation in this country, and is not sufficiently understood or appreciated by the general public. What is more, trained planner Hughes goes on, it isn't helped by the RTPI's failure to bang the drum that this is actually a positive force for shaping successful cities, rather than its common perception as development control alone. So it's part of Hughes' mission to try and turn this around as GVA enters a new phase of growth – alongside a personal crusade to get more women and different ethnic groups into the business.

We meet at GVA's offices in the City to talk through the company's latest transmogrification after various rebrands and mergers over the last decades. In September, buoyed with investment from a new equity partner, it hopes to be just plain old GVA once again, after being Grimley JR Eve, GVA Grimley, GVA Bilfinger, and, if we're going way back to its roots two centuries ago, HN Grimley and Son. Hughes, who has been with the company for 25 years but only became chief executive in February, hopes to spearhead a drive further and stronger into Europe to align with growing cities such as Berlin and consolidate its position as a real estate advisor

par excellence to government, local government and others.

How has it been thus far? 'It's been a bit of a rollercoaster', says Hughes, in his distinctive Belfast brogue. 'We've been sold, or are being sold to a private equity outfit, EQT, which is going to be an interesting experience because we're hopeful they will invest in us, leading up to an IPO in about five years time. So that's a really positive thing.'

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As we speak the firm is getting in place its investment programmes and strategies, building up the brand around GVA to be used across Europe, where it is building a new 'platform'. But aren't all these changes confusing? With such apparent flux, how does the ethos of the company remain consistent?

'That's a key question', says Hughes, 'about how we are seeking to position ourselves in the market

place. As a starting point and as a real estate business we are very much a consultancy business as opposed to a brokerage business.' In fact around 80% of GVA's fee income is consultancy-related, setting it apart from the likes of JLL, Cushman and Wakefield, CBRE and Savills. 'So we're different from them and we probably have quite a special place in the market and we're known for that consultancy approach'. It is also known for advising the public sector to a large degree, with nearly 60% of fee income orientated that way. 'And the third thing that sets us apart is that we are very much involved in the placemaking, urban planning, regeneration agenda', says Hughes, pointing to many of the big regeneration projects around in London at present. Some of the key ones here are the Haringey Development Vehicle, Canada Water and Winstanley Road. 'In all those instances we are the ringmaster, I suppose', says Hughes, 'pulling together different disciplines, acting as the interface between public and private, we're running the procurement processes, we're setting structures up, we're finding the funding. It puts us in quite a unique position'. And it is from this platform that Hughes wants to develop and build 'probably the leading real estate advisory business in the



UK', and take that model into Europe, aided by investment. Hughes wants to bolster urban planning across the UK, up into the 'Northern Powerhouse' and 'Midlands Engine' and is beginning discussions with businesses in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and the Nordics, either to buy firms or partner with them.

EQT are buying the real estate and facilities management wings of GVA but the GVA name will figure across the expansion plans. And although Hughes believes the market is not confused about the firm, the Bilfinger name didn't help, when the German

engineering company's name was attached in 2014. 'If we were to look at that deal now we wouldn't do it', says Hughes. 'They immediately went into a period of business turmoil'. They also had some compliance issues associated with some 'bad practice in Africa' that meant they were in the spotlight, and that fed through to GVA, along with something of a culture clash, it's fair to say, between the 'people to people' GVA business and the Bilfinger business-to-business one. One option this time around had been one of GVA's major competitors, JLL, buying them and eventually

subsuming them within that family, losing the name and the brand in the process. 'That wasn't something that was attractive to us' says Hughes.

Hughes joined what was then Grimley JR Eve from BDP's planning team in Manchester, after training in Queen's Belfast in geography and then urban planning and then going to BDP in Belfast, before joining BDP in its old Gresse Street home in London with Peter Drummond and people of that ilk. He helped write the masterplan for Newcastle Riverside, for the centre of Manchester and Lagaside in Belfast.



Spur for regeneration – the vision for North Tottenham

In Manchester he worked on Trafford Park, got involved in Olympic and Commonwealth Games bids and on many of the big Manchester projects of that time. Grimley JR Eve approached him to ask if he could set up a planning team in Manchester, and he moved across because he wanted to be more involved in development delivery with more of a commercial perspective on big projects. He found he liked the culture of facilitating and enabling people to get on with developing their careers, something he still enjoys about GVA today. He took over planning, development and regeneration in the company in London, before stepping up as chief executive, and believes he's probably the only town planning chief executive in a real estate business in the UK, which says something about the culture there. He is first and foremost a planner, but also a businessman. Is he moving away from the coalface? In a sense, yes; he has had to, given the all the corporate activity. 'But my ambition is to get back to coalface work as you call it if I can but that may not be possible under the new structure'.

Key projects under his watchful eye include Winstanley Road, the Clapham Junction estate renewal project, and Haringey Development Vehicle because of its sheer scale and potential. Both could be ground-breaking in terms of delivering homes, but also in Haringey's case an approach to regeneration which was in the news for all the wrong reasons – the riots. 'It's much more about regeneration than it is gentrification. The social and economic needs of the people who currently live there are at the forefront of the programme.' Hughes believes that all the signs are that this could be a 'seminal' approach to regeneration, with the right political structure, appetite, and market dynamic with Crossrail 2, Tottenham Football Club and some 'fantastic people working up there'. The council has some 'fantastic assets to bring into play' and GVA is

working with the delivery vehicle and around the stadium with Hermes and Argent Related. GVA is also working in Hughes' own manor, Crouch End, with the Hornsey Town Hall project.

Gentrification, though, is a massive difficulty in London, Hughes believes. 'The market almost pushes you down that route to gentrify, because the values that can be created by putting a piece of infrastructure in will mean house prices shoot up and local people tend not to be the ones that benefit from that'. Gentrification is not negative in absolute terms, but it can be if it is gentrification at the expense of everything else. And yet some of it is needed to bring wealth into the local economy, jobs and to create better living circumstances for locals. The onus is on local government and the GLA to make sure that an overly negative impact does not result from investment, Hughes believes.

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And he feels that in this country the public don't understand the role of the urban planner. 'In Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Germany people understand because it is built into their psyche', he says. 'In this country planning has become associated with negativity, development control, and not seen as a positive discipline. I agree absolutely with Terry Farrell on this. The problem is in our training and I'll go one stage forward and won't be very popular for this. I blame the RTPI for not being absolutely clear that urban planning is a positive discipline by its very nature.' This leads to a feeling that change is bad and is heightened especially now with planning departments and space under pressure. It could be addressed at school level with a segue from Human Geography

on why planning is important in a UK context to plan for population change and sustainability reasons and so on. 'It's critical, but it's not addressed', he says.

GVA was behind the 'well received' methodology behind the Elizabeth Line that measured its impacts, and which underpins TfL's attitude to future schemes. It is now working with AECOM on making the case for Crossrail 2 around regeneration and the impacts on investment and capturing it to make the business case. And on High Speed Two it is involved in Euston providing an area action plan, where a private sector investor partner will be sought for what is a phased, complex project. But it is the sheer scale and history of Thamesmead that stirs Hughes, with its two Crossrail stations and several kilometres of riverfront, even if it lacks a river crossing. Peabody engaged GVA initially to secure funding through the Housing Zone initiative and retained them to advise on strategically delivery. 'It is pretty much a new town in London', says Hughes. It will be market testing the private sector's appetite to engage with Peabody on the scheme later this year. 'These are the sorts of projects we want to be associated with because of their scale and change making potential.'

So what of the future? Hughes is clear on cementing GVA's position as a distinctive real estate advisory business that is making a difference across the UK and is allowing cities to develop to their full potential. He wants to be involved at scale, and recognised as the organisation people go to for high quality strategic advice on either a place or city scale. And he wants to be known as a company that can get involved at each stage right through to delivery. 'We're already doing it. We just need to be much more coherent about how we tell our clients that that's what we can do, and get them to buy into it.'

He admires Arup and Arcadis in their structures and impact, but there

is no one organisation quite like GVA, says Hughes. But London needs the public sector to help to build homes, even if home ownership is not as important as it once was.

Looking internally is crucially important too, however. Hughes wants to be at the forefront of the diversity agenda with a proper representation at all levels of the organisation from different genders and backgrounds. 'We've taken external advice to tell us where the obstacles are which are stopping women and people from different backgrounds from making progress. Where are those problems? Where are those logjams? Where do we think there is bias, conscious or unconscious, that might be preventing those people making progress in our organisation? We want to lead the way on this, because we will be a better business for it.'



'When you get a chance to make a change, make a change'

At board level there are seven men and one woman currently. All are white. But there is a newly promoted head of the London office – Ros Goode – one of Hughes' first appointments in what is something of a personal crusade. 'We will be making a difference all the way through my time here', he says, across recruitment, appraisals, meetings, flexible working and an end to Hughes himself refusing to sit on all white male panels externally. As someone who came across from Ireland, Hughes himself experienced prejudice 25 years ago – even called 'Paddy' and 'Mick' to his face from within the profession. 'That stays with you', says Hughes, pausing before offering what could be a metaphor for GVA under his rule. 'So, when you get a chance to make a change, make a change.' ●



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Up the junction:
GVA is involved in
regenerating the
Winstanley and
York Road estates
near Clapham
Junction