

# THE URBAN PANEL

## Urban regeneration

*The new Urban Panel, working with a wide range of partners, offers advice and support both for developing the historic environment and promoting an urban renaissance*

To see urban Britain, where the vast majority of our fellow citizens live and work, as a dynamic historic environment continually being refurbished, reshaped and renewed, is one of the major themes of *Power of Place*. That English Heritage should champion such a vision surprises those more familiar with the image of an organisation with responsibilities for preserving our past by protecting individual sites, buildings and areas of special character. Yet from its inception English Heritage has increasingly concerned itself with the whole rather than the partial in the historic built environment, as the success of our engagement in Conservation Area Partnership Schemes, Heritage Economic Regeneration Schemes and Townscape Heritage Initiatives has demonstrated in delivering substantial funding to assist conservation-led regeneration.

The setting up last year of our new advisory group, the Urban Panel, demonstrates that English Heritage is now enlarging its vision and sharpening its focus on urban issues. Our statutory remit has, of course, always engaged us in major developments in historic towns and cities. The challenge today, however, is to show how we can also contribute to the large-scale regeneration initiatives being brought forward for urban areas not perhaps previously considered natural English Heritage territory – the worn-out parts of our inner cities, industrial settlements brought low by the collapse of our manufacturing base in the latter part of the 20th century, and the so-called brownfield sites targeted for major residential development in the next decade. Many of these areas tell us much about how our culture has evolved since the Industrial Revolution, and a proper understanding of them is the key to retaining and enhancing their character. More than that, English Heritage believes that the uniqueness that distinguishes one place from another should be the springboard for its continuing development.

### The historic environment

Over the last decade English Heritage has undertaken important research into the archaeology and history of many of the sites and

buildings of our industrial and urban past through our national evaluation programmes. The Monument Protection Programmes and Thematic Listing projects have both led to the establishment of benchmarks for statutory designation as well as informing our wider understanding of cultural significance, complementing collaborative work on similar projects undertaken by the former Royal Commission on Historic Monuments. The merging of the two organisations in 1999 has strengthened our ability to deliver the vigorous and authoritative research vital for proper evaluation. We are now well placed to use this knowledge to contribute to characterisation of the historic environment as a whole, focusing on those urban areas that are about to undergo dramatic change, as we are now doing in a carefully selected range of urban projects across the country described elsewhere in this issue.

While brownfield sites are natural targets for contemporary regeneration, they are not usually devoid of history. They could, for example, be former military bases like Bicester or Old Sarum airfields, important for their historical associations with 20th century defence history as much as for any archaeological remains or

*Aerial photograph of Nelson, a planned industrial town based on the textile industry, in urgent need of appropriate regeneration*

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standing buildings. The historic commercial or industrial areas of cities overtaken by change, to the point that they are redundant or even derelict, have much to say about how that city has evolved over centuries. This is as true of the great city – the docks and bonded warehouses of Liverpool, the commercial packing warehouses of Manchester, the former metal trades area of Sheffield – as of the smaller town with a specialist industrial base – carpets in Kidderminster, textiles in Nelson, shoes in Northampton, leather in Walsall. English Heritage is bringing forward projects on a selection of different urban environments, including seaside resorts and market towns, and will be publishing guidebooks, such as the highly successful popular guide to the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter, to promote better understanding of what makes each place unique.

Such publications, together with exhibitions and educational initiatives, are vital to promote understanding, but they are only the start of English Heritage's engagement in regeneration. Characterisation does not imply that every component of the historic built environment is equally significant; rather it provides a basis for evaluating relative significance and identifying opportunities for regeneration. In a joint initiative with European Objective I funding in Cornwall, for example, we are identifying regeneration opportunities in the context of clear archaeological and historical evaluation of an area bidding for World Heritage Site status.



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*A typical residential streetscape in Nelson*

We hope that our work on the Cornish industrial landscape, to be paralleled by a similar project in Lancashire and possibly South Yorkshire, will demonstrate that English Heritage's role in assisting the renewal of urban Britain is an enabling as much as a regulatory one, in which a proper understanding of the past can be shown to be the inspiration for building for the future.

## Urban strategy

Raising English Heritage's profile on such urban issues and persuading our partners that we are positive agents of change was one of the primary objectives in the establishment of the Urban Panel. Its role is not only to advise on major regeneration initiatives but, from its experience of examining schemes all across England, to help develop our corporate approach to urban strategy. With an inter-disciplinary membership of 18 engineers and property developers, architects and archaeologists, historians and planners, the Panel makes carefully targeted two-day visits to urban areas where major change is proposed. Each visit is designed to engage English Heritage, through its regional teams, in constructive dialogue with all the parties involved in promoting regeneration. Open debate is positively encouraged, and after the visit a Review Paper summarising the Panel's views is immediately made publicly available so that the dialogue can be carried forward.

The starting point for a Panel visit may be a proposal for a major scheme of redevelopment. One current stream of regeneration initiatives flows from the need to revisit those post-war city centre shopping developments that, half a century on, often look tired and in need of refurbishment to meet the very different retail needs of the early 21st century; the Panel has already looked at replacement schemes for such shopping malls in Bath and Chester. Or it may be the new wave of city centre-based retail



*Gateshead Millennium Bridge. The Urban Panel and CABE are working together to promote high quality new design that enhances the historic environment*

schemes such as the Panel has examined at Liverpool, Norwich and Southampton. Or again it could be the development of a wholly new brownfield site, such as the new university campus at Lincoln or the proposed reclamation of land from the sea at Southampton Water. Whatever the starting point, the Panel attempts to see the whole picture, seeking to understand how the town or city works, testing the strategic thinking behind the specific proposal, and so putting a particular proposal in the wider context.

This has sometimes come as a surprise, albeit a refreshing one, to local authorities and other partners expecting English Heritage to be interested only in a narrowly defined historic component of a city rather than urban culture in general. To stake English Heritage's claim to be a willing contributor to enriching the culture of cities, however, strengthens our ability to deliver critical messages that may not always be welcomed. When the Panel visited Southampton, members could express their reservations about proposals for the Waterfront in the context of support and encouragement for the city's overall cultural and design strategy for its future growth. Similarly, on our first visit to Chester in 2000, we urged the City Council and their consultants, Michael Hopkins and Partners, to widen the brief for Northgate to take in contiguous areas in order to achieve better integration of the new quarter with the City's historic street pattern and urban grain. We were heartened to see that our message had been received when the Panel revisited Chester earlier this year to review the emerging masterplan. And in two visits to

Liverpool, the Panel examined two major schemes on contiguous and overlapping sites – the Paradise Street triangle and Chavasse Park – where, while clearly preferring the former to the latter, we could nevertheless report objectively on the strengths and weaknesses of both in the context of what they offered that great city.

### **Importance of characterisation**

What messages, then, are emerging from the Panel's first 18 months' work, during which we have visited Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Nelson, Newcastle and Walsall in addition to the places already mentioned? Certainly the most persistent is how frequently inadequate characterisation had led to poorly informed proposals being brought forward. The central message of *Power of Place* about the primacy of understanding in the regeneration process could not be more timely. What it is that makes a place special must be the starting point for framing a design in its civic as well as its architectural dimensions if a new component is to integrate not just successfully but inspirationally into the historic built environment. The Panel has become especially concerned that, even if archaeological, building or streetscape evaluation is successfully addressed, the historical morphology and topography of our cities is so often sadly neglected.

The lack of integration between the different strands of a city has been another major theme of the Panel's initial period of work. Cultural diversity, local distinctiveness and its expression in the historic built environment should be

increasingly recognised and celebrated so that we can sustain the distinctive character of our cities, and neighbourhoods within them, when planning for their future. This is one of the aims of our major project about to start in Liverpool, but such cultural connectivity is important in every urban environment. The Panel was heartened, for example, to see the attention being paid to addressing issues of social deprivation in Lincoln in the context of ambitious schemes for new development throughout the historic city: weaving the new with the old reconstructs social and economic fabric as much as streets and buildings. When we visit Sheffield in October, we shall be seeking to engage with the City Council and CABE in the regeneration of Park Hill, one of the most significant but problematic post-war housing estates now listed Grade II\*.

## Partnerships

Another significant concern is the primacy of partnership in the regeneration of the historic built environment. Where there have been sustained attempts to build effective working relationships between different interest groups, the sense of common purpose and ability to confront difficult issues is impressive. This was again evident in the Panel's visit to Lincoln, where not only had the City and County come together to design a new museum, but the Lindum Hillside Partnership had brought together the Dean and Chapter, English Heritage, the two local authorities and other interest groups to address the strategic planning of the area. At the other end of the city, a similar partnership, including the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside with its exciting new Rick Mather campus masterplan fresh off the drawing board, was facing up to the implications of Railtrack's proposals to route

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Sparky's Pianos in Digbeth, an historic suburb on the edge of Birmingham's modern city centre about to undergo regeneration but currently finding other uses

vastly increased rail freight traffic through a city centre with three level crossings as part of its proposed upgrade of the East Coast main line.

Partnership is the key to English Heritage's contribution to urban regeneration, so we are giving special priority to developing an effective joint working relationship with the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). Both organisations believe that powerful advocacy is required to promote the best contemporary design in the renewal of sites, spaces and streets in urban Britain; in making common cause, English Heritage and CABE can together make a contribution greater than their two constituent parts. Already the first fruits of our partnership are visible in our joint sponsorship of the consultation paper, *Guidance for Tall Buildings*, and in the forthcoming publication, *Building in Context*, which champions excellence and innovation in new buildings in the historic built environment. Both organisations are now working together on specific projects in the regions, including our new major project on Liverpool over the next three years. In the latest example of our increasingly close collaboration, the Urban Panel's recent visit to Lincoln was undertaken with CABE representatives participating fully throughout.

We are at a moment when English Heritage has a great opportunity to contribute to the regeneration of urban Britain. The Panel's work is already an indication of how determined we are to take full advantage of this time. We aim to show that we are eager partners in this vital work of renewal, that we bring a special contribution by offering clear evaluation based on authoritative research early in the development process, and that we can, with partners like CABE, promote excellence and innovation in both masterplanning and architecture as part of an urban renaissance. □

**Peter Beacham**  
**Head of Urban Strategies and Listing**  
**Convenor of the Urban Panel**

Park Hill, designed by Sheffield City architects, J Lynn and I Smith, 1957-61



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