

# Personal Reflection on the 2021 Draft Decision to delete Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City from the UNESCO World Heritage List

Dennis Rodwell, 28 June 2021



*Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City. The 2003 nomination document and management plan championed inscription as a World Heritage Site on the premiss that the surviving urban landscape testified to the historical role of Liverpool as a great port city and defined its ‘tangible authenticity’. Comprising one of the most recognisable waterfront ensembles in the world, the trio of buildings at the Pier Head is described as the focal point: ‘They form a dramatic manifestation of Liverpool’s historical significance ... [whose] vast scale ... allows them to dominate the waterfront when approaching by ship’. Photographed 2007. (© Dennis Rodwell)*

\* \* \* \* \*

I have been alerted to Draft Decision 44 COM 7A.34, at <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2021/whc21-44com-7A.Add-en.pdf> (pp.52–58):

34. Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) (C 1150):

“[The World Heritage Committee] Decides to delete Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) from the World Heritage List.”

I have followed the Liverpool World Heritage story since the turn of the millennium: from the early preparatory stages leading to the 2003 *Nomination for Inscription on the World Heritage List* (<https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1150.pdf>) onwards; at times, at close quarters.

The sequence of my related publications can be accessed on Academia.edu:

[https://www.academia.edu/40384255/Publications\\_focused\\_on\\_Liverpool\\_and\\_the\\_Historic\\_Urban\\_Landscape\\_2008\\_to\\_2018](https://www.academia.edu/40384255/Publications_focused_on_Liverpool_and_the_Historic_Urban_Landscape_2008_to_2018).

The starting point for this Reflection is:

[https://www.academia.edu/36870271/A\\_failure\\_of\\_process\\_Comprehending\\_the\\_issues\\_fostering\\_heritage\\_conflict\\_in\\_Dresden\\_Elbe\\_Valley\\_and\\_Liverpool\\_Mercantile\\_Maritime\\_City\\_World\\_Heritage\\_Sites\\_2015\\_01](https://www.academia.edu/36870271/A_failure_of_process_Comprehending_the_issues_fostering_heritage_conflict_in_Dresden_Elbe_Valley_and_Liverpool_Mercantile_Maritime_City_World_Heritage_Sites_2015_01)

This draws attention to the pivotal error that was made by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in its 2004 Advisory Body Evaluation ([file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/1150-ICOMOS-1331-en%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/1150-ICOMOS-1331-en%20(3).pdf)). Whereas challenges posed by development projects affecting the site and buffer zone were noted, the Evaluation deleted (urban) landscape from the State Party's (Liverpool City Council's) draft for the proposed wording for the justification of outstanding universal value (at criteria (ii) and (iv) (<http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1150.pdf>)). This alteration was not drawn to the attention of the World Heritage Committee at its twenty-eight Session held in Suzhou, China, 2004 (<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2004/whc04-28com-inf26e.pdf>, pp. 224–226), and Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City was inscribed as follows:

*Criterion (ii):* Liverpool was a major centre generating innovative technologies and methods in dock construction and port management in the 18th and 19th centuries. It thus contributed to the building up of the international mercantile systems throughout the British Commonwealth.

*Criterion (iii):* the city and the port of Liverpool are an exceptional testimony to the development of maritime mercantile culture in the 18th and 19th centuries, contributing to the building up of the British Empire. It was a centre for the slave trade, until its abolition in 1807, and to emigration from northern Europe to America.

*Criterion (iv):* Liverpool is an outstanding example of a world mercantile port city, which represents the early development of global trading and cultural connections throughout the British Empire.

In the 2003 nomination dossier, the State Party's perception of Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City may be summarised as:

- Global maritime mercantile importance; surviving extent of complementary components of the architectural and industrial heritage; coherent urban landscape.
- Urban landscape as testimony to the historical role and importance of the city and manifestation of the site's tangible authenticity.

In the 2004 ICOMOS Advisory Evaluation and World Heritage Committee inscription, the perception may be summarised as:

- World port city; pioneering developments in dock technology and related systems; range and quantity of significant buildings.
- Focused on the state of conservation of the historic docks and buildings, including their architectural features and minor detailing.

The effect of this alteration has been two-fold:

- First, it signalled to the United Kingdom government and Liverpool City Council that the urban landscape was not a determining factor in the 2004 inscription; thus, for the subsequent monitoring of the World Heritage Site.
- Second, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, as Secretariat to the Convention and to the Committee, only took retrospective interest in Liverpool's townscape / urban landscape in the lead up to and following the adoption of the UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* in November 2011. This prevented the Secretariat from promoting any actions until then, by which time it was effectively too late.

Adhering to the terms of the inscription of the Liverpool World Heritage Site in 2004, the first UNESCO-ICOMOS reactive monitoring mission, October 2006, described the planning system to manage the city's urban renaissance as impressive, and concluded that the overall state of conservation of the World Heritage Site was good, and its *outstanding universal value* was not under threat (<file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/mis1150-oct2006.pdf>). Additionally, in response to request from the World Heritage Centre, Liverpool City Council prepared the award-winning 2009 World Heritage Supplementary Planning Document (<https://liverpool.gov.uk/media/9644/world-heritage-site-spd.pdf>).

For my part, I have critiqued much of what has happened in the field of urban planning and over-arching heritage management in Liverpool in recent years; the sequence of my publications confirms this.

However, in the matter of basic integrity, I deplore even more the attempt by the World Heritage Centre to transfer responsibility for the 2004 error in the Advisory Body's Evaluation on to the State Party (and Liverpool City Council), by promoting the Draft Decision to delete Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City from the World Heritage List. If the World Heritage Centre and Committee do not like what has happened since the 2004 inscription, the starting error should be acknowledged, and steps taken to reform the relevant procedures and avoid repetition across the system.

In my opinion, to proceed with the delisting of Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City would signal failure of the World Heritage system and jeopardise its reputation. It would place a retrospective question mark over the status of each and every one of the 1,121 properties in the current World Heritage List, together with those that may shortly be inscribed at the forty-fourth session of the World Heritage Committee in July 2021.

Within the framework of a Convention that is ratified today by 194 State Parties, there is an elemental prerequisite for certainty, clarity and consistency – the 3Cs of effective protection. Failure to adhere to these 3Cs at this time would, in my view, reflect a level of inconstancy that would equate the World Heritage List to a House of Cards – just as the Convention approaches its fiftieth year.

\* \* \* \* \*

© Dennis Rodwell

Architect-Planner, Consultant in Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development