

Liverpool and Edinburgh World Heritage Sites

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Comparative views of the Pier Head Group across Canning Dock and Mann Island taken in 2007 (above) and 2011 (below) © Dennis Rodwell



Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2004 and placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2012. The site's ongoing status on the List in Danger has been the subject of increasingly vigorous debate at the subsequent annual sessions of the World Heritage Committee. In 2016, the Committee effectively placed an ultimatum on the United Kingdom authorities to abide by its repeated requests concerning the effective management and conservation of the Liverpool site or anticipate its deletion from the World Heritage List. The next session of the World Heritage Committee is scheduled for July 2017 (in Krakow).

The Liverpool World Heritage Site has attracted controversy from the outset. At the time of inscription, this was provoked by the 'iconic' architectural project for a 'fourth grace' – a glittering cloud-like structure designed by architect Will Alsop for a waterfront site adjacent to the Pier Head Group (popularised as 'The Three Graces'). Abandoned shortly afterwards, the substitute projects for the new Museum of Liverpool (Kim Nielsen, architect) coupled with the triple-block development on the adjacent Mann Island (Broadway Malayan, architects) provoked the first of three joint UNESCO-ICOMOS reactive monitoring and advisory missions (in 2006, 2011 and 2015). Controversially, the 2006 mission acquiesced in the endorsement by English Heritage of the 'high-quality architectural design and materialization' of these developments; unsurprisingly, the projects vied for infamy in successive *Building Design* competitions for the Carbuncle Cup, an annual award for the ugliest new building in Britain.

The 2011 and 2015 missions both focused on threats posed to the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage Site by the proposed development of 'Liverpool Waters', a speculative £5.5 billion developer-led project to, in effect, construct a major new mixed-use urban district within and to the seaward side of the World Heritage Site and its buffer zone. Whereas the 2006 mission was informed by the 2005 UNESCO *Vienna Memorandum: World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape*, a provisional document that attracted strong critique for its apparent endorsement of

conflictual modern interventions, the 2011 and 2015 missions were informed by the 2011 UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, a document that seeks to inspire a holistic, integrated approach to the management of change in historic cities, whether or not they are inscribed on the World Heritage List.

The 2011 mission report led to 'Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City' being placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger the following year; the 2015 mission report, to escalating representations at the 2015 and 2016 sessions of the World Heritage Committee. These representations have addressed the criteria for placement on the List in Danger as set out in the UNESCO *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. The 'potential dangers' include: "modification of the juridical status of the property diminishing the degree of its protection; lack of conservation policy; [...] threatening effects of town planning." Particular issues that have come to the fore over Liverpool Waters include:

"lack of overall management of new developments; lack of analysis and description of the townscape characteristics relevant to the Outstanding Universal Value of the property and important views related to the property and its buffer zone; lack of clearly established maximum heights for new developments, for the backdrops of the World Heritage areas as well as along the waterfront; [and] lack of awareness of developers, building professionals and the wider public about the World Heritage property, its Outstanding Universal Value and requirements under the World Heritage Convention."

In this, it is indicative that the United Kingdom has attracted a disproportionate number of monitoring missions to its urban World Heritage Sites: including, as readers will be well aware, the 'Old and New Towns of Edinburgh'. Viewed from an international perspective, the 'potential dangers' affecting the Liverpool site are not unique to it. There is, in effect, an abandonment of planning in the United Kingdom (in the correct meaning of the word planning, as forward looking rather than opportunist reaction to speculative proposals); and an absence of understanding let alone practice of *integrated conservation*, the concept first articulated in the 1975 *European Charter of*

Panorama of the Liverpool waterfront from the seaward north-west, illustrating the damage inflicted on the urban landscape as a result of incoherent contemporary interventions. © Dennis Rodwell



the Architectural Heritage. Recent changes in national planning policy and guidance exacerbate this. These include a lack of coordination between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which officially represents the United Kingdom as *state party* to the World Heritage Convention, the Department for Communities and Local Government that is responsible for planning matters in England, and similar disconnection in relation to the other 'home countries' as well as to individual planning authorities. In short – viewed from outside – there is no 'juridical status' that enables the United Kingdom to comply with its obligations under the World Heritage Convention. The United Kingdom delegations speaking at the 2015 and 2016 sessions of the World Heritage Committee (in Bonn and Istanbul respectively) effectively admitted this.

Recognition of the challenge facing the United Kingdom urban heritage community is selective, but not new. In 2008, I was invited by English Heritage to moderate a workshop at their *On the Waterfront* conference in Liverpool. At the end of the workshop I invited participants to proffer their personal ripostes to the question that was posed in the title: 'Planning systems: do they fit the current needs of historic port cities?' The responses reflected the United Kingdom experience and were volunteered by individuals working in central and local government. First, "*in the United Kingdom we do not step back, start from first principles, and ask the essential questions*". Second, even more unambiguously, "*the planning system in the United Kingdom does not fit the needs of any historic cities, let alone port cities*".

Shortly afterwards, I was in another European port city inscribed on the World Heritage List, 'Bordeaux, Port de la Lune', a city that has very strict controls on building heights, form, and building lines. I spent an evening with an architect couple who presented their work: creative and imaginative; respecting all the urban regulations. I asked if they found the regulations to be restrictive. Their reply?

On the contrary: we know exactly where we stand, as do our clients; we don't waste time disputing and negotiating; we get on with the job of designing to meet our clients' instructions; and we deliver on time. It appeared as no coincidence that the 'scandal' affecting the four-line Bordeaux tram system was that its completion was two months late. Why? Because it employed an innovative technology: there are no stanchions or overhead cables; no infrastructure is visible above ground level; and there were a few teething problems.

Effective urban conservation policy has an elemental requirement for the '3Cs': *certainty, clarity, and consistency*; this, at the strategic down to the detailed scales. For historic cities whose *genius loci* we wish to sustain for posterity, support for projects that do not conform to any long-term vision at any scale, however seductive they may appear to some at first sight, should have no place. Local politicians, especially where electoral cycles are short, are especially susceptible to opportunist projects, the bigger the better. The case of Liverpool Waters is a prime example of this.

In the United Kingdom we have a number of challenges that distinguish us from other European countries. First, we have no *national* designation for historic cities or urban areas – hence city areas such as the Liverpool and Edinburgh World Heritage Sites are propelled from local designations to global inscription without any intermediate stage. Second, especially for England, and manifest in relation both to the London and Liverpool World Heritage Sites, we operate under national guidance that promotes the construction of tall buildings in historic cities together with a banal system that favours views from set corridors over overarching panoramas. Third, *development* and *conservation* continue to be seen as polar opposites, not as complementary – notwithstanding that informed opinion recognises that any intervention in the fabric and functionality of the built environment represents development,

whether conversion, adaptation, repair or other. Fourth, emphasising the political bias towards new construction, is the unfavourable VAT regime: thus, interventions to existing buildings, whether listed or not, are subject to a 20% surcharge, whereas new construction is zero rated. This is the inverse of the fiscal bias towards conservation and adaptive reuse that applies across most of continental Europe. This discrepancy is the result of United Kingdom policy; not, as sometimes represented, of European Union directives.

We additionally have a reputational challenge. When, in 2004, I first asked the late Ron van Oers, head of the UNESCO World Heritage Cities Programme, which country he considered to have the best protective system for historic cities, he unhesitatingly replied the United Kingdom. Subsequently, as part of the reflections that informed the 2011 UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, the Liverpool World Heritage Site was offered as a test case. This placed the United Kingdom firmly in the spotlight. When, following the 2011 mission, I repeated my question to Ron van Oers, his reply was very different; when I followed up by asking how he now rated the United Kingdom protective system, his reply was to the effect of "*What system?*".

In summary, from the international perspective, the underlying threats that have led to the placing of 'Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City' on the List of World Heritage in Danger are generic. Controversies that have arisen in recent years relating to the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site, whether over Haymarket, Caltongate, St James's Centre or the former Royal High School, are all symptomatic of this common pattern. The conservation community in Scotland should not be complacent. The international spotlight is now firmly on the United Kingdom as a whole. ■