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PLANNING SYSTEMS:
*DO THEY FIT THE
CURRENT NEEDS OF*
HISTORIC
PORT CITIES?

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Port Cities that have lost their principal function, in some cases their *raison d'être*, present a particular challenge for conservation and regeneration. Port Cities are not just about buildings and infrastructure. They express and bear witness to a whole way of life: of exchange, communication and conviviality; and of a *mélange* of tangible and intangible cultural heritage traditions focused on the natural element of water.

Are we simply concerned with conserving the vestiges of their historic built environment and – through 'regeneration' – redefining all other aspects of their heritage, especially at their waterfronts: from the 'low life' of sailors, dockside workers, street traders, hostels and bars; to the 'high life' of plush offices, expensive apartments, and luxury cruise ships? Do top-down planning policies and investment strategies best suit the distinctive identity and immense diversity of the world's numerous port cities, be they large or small, sea or river? How do we define the parameters of their authenticity and integrity and for the evolution of their *genius loci,* or spirit of place?

This workshop discussed aims and means, and took a critical look at aspects of national and regional planning policies, models and directives, and local interpretation of them in practice.

INTRODUCTION

Port cities provided the main theme for a number of conferences in the second half of 2008, including in France, Germany and the United States[1], and of course this conference held in Liverpool. This degree of attention is hardly surprising: at least half of the world's cities were founded at locations that profited from trading and other links by sea, river or canal and can therefore be considered as 'port cities'.

The distinguishing characteristic of historic port cities is the specificity of inter-related activities that take place at or close to their waterfronts, together with the relationships that these inspire between people, boats and shipping; the loading and unloading of raw materials and merchandise; buyers and sellers, stallholders and merchants. Waterfronts manifest multiple forms of human interaction: of social meeting as well as business. Those of large maritime ports host extensive transient populations, catered for by a range of hostels, bars and restaurants, marginal activities such as the 'informal economy' and brothels, and an above average share of souvenir hunters and tattoo studios. They function to a specific form of spontaneous order that constitutes chaos to urban planners: neither well understood nor appreciated.

Planning systems impact variously on historic cities according to issues of national and local governance and essential factors such as time and place. The degree to which they may or may not meet the current needs of historic port cities will depend: firstly, on the responsiveness of national and regional planning policies, models and directives; and secondly, the degree of discretion that is delegated to local authorities and communities and how this is exercised.

Notes

1.　The European Association for Urban History conference 'Comparative History of European Cities', Lyon, August 2008, included two main sessions focused on port cities and a number of presentations in specialist sessions; HafenCity University, Hamburg, hosted 'The Fixity and Flow of Urban Waterfronts' in October 2008; and Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, hosted 'Global Port Cities and Networking from the 20th to the 21st Century' in November 2008.

20TH TO 21ST CENTURY IMPACTS ON HISTORIC PORT CITIES

The major impacts are predominantly to be found in sea port cities where, from the 1960s onwards, the changeover in international shipping practices from manually intensive dockside to predominantly automated containerisation led to the use of far larger ships and the relocation of freight activity to specialised container ports and distribution centres served by new landside rail and road links.

This created voids at their historic waterfronts. From symbols of prosperity their dock areas degenerated into symbols of economic and social decay, often with impacts across the whole city. In few world cities was this transformation as swift or as complete as in Liverpool, a city whose very existence depended on shipping, maritime trade and associated commerce and industries.[2]

GLOBALISATION: THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

Historic sea port cities were places of economic exchange and leading gateways for the transmission of people, goods, cultural and social networks between peoples. They were cosmopolitan: multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith. The exchange of goods and ideas included building materials and technologies, architectural design and urban planning.

We tend to think of globalisation as a twentieth century phenomenon; also, in some circles, as one to be resisted. But globalisation is not new. The 1,000 year-old maritime mercantile republics of Venice and Dubrovnik, for example, enjoyed a quasi-globalised as well as balanced trading, cultural and ecological relationship to their extended hinterlands, and hosted a mélange of ethnic and religious communities from the full length and breadth of the Mediterranean and beyond.

The port of Liverpool epitomised later globalisation beyond the confines of Europe into the New and Third Worlds. Such ports became major nodes in a worldwide capitalist network and supported the integration of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods – such as Liverpool's Chinatown, home to Europe's oldest Chinese community – with resultant gain to the human traditions of their host city and without loss of elemental identity and sense of place.

Critically, throughout the period of their heydays, Adriatic sea port cities such as Dubrovnik and Venice and Atlantic ones such as Liverpool were in control of their own destinies. In their urban management they were not answerable to outside planning policies and directives; in their architectural expressions they interpreted outside influences but were not beholden to them.

The strong sense of place in these cities was reinforced by strict local planning regulations. Those of Dubrovnik, for example, date from 1272 and continue to guide building heights and materials (but not architectural style), colours and advertising in that city *(Fig.1)*.[3]

Fig.1: Dubrovnik, Croatia: an historical example of globalisation in the socio-economic sense, but one whose strictly enforced local urban planning regulations have protected its architectural homogeneity, cultural distinctiveness, and sense of place. (© Dennis Rodwell)

The protection of sense of place in the context of multiple influences is not therefore a new phenomenon. It is the geo-cultural spread, the diversity and rapidity of communication sources, the widespread lack of effective, locally-determined regulatory frameworks, and burgeoning uniformity that is more recent. As one critic has put it:

Notes

2.   Rodwell, D 2008 'Urban Regeneration and the Management of Change: Liverpool and the Historic Urban Landscape'. *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 14 (2), 83-106.

3.   Rodwell, D 2004 'Dubrovnik, Pearl of the Adriatic'. *World Heritage Review* 38, 68-79.

4.   Hunt, D 2006 Memoirs: *Military and Diplomatic*. London: Trigraph, 286.

Fig.1

Fig.2

Fig.3

Fig.4

'Never before has the world been so firmly in the grip of an establishment like the present architectural one, the most rigid in the history of art. All modern cities, as they are rebuilt, grow to resemble each other more. Rio and Hong Kong, to take two with rather similar settings, are clothing themselves more and more in the same style; London and Tokyo come closer each year'.[4]

APPROACHES TO REGENERATION AND CONSERVATION

What are today's options to kick-start the cycle of transformation from retreat and neglect to recovery in historic port cities?

- Strategic directives determined by centralised planning policies that are not place-specific?

- Piece-meal market-led regeneration from outside investors with no community loyalty?

- Community-led regeneration from within?

Are these workable and effective as discrete alternatives? And if not, how does one coordinate them into a coherent vision and secure a sustainable future?

Where do conservation objectives fit into this picture – to the fore or sidelined? Does conservation only address issues relating to the built environment; and if not, how do established urban planning and protective mechanisms incorporate intangible, human factors, especially the 'spontaneous order' that characterises maritime waterfronts?

THE TYPOLOGY OF REGENERATION

The transformation from 'low life' to 'high life' is typical of the top-down investment-led approach to regeneration in historic maritime ports and the re-invention of their waterfronts with prestige offices, high value apartments, hotels and leisure facilities, tourism and cruise ships.

Quebec City on the Saint Lawrence River, something of an exception to the generality in that it remains a fully operational trading port close to the city centre, is nevertheless a major tourist destination and port of call for cruise ships from all round the world. The historic heart, *Vieux Québec*, the twelfth most visited city in the world with eight million visitors a year, is host to a concentration of bars, restaurants, souvenir shops, art and sculpture galleries. But how viable is a local community that is no longer served by a bread shop, and wherein lies the continuity of its distinctive spirit of place *(Fig.2)*?[5]

Fig.2: Quebec City, Canada. Under the pressures of tourism, the resident population of Vieux Québec has reduced to around 5,000, insufficient to support local services. (© Dennis Rodwell)

Historic waterfronts act as catalysts for economic regeneration and enable people to reconnect with historic quayside areas whether for business or social exchange, residence or leisure. Also, in the case of a historic port city such as Liverpool where the docks were

physically separated from the inland commercial and residential parts of the city, regeneration has opened up lengths of the waterfront to wider access. The rescue and mixed-use conversion of the Albert Dock complex pioneered heritage-led regeneration at a critical period in the city's history in the 1980s and attracted people en masse to a revitalised sector of its dockland *(Fig.3)*.

Fig.3: Albert Dock, Liverpool, England, whose restoration and conversion in the 1980s into a spectrum of cultural (Tate Modern, National Maritime Museum, Beatles Story), retail, leisure and residential uses inspired a post-industrial vision for Liverpool. (© Dennis Rodwell)

Notes

4. Rodwell, D 2008 'Signs of a revitalised, more relevant, ICOMOS'. *Context* 107, 8-9.

Historic waterfronts have also inspired some highly creative examples of modern architecture which define today's image of certain cities *(Fig.4)*.

Fig.4: Opera House, Sydney, Australia: an example of contemporary waterfront architecture that provides the defining image of a city in the New World. (© Dennis Rodwell)

The temptation to proliferate such undoubted, individual success stories, employing 'signature architects' to design 'iconic' interventions, has not however always led to favourable outcomes.

CENTRALISATION – VERSUS – DECENTRALISATION

Symptomatic of centralist government policy in the United Kingdom is the concentration of people, employment opportunities and decision-making in the south east of England and the inevitable 'North-South divide'. The *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister* books and television series in the 1980s remorselessly satirised repeated efforts to decentralise government departments and related bodies from the South East to the North and the equally determined efforts of civil servants and others to undermine them.[6] Principal amongst the reasons were distance from London (where they and their families lived) and from Cambridge and Oxford (where the majority had attended university and where reunion dinners were held regularly).

A vivid reminder of the failure of decentralist efforts to bear fruit arose just a few weeks before this conference. *Cities Unlimited*, published by what the media described as a 'right-leaning think tank', cited some cities in the north of England – notably Liverpool and Hull – as effectively beyond revival owing to their poor locations, and proposed that mass migration to London, Cambridge and Oxford [sic] would prevent people becoming 'trapped' in poorer areas.[7]

The absurdity of the notion that geography rather than government policy is a determining factor in the potential of a historic sea port to recover from the cycle of decline can be evidenced from the northern city of Oulu in Finland, 300 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle.

Historically a river and maritime trading port based on timber, salmon, furs and hides, Oulu had fallen into serious decline by the 1970s. Since then it has evolved into a major centre for research and development in fields related to satellite technology and mobile telephones: a re-invention of the historical role of Oulu as a centre of communication.[8] Whereas in population terms it is now Finland's sixth city; in air traffic terms Oulu airport is now second after Helsinki.

The city's pioneering spirit and new self-image have been encouraged by regional economic development policies that offer a high degree of fiscal autonomy and favour initiatives taken at local level over those generated or imposed by national government.

Are cities like Liverpool and Hull less accessible than Oulu?

NATIONAL MODELS AND LOCAL INTERPRETATION: UNITED KINGDOM

Compared to many European countries, one of the defining characteristics of urban planning in the United Kingdom since at least the Second World War has been the concentration of the most volatile pressures for redevelopment – especially for commercial uses – in their most sensitive historic cores.

Notes

6. **Lynn, J** and **Jay, A** (eds) 1984 *The Complete Yes Minister*. London: Guild Publishing; Lynn, J and Jay, A (eds) 1986 Yes Prime Minister: Volume 1. London: Guild Publishing; and **Lynn, J** and **Jay, A** (eds) 1987 *Yes Prime Minister: Volume II*. London: Guild Publishing.

7. Leunig, T and Swaffield, J 2008 *Cities Unlimited*. London: Policy Exchange.

8. Rodwell, D 2008 'Picking up the threads in Lyon'. *Context* 106, 9–10.

Continuity of their historically compact, mixed use characteristics, and the socio-economic diversity and human vibrancy that attaches to 'spontaneous order' and is fundamental to today's concept of the *sustainable city*, formed no part of national planning policies that followed models of land use separation inspired by Ebenezer Howard and promoted by the Modern Movement.[9] The tools for an alternative approach that would support continuity, in harmony, of the tangible (architectural) and intangible (human) cultural traditions in a city do not exist nor has there been the will to devise them. As was stated unambiguously in a publication that coincided with European Architectural Heritage Year 1975: '... ''the starting point in a historic town must be its historic quality and visual character'' – not secondary social, economic or even ecological arguments'.[10]

However, within a protective system that is highly fragmented[11], even the visual character of United Kingdom cities is not protected by government policy; rather the reverse. The 2007 document *Guidance on tall buildings* recommends 'that local authorities should now identify appropriate locations for tall buildings in their development plan documents'.[12] Whereas apologists point to certain

provisos, ones that could be applied to protect the integrity of distinctive urban landscapes, it is clear that the fact and timing of this document encourages policies at local level that favour the construction of tall buildings at key locations in cities – including along the Liverpool waterfront, in what amounts to a crude parody of its twin city of Shanghai and manifests serious loss of identity and sense of place *(Figs.5 & 6)*.

Fig.5: Liverpool waterfront. With the exception of the trio of landmark buildings at the Pier Head to the left of this photograph (Fig.6), the urban landscape at the time of the city's pre-eminence as a port city was characterised by long, low, brick-built dockside warehouses. The rising ground behind allowed the skyline to punctuate this panorama – here featuring the Anglican cathedral. (© Dennis Rodwell)

Fig.6: The Liverpool waterfront to the north of the Pier Head (seen far right in this image, with the tower of the Anglican cathedral just visible behind), illustrating the recent damage inflicted on the urban landscape as the result of incoherent contemporary interventions. (© Dennis Rodwell)

Furthermore, received thinking continues to support strong competition between cities within limited, saturated business sectors. The billion pound development by Grosvenor Estates of 'Liverpool One', just inland from today's waterfront, may on the face of it provide Liverpool with a shopping magnet to counteract the gravitational pull of Manchester, but evidence of the true cost to the city in terms of impact on the periphery comes as no surprise as 'Liverpool gains the ignoble title of highest [retail] vacancy rate in a major UK city'.[13]

NATIONAL MODELS AND LOCAL INTERPRETATION: FRANCE

France is prominent among continental European countries to adopt national and regional planning policies together with local bye-laws that encourage more sustainable approaches to urban continuity and development in historic cities. Legislation dating from 1930 provides for the protection of the urban landscape of entire cities, and in the post-War regional plan for the river port city of Paris the administrative and business quarter of *La Défense* was located outside the *boulevard périphérique*, thus syphoning major

redevelopment pressures away from the city centre and enabling freedom of architectural expression both in height and design without negative impact on the historic core.

Notes

9. Rodwell, D 2007 *Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

10. Cantacuzino, S.(ed.) 1975 *Architectural Conservation in Europe.* London: Architectural Press. The passage cited here appears at page 4 in the editorial; the passage quoted within it appears at page 18 in the chapter by **Worskett, R** 'Great Britain: Progress in Conservation'.

11. Rodwell 2007 *Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities*.

12. CABE and English Heritage 2007 *Guidance on tall buildings*. London: CABE and English Heritage; **http://www.english-<heritage.org.uk/ upload/pdf/CABE_and_English_Heritage _Guidance_on_tall_buildings.pdf?1265111862>** accessed 1 February 2010.

13. 'Empty shops – which town takes the crown', report of Experian's Retail Risk Ranking; <http://www.estatesgazette.com/blogs/ focus/2009/07/> accessed 1 February 2010.

Fig.5

Fig.6

Further support to the mixed use urban grain of the historic city is provided by a combination of local planning regulations and protectionist policies towards artisan businesses that date at least from the time of Baron Haussmann in the 1850s. Similar instruments safeguard continuity in the historic character of the Atlantic port city of Bordeaux.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

At the end of this 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 United Kingdom experience and were volunteered by individuals working in central and local government. Firstly, in the UK we do not step back, start from first principles, and ask the essential questions. Secondly, even more unambiguously, the planning system in the United Kingdom does not fit the needs of any historic cities, let alone port cities.

This recalled a presentation given by Professor Bruno Gabrielli of the University of Genoa at a workshop held in early-2007 as part of the ongoing UNESCO initiative on *historic urban landscapes*, in which he articulated what he described as a 'crisis of legitimacy' in the theory and practice of urban planning today. He posited the need for a new approach that re-positions urban planning as part of a continuous cultural process that embraces tangible and intangible aspects, reinforces *genius loci* and associative values, and engages with ecological and environmental issues. He envisaged this as a project that focuses on quality and the recovery of cultural and social dignity to the degraded parts of cities.[14]

Notes

14. **Rodwell, D** and **Van Oers, R** 2007
    'Summary Report of the Regional Conference of Countries of Eastern and Central Europe on ''Managementand Preservation of Historic Centers of Cities inscribed on the World Heritage List'', Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation, 29 January to 2 February 2007'. Paris: UNESCO; <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-47-7.pdf> accessed 1 February 2010.

Planning systems for historic port cities that conform to a typology of regeneration that favours the re-invention of their waterfronts to sanitised, gentrified models and fails to address the socio-economic and environmental issues of their cities as a whole, may resolve certain physical issues to the delight of city image-makers but do not match the ambition either of Professor Gabrielli's vision or that expressed by a number of the speakers at this conference.[15] The breadth of cross-disciplinary evaluation and management tools that are required to coordinate the concepts that comprise and define the distinctive identity of individual cities – their unique spirit of place – have yet to be incorporated into the discipline of urban planning. Articulating what we mean by the terms authenticity and integrity – key words in the lexicon of international conservation but absent from that of the United Kingdom – in the context of historic cities would be an important first step, followed by the refinement of urban planning tools that recognise and applaud the specific 'spontaneous order' that is the life blood of historic port cities.

Notes

15. Rodwell, D 2009 'Chequered histories and distinctive futures'. Context 108, 9-10.

BIOGRAPHY

Dennis Rodwell is a consultant architect-planner. He works internationally in the field of cultural heritage, focused on the promotion and achievement of best practice in the management of the historic environment. He has been rapporteur to recent UNESCO and ICOMOS events focused on the *historic urban landscapes* initiative. Previously a principal in private practice as a conservation architect, he has also served in local authority posts as conservation officer, urban designer and principal planner, and successfully promoted the rescue of a number of historic buildings at risk. He writes and publishes widely on the theme of conservation and sustainability in historic cities, including *Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2007.

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