

Birmingham's skyline is set to change once again as the wrecking ball moves in to a once neglected chunk of the city. Stacey Barnfield met the man with the vision...

Construction work has started on revitalising another massive swathe of Birmingham city centre.

More than £400 million is being spent transforming derelict parts of Digbeth into affordable housing, office space, restaurants and a hotel.

Five hundred apartments will be created, with 85 shared-ownership homes on Cheapside, Bradford Street and Alcester Street.

The 18-month 'Irish Quarter' project could see Bradford Street become one of the city's smartest thoroughfares, with ambitious plans to transform it into a tree-lined Parisian-style boulevard, flanked by leisure facilities.

From the Highgate end of its mall-like straight stretch is one of the finest views of Birmingham's skyline to be found anywhere in the city.

This was one of many factors that convinced Tony Corbett, development director of Concept Development Solutions that the area was ready for a new lease of residential and commercial life.

"Digbeth is the birthplace of Birmingham, around the Old Crown and River Rea, so we wanted to come back to where it all started," he told CityLiving.

"After looking at a map of the area and discovering that a large proportion of the factories and buildings are no longer in use, we saw an opportunity to create a vibrant new suburb from Highgate Park down to the wholesale



At the heart of the community: Tony Corbett

# Designs on Digbeth

markets. In Bradford Street there is the opportunity to open up a first-class approach into the Bull Ring and the rest of the city centre."

Despite its sheer scale, and the historic implications, the Wolverhampton-born property expert has never been daunted by the project.

"We started with a small, shared-ownership residential scheme and the whole plan built up in jigsaw pieces," he said.

"When word spread to the land-owners in the area they expressed an interest to get involved.

"People wanted to see this project happen and were literally knocking on our door to get involved.

"Many of the remaining businesses are moving away from the out-dated Victorian buildings and relocating to more modern facilities on national distribution networks in and around Birmingham.

"The old café on Bradford Street, Mr G, is currently in temporary accommodation to provide breakfasts for the builders.

"He will open up in the new development with a new, smarter premises. I'd like to think this represents the spirit of the whole scheme."

Speaking at the scheme's launch Coun Mike Nangle, Birmingham's first Irish Lord Mayor welcomed the start of the construction: "There was a feeling it was all a bit neglected before. It was an Irish Quarter but because of the empty buildings we could see that really was

not conducive to being recognised as an Irish Quarter," he said.

"This will bring second or third generation Irish people here for entertainment instead of Broad Street. As Birmingham's first Irish Lord Mayor, it seems very appropriate to see this starting."

It is planned that the area will incorporate Irish design into its features such as Celtic logos worked into street lighting and signage and street signs in English and Irish.

Pat O'Neill, chairman of the Irish Community Forum is determined that the new influx of people would not see the area's charm driven elsewhere: "We will maintain the area's grass-roots Irish identity and keep it as a base for Irish cultural heritage," he said.

Tony Corbett believes it is the community feel already in place that will guarantee the bold project is a success.

"The area is home to some of the city's finest traditional pubs, with character and soul.

"There is a fantastic park, school and police station in the area. All of these factors help to encourage a sense of community.

"We see this as an area where the everyday Brummie can enjoy the city's rebirth at an affordable and accessible price," he added.

For more information on the project visit [www.conceptdevsolutions.com](http://www.conceptdevsolutions.com)



Scale models of the new Digbeth apartments