**LIVERPOOL MARITIME MERCANTILE CITY**

INSCRIBED UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN 2004

Engage Liverpool, a civil society actor and not-for-profit social enterprise, got involved last year for the first time with the World Heritage Watch Forum held in Krakow, Poland. Liverpool had been on the at-risk register since the St Petersburg, 36th Session of the World Heritage Committee (WHC) in 2012[[1]](#footnote-1) and in 2016 UNESCO WHC took drastic action, rejected by the Mayor,[[2]](#footnote-2) which called for a two-year moratorium on all planning applications in the site. Then in 2017 the city was given until 2018 to show that it really cared about WHS status or it would be deleted at the 42nd Session of the WHC in Bahrain.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The city’s public authorities had been ambivalent to say the least and it was clear that the elected Mayor and some developers[[4]](#footnote-4) wouldn’t be upset to see Liverpool lose its World Heritage Site (WHS) status. It was obvious that unless civil society took an interest we were in serious danger of losing the inscription. Engage, which works with residents who live in the city centre and waterfront, decided that we would spearhead a campaign of education to let people know what being a UNESCO WHS involved and to ask the question was WHS a status worth fighting for? The outcome was certainly not a foregone conclusion.

We had decided that the topic for our 2017 annual seminar series would be the UNESCO WHS and it was recognised that the local and national media had only ever reflected one side of the story and that citizens had never heard UNESCO’s voice, only anti-UNESCO comments mediated by leading players in the city. So after taking advice we invited three UNESCO speakers to come to the city and share their thoughts with us.

All three accepted our invitation which was incredible and so we set about inviting citizens to hear UNESCO’s concerns about Liverpool. Each seminar was at capacity with over 150 people attending and the interest was intense. Every event was live-streamed and yet the local press made no mention at all of the city’s illustrious guests. Engage managed to place the three seminars in prestigious buildings in the WHS. The first seminar was held in the 18th century Grade I listed Town Hall, the centre of civic life in Liverpool, and the theme was ‘UNESCO WHS - What’s It All About?’ Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel, Chief of the Europe and North America Unit at the World Heritage Centre in Paris, was the main speaker.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The second seminar a fortnight later was held in a different part of the WHS on the Waterfront, the location for much of the controversy with UNESCO, in the newly-built Museum of Liverpool, in perhaps the most sensitive part of the site. The theme was ‘Development and Conservation – Why the Conflict?’ and the speaker was Prof Michael Turner, UNESCO Chair in Urban Design and Conservation at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The final seminar was in the Grade I Listed Civil Court at St George’s Hall in the heart of Liverpool’s Culture Quarter, and heard Dr Minja Yang, formerly Deputy Director and Coordinator of UNESCO World Heritage Cities programme and currently President and Professor at the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, address the capacity audience on the theme ‘Heritage Assets - Where’s the Value?’[[7]](#footnote-7) Following her address the participants were asked to vote on the original seminar question and the verdict was unanimous – yes WHS is indeed a status worth fighting for. Not one single vote against.

The impact of our seminars is hard to quantify but two days before Dr Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel arrived in the city the elected Mayor announced he was establishing a Liverpool World Heritage Board which was asked to ‘reset the relationship with UNESCO’.[[8]](#footnote-8) This has now reported and though their report hasn’t been released by looking at the draft Desired State of Conservation Report, that the Council agreed and which is now in the hands of the State Party (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport), one can see a huge effort has been made to make sure Liverpool doesn’t lose its status this year in Bahrain.

Civil society actors can do very little in the face of strong political power and overwhelming financial resources but we continued to believe in soft power and the impact of simply listening to a voice that spoke of peace, humanity and outstanding universal values. Many of our citizens were deeply moved to hear Dr Anatole-Gabriel say that: “My presence here is to tell you that we, at UNESCO, care for Liverpool. We want to keep Liverpool on the World Heritage List” and she went on to state clearly that the Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City WHS “is a jewel because it embodies one part of the history of humanity itself.” Our speakers themselves reset the relationship between the city and UNESCO.

The DSOCR has recommended major improvements to protect the OUV of the site which though it has taken time to get here is a welcome change of attitude on the part of the civic authorities. It is a very honest and clear document and it is to be hoped that it will be accepted by the WHC when it meets this year.[[9]](#footnote-9) The new elements are:

* A comprehensive updated **Management Plan[[10]](#footnote-10)** was adopted in 2017 that integrates the attributes of the World Heritage property to guide Citywide policies and actions
* Update of planning tool in force, by the definition and adoption of policy and regulatory measures embodied in a **Local Plan**
* Update of planning tool in force, following the adoption of the Local Plan before the end of 2018, through the revision of the **Supplementary Planning Document** that adopts the Historic Urban Landscape approach
* Review the development in progress for the **Princes Dock Neighbourhood** and, by negotiation with all parties concerned, to continue the pattern of substantially lowering the height of schemes
* Develop and finalize a **height (“skyline”) policy for tall buildings** within the Property and its Buffer Zone
* the **Neighbourhood Masterplans for Central Docks and for Northern Docks** and their respective surroundings will be reviewed and finalized
* **Implement the new complementary framework** within the WHS Buffer Zone of the “Ten Streets” Spatial Regeneration Framework
* Strengthen the management system for the Property, and the consistency of approach in managing the development process, through an integrated multi-stakeholder approach, including consideration of the **creation of a Liverpool World Heritage Trust**, in which Engage Liverpool is specifically mentioned
* Develop and implement a **World Heritage interpretation and communication strategy** aimed at the community of Liverpool, and its visitors, and an awareness-raising programme aimed at developers and building professionals, of the World Heritage Property, its Outstanding Universal Value and conservation and management requirements under the World Heritage Convention
* **Review the Property boundaries and Buffer Zone**, and consider an enhancement of its integrity by **an extension of Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City World Heritage Site** to better reflect her maritime and mercantile pre-eminence as the greatest Western European seaport, from the early eighteenth to the mid -twentieth centuries.

It is to be hoped that this is sufficient progress for Liverpool to be kept as an at-risk property in 2018 but not deleted. It is completely understandable that the WHC will want to see these plans and aspirations implemented and as a local civil society actor we would want to exercise caution in any approach given the history of our unnecessarily ambiguous and confrontational relationship with UNESCO. We need time to prove our sincerity and to demonstrate our capacity for delivering what we are proposing.

It would be really good if UNESCO WHC could encourage specific ways in which civil society could be more active in engaging in actions to support at-risk sites and recognise that there is great value in a multiplicity of agencies working from their own perspective and with their own ethos to protect the status of each WHS. Also it seems critical to us that should a planning application come forth for a new football stadium in the World Heritage Site at Bramley Moore Dock then the State Party has no option but to call in the application and in so doing prove to UNESCO that UK planning regulations are capable of protecting this and the many WHSs across the country. UNESCO will be rightly asking why the UK Government never called in the Liverpool Waters project in the beginning and maybe it is because the official State Party (DCMS) is not the Department of Government responsible for Planning (DCLG) and they don’t necessarily work together!

Engage has decided to support both the city and UNESCO and make the theme of this year’s annual seminar series inspirational WHS cities in Europe. We want to bring to Liverpool stories from other WHS to showcase what they have done to make good use of their status to deliver jobs, regeneration, quality of life for locals and an enhanced visitor experience for tourists.

We are currently inviting two people from each city, one from the WHS management team and the other either an architect or planner in the WHS to share with us how they have used their WHS status to establish a unique identity that sets them apart from other cities in their country and region. We want to know how they have increased income to the city, convinced architects that working with the OUV of the site can enhance and improve the designs of their buildings, how they have involved residents in increasing awareness of the WHS for locals, and how they have worked with politicians and developers to keep them on board? The three ‘WHS Cities of Inspiration’ we are inviting to participate are Strasbourg, Hamburg and Bordeaux. None are perfect but each has a story to tell that we need to hear, each has developed an approach to their WHS that we can learn from.

The final word must go to the DSOCR document set out by Liverpool City Council:

We recognize that this is work in progress and we invite the active participation of the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS in the masterplanning process to assist us in reaching the desired state of conservation that is set out here.

Gerry Proctor MBE MPhil FRSA

Chair of Engage Liverpool CIC

1st April 2018

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/the-northerner/2012/jun/20/liverpool-unesco-heritage-risk> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/17/liverpool-waterfront-world-heritage-site-status-risk-mayor-rejects-unesco-plea> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/42com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/01/final-warning-liverpools-unesco-status-at-risk-over-docks-scheme> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.engageliverpool.com/news/videos-unesco-whs-seminar-one/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.engageliverpool.com/news/unesco-whs-seminar-two-videos-plus/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.engageliverpool.com/news/unesco-whs-seminar-three-videos-plus/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/03/liverpool-world-heritage-site-threat-taskforce> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.engageliverpool.com/news/plan-save-whs-status-published/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://regeneratingliverpool.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PMD-486-Liverpool-WHS-Management-Plan-FINAL-VERSION-as-at-12-May-2017.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)