

PLANNING AND HERITAGE

A role in the mainstream

Planning procedures, including the development of master-plans and planning briefs, will support both the regeneration of the historic environment and the government's policies on sustainability, social inclusion and economic development

Now is the time of unrivalled opportunity for the heritage sector, unprecedented in recent memory. All the conditions are right for the historic environment to feature strongly in the attainment of key government objectives, but it is not enough to put the goods in the shop window. We now have to find ways of making sure that potential customers are induced to look in.

Maximising urban potential

There is widespread acceptance that the need to provide for higher than expected rates of household formation in a sustainable way means maximising the potential of our existing urban areas. Existing built-up areas will have to consume more of their own smoke if pressures for development are to be reduced, both on peripheral greenfield sites and, more generally, in rural areas accessible to commuters within the penumbra of the major conurbations. Also, as both the Urban Task Force Report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, and the Urban White Paper suggest, 'more than 90% of our urban fabric will still be with us in 30 years'. This means that new development realistically 'can only be a small proportion of the urban environment'. The rest will therefore have to be 'maintained and improved' to ensure that our towns and cities are 'attractive places in which people want to live and work'. It is clear that the achievement of an urban renaissance depends crucially on the viability, vitality and, above all, the intrinsic quality of our existing urban areas.

A winning formula?

The historic environment, including buildings, the spaces between them, urban parks and other incidental open space, is an important yardstick of quality and a source of local distinctiveness. It is key to delivering the attractive living and working conditions that are both conducive to a market-led return to urban living and important in influencing inward-investment decisions. It provides a basis for reinstating patterns of sustainable urban living and helps to provide the references for repairing tears in the urban fabric. Cleared urban brownfield sites, for instance, are seldom totally devoid of traces of the past: archaeology can help to reveal 'the bones beneath the skin'. The emphasis on avoiding unnecessary

demolition, and concentrating on maintaining and improving existing buildings, means that regeneration initiatives can both take place without displacing existing communities and also be geared to preserving, if not enhancing, community linkages.

The adaptive re-use of existing buildings, which embody environmental capital and where environmental impacts have long since been discharged, are inherently sustainable. Larger commercial buildings that are redundant or underused, and which commonly have a strong urban presence and no little historic interest, lend themselves particularly to conversion to mixed uses, higher densities and the application of urban village principles. Furthermore, as Lord Rogers himself has argued, the historic environment – terraces, squares, crescents, mansion blocks – provides a valuable template for achieving intensification involving significantly higher residential densities than the norm, without sacrificing the attributes of civilised urban living (such as the more expensive parts of Notting Hill and Westminster). All this is quite apart from the economic benefits deriving from historic buildings and landscapes through the stimulation of tourism, which unfortunately is commonly assumed to be the only direct economic benefit attributable to the historic environment.

Distinctive character

Writing in the *The Times* recently, Simon Jenkins suggested that 'people do not like visiting hideous places. To be cool, the city has to be alive, and to be alive it helps to be beautiful'. In the face of a development industry that has not so far been conspicuously successful in recreating the intimacy, local distinctiveness and incremental feel of the traditional town centre, Jenkins notes that the search is on to locate 'any canal, bridge, warehouse, Georgian façade or Victorian palace' that might lend 'a touch of urban distinction' and serve as a counterpoint to the dreary sameness of countless High Streets and suburban centres dominated by standard format retail outlets operated by the multiple chains. The features of the historic environment will often provide the basis for enhancing the distinctive character of a



The Collegiate School on Shaw Street, Liverpool, was a burnt-out shell until converted to residential apartments by Urban Splash, with financial assistance from English Heritage. The project, together with the repair of the nearby church of St Francis Xavier which is now a part of Liverpool Hope University, has provided a catalyst for regeneration

place and differentiating one centre from another. Such an approach was successfully adopted by Stockport MBC in the Market Underbanks area at a time when centres within the Manchester conurbation were seeking to maintain local loyalties against any loss of retail trade to the Trafford Centre, then about to open.

Countering political apathy and raising the profile

If now is a time of opportunity for the heritage sector and, as we have seen, the logic supporting the case for an enhanced role for the historic environment in the pursuit of mainstream government policy objectives is so powerful, why does it still appear to rank low in the list of political priorities? The MORI poll commissioned as part of the Heritage Review showed that people place a high value on the historic environment – 85% of the population consider it has an important role in promoting



The Collegiate School: detail of interior

regeneration in towns and cities – yet still the government remain unconvinced. The stark fact that grant-in-aid to English Heritage since 1994–5 has declined by some 20% in real terms is proof positive of this lack of concern. How can this perception be changed?



Whitehaven Castle, rebuilt by Sir James Lowther in 1769, was subsequently used as a hospital until the early 1990s. The building stood vacant until last year when it was re-opened as residential accommodation by a housing association after major repair and refurbishment. It has become a flagship for much of the successful heritage-led regeneration work in Whitehaven

There are hopeful signs, and *Power of Place* has sought to build on these in its recommendations to the government. Indeed, the very first recommendation is firmly directed at the need to ‘put conservation at the heart of regeneration and renewal’. It takes as its cue the recognition in the Urban White Paper of the importance of building on the good things, including the ‘famous historical and cultural centres’, in attempting to recapture ‘the tradition of creating towns and cities of quality and beauty’. Similarly, *Power of Place* draws on references in the UWP to English Heritage’s regeneration schemes, and the fact that their value-added effects have been validated in *The Heritage Dividend*, to emphasise the social and economic benefits of conservation-led regeneration, including a key contribution to the attainment of sustainability objectives.

Other recommendations directed primarily at raising the political profile of the heritage sector include a suggestion that the responsibilities of ‘green’ Ministers should include the historic environment. Such a change, if agreed, should go some way towards restoring the notion of an integrated environment (a view long propagated by the environmental agencies in the preparation of joint guidance, notably on environmental capital). It may also serve to promote a better

understanding of the role of the heritage sector in delivering sustainable development. Similarly, the somewhat isolated position of the heritage sector has often been attributed to the lack of direct links to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Unlike English Heritage, the other environmental agencies have profited from their sponsorship by DETR and the opportunities this has given them to influence planning policy from the inside. Their recent move to the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, however, could well reduce that influence. Accordingly, *Power of Place* calls for better working links between English Heritage (on behalf of the heritage sector as a whole) and the DETR (now the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions). More significantly, the report notes that CABE is now jointly funded by the DTLR and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and remarks that ‘many feel’ that this arrangement should be extended to English Heritage.

Coping with pressure for development

While English Heritage strongly supports the sustainability principles implicit in developing existing urban assets, there are clearly dangers in a possible proliferation of over-scaled, ill-considered

ered development, shoe-horned insensitively into the urban fabric without proper regard for such matters as historic character and context, massing, grain, materials, local distinctiveness and topographical modelling. The current resurgence of demand for high buildings is another manifestation of this pressure, and with the introduction of very high buildings of up to 1000ft, it has the potential to cause even greater damage to the urban fabric than conventional buildings.

In such circumstances, the clear preference of the heritage sector, put forward in one of the key recommendations in *Power of Place*, would be the preparation of spatial masterplans to guide urban development, based on an integrated characterisation including environmental, economic and social/community factors. English Heritage's guidance note on *Conservation Area Appraisals* and the Countryside Agency's *Village Design Statements* both provide ready models for what should be a participative and inclusive process, well attuned to the government's growing support for community planning initiatives, as exemplified by Community Plans and Local Strategic Partnerships.

Planning gain and Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)

There is little doubt that the current emphasis on inner city regeneration will involve greater use of CPO procedures, and it is confidently expected that the forthcoming Planning Bill will include measures to facilitate their use. Similarly, in anticipation that planning gain will continue to be important to LPAs as the principal means of securing other planning benefits from major development proposals, English Heritage launched in June 2001 its *Proposal for Enabling Development affecting Heritage Assets: A Practical Guide to Assessment* as an adjunct to its policy statement, *Enabling Development and the Conservation of Heritage Assets*, which had been well received last year by conservationists and the development industry.

Increased use of CPO procedures poses a particular problem for the historic environment. The CPO process demands that a planning permission should be in place before a CPO can be considered, yet many developers (and frequently their Local Authority partners) do not wish to go to the expense of preparing detailed proposals – often for large parts of the historic core – before they know that the CPO will be confirmed. There are obviously special

problems here when proposals are likely to have significant environmental effects, because outline applications are unlikely to be acceptable as a basis for assessing the impact on the special character of conservation areas, or of individual listed buildings, nor are they likely to pass muster in the event that an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is required under the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999.

Part of this problem can be overcome by the preparation of master plans and planning briefs, but the heritage sector will have to adjust to a greater use of CPO procedures and, in the wake of the Planning Green Paper, to a shift towards 'in principle' decisions for major infrastructure projects and significant job-generating proposals, without being an identifiable source of delay or acceding to proposals that would cause unwarranted damage to the historic environment. English Heritage is currently investigating how 'approval in principle' might be feasible, without any loss of control over the subsequent details, and whether ways might be found in particular circumstances to insist on the retention of the concept architect through to the completion of the development. CABE supports this latter point which both organisations will no doubt be seeking to raise in the debate on the Green Paper.

What the heritage sector must do

The lesson in all this is that the heritage sector must be confident and united in pressing the claim that the historic environment is a major component in the delivery of the urban renaissance envisaged by Lord Rogers and his Urban Task Force. It must also be proactive and engage positively with government, local authorities, developers and local communities to demonstrate how conservation-led regeneration aligns closely with mainstream policy objectives for sustainability, social inclusion and economic development. Finally, rather than simply accept the limbo state induced by the delay in the Government's response to the Heritage Review, there is a need to start acting on the recommendations in *Power of Place* and to prompt a robust debate with government to maintain a high profile for the historic environment and influence for the better the content of the forthcoming Planning Green Paper. □

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