

Rethinking heritage

The decision by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to place 'Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City' on the list of world heritage in danger raises some crucial issues.



Liverpool waterfront, including the Pier Head group, the Museum of Liverpool and the Mann Island development

The conservation movement has long had difficulty when challenged by managing change in historic cities. Identifying individual components of the architectural heritage and selected areas for a variety of strengths of protection, from the benign to the interventionist, has generally proved to be the limit of perspective and ambition. It is rare to see these components related to each other as part of a much broader process of dynamic change at the urban scale, and not simply integrated but rendered as a determinant and driver of territorial planning policy.

In situations where the survival of the components of the architectural heritage depends on their place within the whole, urban heritage is consequently at risk of suffering unnecessary losses. This is especially the case where the culturally sensitive historic cores of towns and cities are the prime focus of pressures for major change or redevelopment, and counterbalancing policies are not in place to manage those pressures proactively. With few exceptions, functional continuity at scales that match the needs and opportunities of the historic urban tissue is a subject that is given inadequate priority in conservation.

To a considerable degree we take it for granted in the UK that we have contained these losses – at least, of listed buildings and townscape within conservation areas. That this view is not shared by the international conservation community is evidenced by the disproportionate number of monitoring missions that UK urban world heritage sites have attracted in recent years. These joint missions – by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and its advisory body the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) – have addressed issues of concern affecting the urban sites of Bath (in 2008), Edinburgh (also 2008), Liverpool (2006 and November 2011), and London (the Tower and the Palace of Westminster, also 2006 and 2011). No other state that is party to the World Heritage Convention has attracted such attention to the management of its urban heritage.

This concern was highlighted at the 2008 English Heritage conference 'On the Waterfront'¹. The workshop question 'Planning systems, do they fit the current needs

of historic port cities?', elicited two responses from UK heritage professionals. First, we do not step back, start from first principles, and ask the essential questions. Second, the UK planning system does not fit the needs of any historic cities, let alone ones that are ports. We may be world leaders in micro conservation, but where do we stand at the macro level?

This June, at its meeting in St Petersburg, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee placed 'Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City' on the list of world heritage in danger. Such placement can present an opportunity or pose a threat. In the case of earthquake-prone Dubrovnik, for example, following the highly destructive 1991–92 siege, inscription on the danger list served as a focus for coordinated national and international actions of recovery. In the case of Liverpool, however (as with the precedent of Germany's 'Dresden Elbe Valley', delisted in 2009), placement on the danger list poses the threat that Liverpool could become the first UK site to be removed from the UNESCO world heritage list: naming and shaming.



Regensburg: socio-economic continuity at the heart of the conserved historic centre

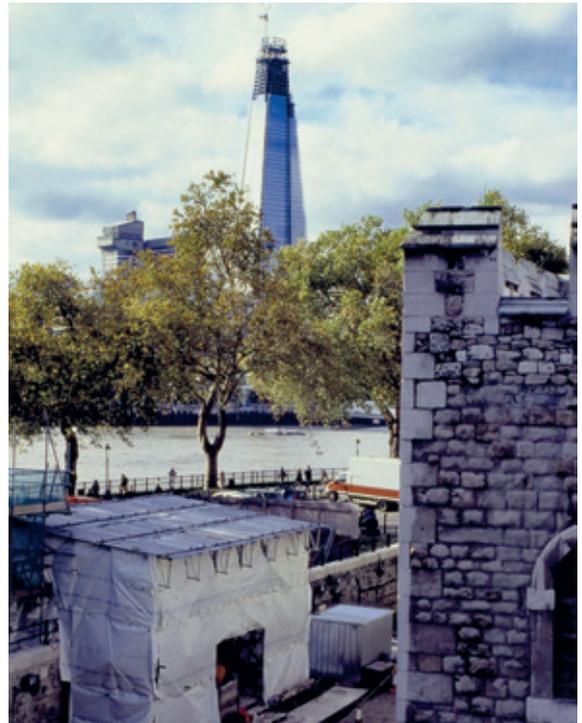
The controversy has been focused on ‘Liverpool Waters’, a £5.5 billion development proposal by Peel Holdings for 60 hectares of derelict historic dockland north of the Pier Head group (popularly known as the Three Graces), for which Liverpool City Council granted outline planning approval in March – against the advice of UNESCO, English Heritage and others. It is reported to be the largest current planning application in the UK.

The UNESCO stance coincides with a longstanding reflection on the management of sites once they are inscribed as ‘world heritage’. Specifically, the most numerous and challenging category: sites that are either urban (of which the city of St Petersburg is the largest in extent), or are monuments situated in an urban context (Cologne Cathedral, for example). This reflection has been focused on the initiative that culminated in the November 2011 UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*.

The context for the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation is ably set out in *The Historic Urban Landscape: managing heritage in an urban century* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), co-authored by the initiative’s two principal drivers, Francesco Bandarin (formerly director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and now assistant director-general for Culture) and Ron van Oers (coordinator of the UNESCO World Heritage Cities Programme).

This book sets out the rationale for a need to revisit traditional approaches to urban conservation, aimed at maintaining urban identity and supporting social and economic development. It does so from first principles, and in the context of today’s major challenges, including rapid urbanisation in developing countries and the global predilection for aggressive architectural interventions.

The Historic Urban Landscape explains and promotes



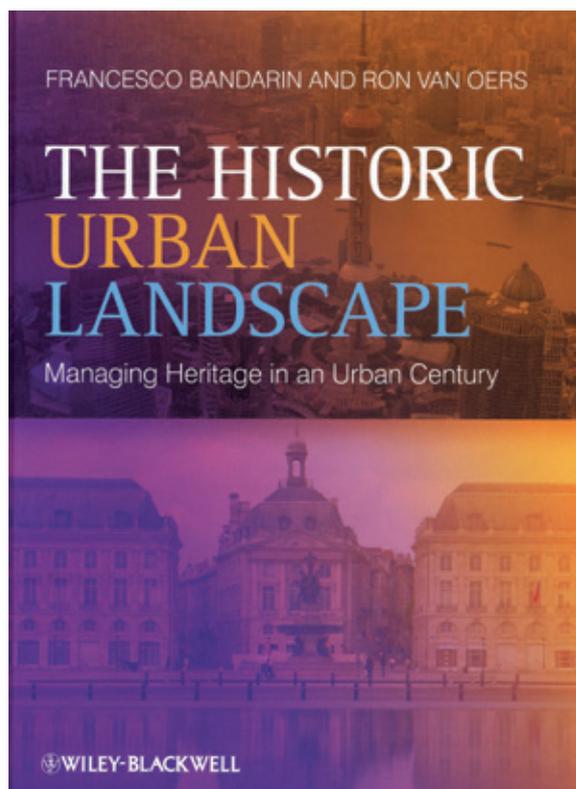
an all-embracing ‘landscape approach’ – a project that parallels English Heritage’s work in the field. The objective is to provide an inter-disciplinary umbrella concept to comprehend how cities are layered and how they develop in their manmade and geographical settings, and to inform a new model for urban development in which heritage values provide guidance and direction. The book embraces the series of agendas in the UNESCO family – tangible and intangible cultural heritage, natural heritage, and cultural diversity. It subsumes setting; the built environment, both historic and contemporary; open spaces; land-use patterns; visual relationships; and continuity of social and cultural traditions and processes.

As *The Historic Urban Landscape* makes clear, however, the initiative has been formulated primarily within intellectual circles and anticipates extensive research. The fact that it requires a book to explain it suggests that communication within academia, let alone to the broad spectrum of civic leaders, urban managers, professionals and citizens, presents a mountain to climb. Indeed, the present book has been anticipated by *Managing Historic Cities* (World Heritage Papers 27, UNESCO, 2010), and is itself the first of a planned trilogy by the same authors.

Bob Kindred has noted in a review of *Managing Historic Cities* in the July issue of the *Journal of Architectural Conservation* that ‘it is unlikely that the term [urban landscape] would be readily grasped or assimilated by policymakers, as the relationship between urban planning and urban landscapes is one not yet widely shared’. In the UNESCO-ICOMOS debates, however, as *The Historic Urban Landscape* admits, it is the prefixed qualifier ‘historic’ – with its implied cut-off point – that proved contentious (*paysage urbain* has a long history as a management tool in France, for example).

Unfortunate also has been the lack of accord between UNESCO and its advisory body ICOMOS. As the book confirms, a key passage in the interim definition

The London Shard viewed from the Tower (photographed nearing completion in late 2011)



of historic urban landscape that was agreed at the 2008 workshop in Paris (stating that ‘its usefulness resides in the notion that it incorporates a capacity for change’) was deleted in the final version. This followed strong opposition from the preservationist lobby that persists within ICOMOS: ‘managing change’ being regarded as the antithesis of ‘the classic values of conservation’. Indeed, as if to underscore the contest between the two organisations, in the same month (November 2011) ICOMOS published its own more comprehensive as well as more preservationist *Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas*.

Even more unfortunate, in my view, and especially counter-productive in the context of debate over Liverpool, has been the insistence by UNESCO, explicitly in the 2005 Vienna Memorandum and implicitly in the 2011 Recommendation, that all interventions in the historic urban environment should be ‘contemporary’. In an urban century in which cultural diversity and identity are under continuous threat, to be prescriptive in the matter of architectural style (or mood) appears contradictory. UNESCO has thus, however unintentionally, fuelled one of the major challenges that the historic urban landscape initiative sets out to address: aggressive architectural interventions.

Bizarrely, although UNESCO opposed Will Alsop’s design for the waterfront Cloud development (dubbed the Fourth Grace) from the outset, at the time of the world heritage inscription in 2004, it acquiesced in the substitute project for the Museum of Liverpool and the neighbouring Broadway Malayan development on Mann Island.

The museum’s design architect, Kim Nielsen, is quoted as saying that ‘Our first reaction was that you shouldn’t build here’². The project was opposed by ICOMOS-UK. The Mann Island development has been dubbed by some the ‘three disgraces’ and the ‘three coffins’. That the funding for the museum was partially linked to the development value of the Broadway Malayan site suggests that one siting error in the urban landscape was used to facilitate another.

In my view, the ‘dramatic manifestation of Liverpool’s historical significance’, symbolised by the historic Pier Head trio – and a cornerstone of the world heritage site designation – has been seriously compromised by these two developments. Both, coincidentally, have vied for infamy in successive *Building Design* competitions for the Carbuncle Cup (as has the neighbouring ferry terminal).

As if to compound the confusion of messages, the decision to place Liverpool on the UNESCO danger list was not related to any consideration of the merits of Liverpool Waters as a projected major new layer for the city. Those merits must be questioned, given the high level of vacant old and new property in the city centre and on the existing waterfront. The UNESCO case focuses on what are described as ‘supertowers’ (which include the proposed 192-metre high Shanghai Tower), and the view that the ‘historical authenticity’ of the world heritage site would be thereby ‘irreversibly damaged’.



Dubrovnik was on the UNESCO list of world heritage in danger from 1991 to 1998.

Note

John Hinchliffe retired from post as world heritage officer for Liverpool City Council at the end of September. Instrumental in securing the city’s UNESCO status in 2004, and in the production of the award-winning 2009 supplementary planning document for the world heritage site, he has proved an able and respected ambassador for the city on the international stage.

References

- 1 See ‘Chequered histories and distinctive futures’, *Context* 108, March 2009 and the published proceedings (at www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/on-the-waterfront/)
- 2 ‘Liverpool’s scuttled flagship’, *Building Design*, 12 August 2011

The status of Liverpool Waters is also an issue. Whereas outline consent was granted by the city council in March, the application was not forwarded to the secretary of state – as the scale of the proposed development and the objections of English Heritage both require – until October. A decision on the calling of a public inquiry is awaited. Further, Liverpool Waters is essentially a long-term speculative project, without presently sourced funding to implement it. I am advised that the offending towers do not feature in the programme until the 2030s. Who knows whether tall buildings will still be fashionable then?

On the premise of north-south equity, one has to question why Liverpool has been targeted for danger listing. For London, UNESCO has simply characterised as unfortunate Renzo Piano’s contested 310-metre-high Shard, in close view of the Tower.

The conservation community, both internationally and nationally, is correct to engage in a debate about the future direction of urban conservation, and to endorse a holistic approach that accounts for urban heritage not just in terms of physical development and the conservation of objects, but in seeking to place heritage as a driver in the development process.

The danger listing of Liverpool has tarnished the UK’s reputation. At the same time, it could be seized as an opportunity for the UK conservation community to play a lead role in this debate, and to do so at a practical rather than academic level.

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