

IS HERITAGE REALLY IMPORTANT? IS HISTORY REALLY IMPORTANT?

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'Is heritage really important' and 'is history really important' are two separate but related issues. They are also two enormous questions for which the following brief examination is only a very small response and one which is directed to the way in which heritage and history have a role in urban design.

> There are at least **6 REASONS** why heritage and history are important :

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS MONEY

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS BEAUTY

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS FIBRE

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS PLACE

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS LEGACY

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS SUSTAINABILITY

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS MONEY

'Heritage motivates people to travel in order to quench their thirst for knowledge, to reinforce their place in history and contextualise a place geographically and socially. In doing so they spend considerable sums of money to the benefit of the place.'

[UK Heritage Lottery Fund 2010](#)

> The UK heritage tourism industry contributes in excess of GBP 12 million to the UK economy every year and supports an estimated 195,000 full time jobs, bigger than the UK advertising, car or film industries. 4 in 10 leisure visitors cite heritage as the primary motivation for their trip to the UK

(more than any other single factor) whilst 53% of the UK population make a trip to experience the atmosphere of a historic town or city at least once a year.

The reasons why people come to see and experience places of historic heritage are many and varied, but what is important in this context is that they do come – and when they come they spend money. They do this in a direct way (such as entry payment to museums) and they do this in a substantial indirect way through the many forms of spending associated with visiting attractive places (such as eating, accommodation, etc, and particularly through general shopping).

The UK planning system arranges shopping into two types: convenience shopping and comparison shopping. Although planning might wish it to be otherwise (for the sometimes over-simplistic notion that everybody should just use the corner shop) it is understandable that when shopping for the usual bulk food needs, ease of shopping and parking often take priority over the physical appearance of the place. This is not to say that the many large retail parks in the UK are perfectly good – on the contrary, whilst they might combine the bulk shopping needs with easy parking, they are unsustainable. They are frequently associated with traffic congestion problems and have contributed to the decline of the traditional shopping street. The point I am making here is that the quality of the immediate physical context is frequently not the determining factor for the convenience shopper.

Comparison shopping is a quite different issue and it is one which might be considered to be far closer to the activity of 'leisure shopping'. In both cases the shopping experience is crucial to the activity – and not surprisingly, the physical quality of the context plays a significant role in determining the quality of that experience, i.e. the extent to which it is a safe and pleasing experience, the extent to which movement in the place is understandable and convenient, the extent to which the buildings and spaces are stimulating and attractive, and that they not only contain shops but other associated

uses such as restaurants and bars. It therefore comes as no surprise to find that historic UK towns such as Chester, York or Shrewsbury are all places which are considered good shopping town centres, because they provide rich and stimulating surroundings which contribute significantly to the comparison and leisure shopping experience. Therefore the contribution of heritage to the shopping experience should not be underestimated and particularly the role of the historic environment to the meandering comparison shopping experience.

- > Further, when combining the wealth generated by shopping with the associated employment it is apparent that heritage has a very valuable role in sustaining the local economy. Thus, quite apart from any justification based upon 'soft' reasons such as beauty or culture, heritage is important for its 'hard' value in contributing to making money.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS BEAUTY

'Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.'

Confucius

- > Across the UK there are many natural and man made locations with special designations. Some are designated because they are places of special historic or ecological value such as 'Conservation Areas' and 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest' (SSSIs). In many cases these places are special because they are also visually attractive, i.e. they are beautiful. The UK designation of 'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONBs) is one good example of this.
- > Of course the concept and definition of beauty is very debatable and many subscribe to the belief that it is a wholly subjective issue, that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. As if to prove this point, in 2000 a British newspaper pursued a campaign to designate Kylie Minogue's bottom as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. Although it was intended as a hoax it demonstrated that it is wrong to assume that there is universal agreement about what is outstandingly beautiful.

Notwithstanding the above example, it is evident from observation (at least in western society) that people often share the same preferences for things such as movie stars, cars, great buildings and great places, i.e. society displays a remarkable amount of collective agreement about what is beautiful. Moreover, whilst it is perfectly true that it is possible to think of places of historic heritage which mark unpleasant events of the past and are not aesthetically pleasing, a great many of the places in the UK which are designated as being outstandingly beautiful are those which might be termed as having historic heritage.

Places of historic heritage are not automatically places of beauty, but heritage and history are important because they often are beautiful places.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS FIBRE

'Every noble life leaves its fibre interwoven forever in the work of the world.'

John Ruskin

A significant proportion of UK residents now live in housing estates which are relatively bland and uninteresting. Layouts frequently exhibit the same placelessness, the architecture is at best a pale, superficial and confused reflection of older styles with little authentic quality and British town centres are full of the usual national and international pastiches. People are becoming visually gratuitous through the medium of mass media and their senses are impoverished by their bland 'living diet'.

The quality of architecture is often discussed with reference to the three principles first described by Marcus Vitruvius (70-15 BC): **Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas**. The first and second of these qualities – those of firmness (structural soundness) and commodity (fit for purpose) are often easy to explain and defend. However the issue of 'delight' is often difficult to define as it can be viewed as the 'intangible' part of design, and yet one can argue that it is this very quality which distinguishes and sets architecture above mere building. Could it be

that the explanation of the value and importance of delight may in part lie in satisfying the need to have sensory 'fibre' in lifestyle?

- > Whilst good architecture and urban design which is well crafted is able to satisfy some 'sensory fibre' irrespective of its heritage the many layers of interest and the patina of age which is often associated with historic landscapes frequently provide a rich source of sensory 'texture' and visual 'fibre'. I would propose that heritage and history are important because they provide sensory fibre necessary for human well being.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS PLACE

'What the individual requires... is not a plot of ground but a place – a context within which he can expand and become himself. A place in this sense cannot be bought; it must be shaped, usually over long periods of time, by the common affairs of men and women. It must be given scale and meaning by their love.'

August Heckscher

- > In *Genius Loci* Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979) explains how places are important to satisfy the human need to belong to a location and the need to orientate themselves in the world.
- > In *Place and Placelessness* Edward Relph (1976) describes how places are a combination of the physical setting, the activities which take place there and have taken place there and the meanings associated with it. He also explains the importance and role of authenticity in 'place making' and how that quality is achieved in an area through the process of being lived-in, used and experienced. Time is clearly a contributing factor in the creation of places.
- > The marks of the passage of time manifest themselves in many different ways. Sometimes it is through the accumulation of memories and meanings associated with a place but often it is the physical setting of a location through the remnants and layers of historic development and change which helps give a place its history and much of its identity and authenticity.

The whole concept of place is very much dependent upon the ability to distinguish between one place and another, i.e. to be able to identify with a place, the place must be distinguishable from other places. The things which mark one place from another is about their differences. Difference is a good principle. Looking at human beings and the celebration of the variety of people proves that difference brings diversity and interest.

Heritage is not only a very potent and very tangible expression of the passage of time but a rich source of the things which make places different.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS LEGACY

'Heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.'

UK Heritage Lottery Fund 2010

The term heritage can often just mean old or historic and certainly the sections above have tended to imply this. Although the words heritage, old and history are frequently used together they actually have three different meanings.

Old is more to do with having lived or existed for a relatively long time, whilst the word history comes from the Greek **ιστορία** – historia, and is concerned with information about the past and shares its etymology with the English word 'story'. Heritage on the other hand is more precisely defined as meaning legacy, i.e. that which is inherited from the past and particularly, that which is valued today and worth preserving for future generations.

Once heritage is not only used to mean very old things it is possible to embrace many other forms of development, architecture and landscape, including from the very recent past. Indeed the UK heritage industry regards many buildings from the 20th century as being part of the British heritage. A key aspect of heritage in this respect is not so much that a building or a place is old but that it is valued today and worth preserving for the future.

- > Of course this raises another question of how to decide whether a man made or natural landscape is valuable or not and therefore worthy of preservation. Whilst these brief notes are far too short to explore this important question they can acknowledge the broad principle that the retention and re-use of older buildings and townscape are an inevitable and important part of legacy. They help location in history, understanding culture, bring about a more sustainable approach to building (i.e. extending and continuing the use of an existing resource) and provide a development with an 'instant' sense of maturity and visual distinctiveness. Historic heritage is the gift from the past to the current generation. Heritage is passing this gift to the future.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY AS SUSTAINABILITY

'Therefore, when we build, let it be such work as our descendents will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone upon stone, that a time will come when men will say, as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them, see! this our fathers did for us.'

John Ruskin

- > The definition of sustainability in the UK is slightly different from the definition used in Poland. Whilst the British meaning is often based on the Brundland Report (1987)¹ and is particularly concerned with the responsibility to future generations, the Polish definition of sustainability has more to do with the concept of balance. Both are right.
- > Despite its noble origins, the word sustainability has also come to mean many different things in the UK. One of the misleading interpretations is the way it can be seen as being primarily concerned with the use of sustainable features, such as photovoltaic panels or wind turbines or specific waste recycling and energy efficiency measures.
- > The true essence of sustainability however is about good stewardship. An important part of that process the best use of resources, the way they are valued and how to make the best use of the built heritage. This principle not only applies to the

way in which buildings are preserved as a record of the past, but also in the way in which buildings are continued to be employed for contemporary uses whilst preserving the integrity of the original structure. In doing so the great and the beautiful is passed on to the descendents, so that they too can enjoy the richness of our heritage.

This is not a static process. Preserving buildings as museum pieces can in some cases be economically unsustainable. It is far better to put the building to good use whilst preserving the integrity of the property. Not only will this sustain the building for future generations but it will also help provide the 'fibre' and place making maturity to an area.

CONCLUSIONS

These notes have very briefly touched upon several issues which are important in urban design. The planning and design of the built environment can be, and to a great extent must be financially viable. It must contribute to the beauty and richness of our urban landscapes, it must provide a texture to our lives, it must help to create real places and it must provide a worthwhile legacy for future generations.

Whilst heritage and history are by no means the sole solution in addressing these issues (and indeed one would hope that the good examples of today will become the valued heritage of tomorrow), they do provide a rich source.

It has been said that if one wishes to understand a society then one needs look no further than the physical world around it – as its values are made manifest in the buildings and landscapes. It would be a dangerous and sad thing if one did not move forward confidently, creating buildings, landscapes and places which one hopes will become the beautiful heritage of the future, and it would be equally dangerous and sad if one did not value and acknowledge the value and importance of existing heritage and history.

¹The Brundland's Report quotes: *'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'*