04

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT OF PORT CITIES: *THE CASE OF LIVERPOOL*

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Port cities have a special identity, evident in many aspects of their life – cultural, ethnic, economic, and visual. They are places of movement, of business, and of cultural exchange, looking outwards as well as inland to their hinterlands, to which they often seem alien. They belong to themselves and to a community of far-flung trading places, linked by the global traffic that flows between them.

This description is appropriate, it may be argued, for historic port cities in the period when the business of trade formed their principal economic activity and was evident through intensive activity on the waterfront and throughout their streets. The movement of goods within the docks to and from ships and warehouses, the transport of those goods to and from the docks and their inland markets or suppliers, the buying and selling and insuring of goods in exchanges and offices, the financing of trade through banks, the organisation of trade through shipping companies and the meeting of communities around the waterfront all made ports special places *(Fig. 1)*.

Fig. 1: *this bird's eye view of Liverpool in 1851 shows the busy traffic of a working port, where activity was concentrated on the waterfront (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

For many historic ports around the world, this era has passed. They may handle greater quantities and values of goods today than ever before, but the business of trade is no longer central to the life of these places. Container transport and changes in global business mean that both the physical and administrative aspects of trade bypass the centres of port cities where they were once the dominant elements. But these cities remain, seeking to re-invent themselves and to reverse the decline in their fortunes.

Liverpool's painful adjustment to changing global trading patterns is well known. The second half of the 20th century witnessed the decline of employment in the docks and trading companies, social and political unrest, and severe environmental degradation as the physical decay following from the failure of businesses was added to the un-mended scars of wartime bombing. By the last decade of the century, the city was in crisis, its condition deterring inward investment and the process of decline seemingly inexorable.

The 1990s, however, saw the first sustained stirrings of economic and physical transformation. Confidence in the future grew and the pace of change began to gain momentum. Hope for the city was based partly upon a recognition that, despite the decay of its fabric, it was still recognisable as a place of strong and distinctive character. Suddenly the historic environment was at the centre

Fig.1

Fig.2

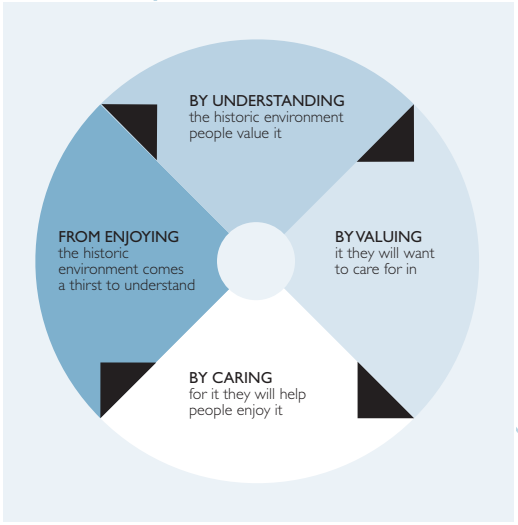

Fig.3

of plans to revitalise the city. It was acknowledged to be one of the city's greatest selling points and as such something that could be a powerful agency in regeneration if it could be retained, enhanced and exploited. It was central to the creation of a new image for Liverpool, one based on the idea of a modern, forward-looking city building on a unique and valued heritage *(Fig.2)*.

The need and opportunity to integrate the historic environment into the planning of change in the city led to the creation in 2002 of the Historic Environment of Liverpool Project (HELP), a long-term strategic partnership between the principal agencies concerned with the conservation and management of the city's heritage. Principal partners were English Heritage, Liverpool City Council, National Museums Liverpool, the University of Liverpool, Liverpool Vision and Liverpool Culture Company. The project's aim was to promote the historic environment in the city's regeneration through three strands of work: understanding what was significant, using planning powers to protect and enhance the city's heritage, and raising awareness of the interest and importance of the city's heritage.

Fig.2: *regeneration of historic ports brings new building activity alongside retention of important historic structures (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

Central to the project's purpose was understanding: this is the starting point in English Heritage's 'virtuous circle', and from it all else flows *(Fig.3)*. The HELP programme therefore included a significant research module designed to identify Liverpool's historic character and to demonstrate how its architectural legacy confers on the city a distinctiveness resulting from its role as a great trading port. Good understanding was seen as the basis for better protection and as the essential means of taking decisions in the regeneration programme which would consolidate the city's special identity. It was especially important in the context of the bid for World Heritage Site status: the assessment of Liverpool's 'universal value' and identification of coherent boundaries and buffer zones depended on a rigorous examination of significance over an extensive area of the city.

The research module had two principal components. First was a city-wide exercise in Characterisation, part of English Heritage's national programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation. The work on Liverpool formed part of a Merseyside-wide characterisation project, carried out by Merseyside Archaeological Service (part of National Museums Liverpool). Liverpool has a hugely varied historic landscape, encompassing all the aspects of a major city (inner and outer residential suburbs, parks and open spaces, central business and cultural quarters) as well as the waterfront peculiar to great ports. The appearance of the city today reflects a long process of evolution which saw, in outer areas, expansion of the built-up zone over once rural land and, in the centre, reclamation from the river and the regularisation of a medieval street plan. Some of this evolution is still evident in vestigial form in, for example, the layout of 19th century roads and property boundaries, which may reflect much older former agricultural boundaries. The Characterisation project demonstrates how today's landscape has evolved, using analysis of historic maps to show change and continuity in land use and character. The information was compiled through a GIS (Geographical Information System) which breaks the present-day landscape down into numerous 'polygons' (discrete mapped areas recorded in a computerised mapping system) according to the character of different parts of the city: a database record attached to each polygon classifies both its present character (in terms of function or land-use) and the succession of past land-uses as recorded on historic maps *(Fig.4)*. The database is fully searchable and forms part of the Historic Environment Record database so that, for example, the location and former extent of terraced housing or commercial buildings can be assessed, and then displayed in cartographic form.

Fig.4: *character areas on the Liverpool waterfront: historic land uses are established from early maps and presented in GIS format on the modern map. It is interesting to note that character changes: for example, Albert Dock, shown here, had a commercial function when built, but today has a mix of retail and cultural uses*

The results of the Characterisation programme have been influential in a number of ways. The information contained within the database is available to inform planning decisions, helping to indicate the types of development which might be consistent with historic character and the capacity of areas to absorb change. The historic mapping sources proved a very useful tool in engaging local communities in the history of their areas. The ability of the database to provide detailed historical information quickly and visually connects people with the places in which they live, reviving latent interest and playing a key role in the heritage cycle *(Fig.5)*. The material can be as much a tool for communities as one for professional conservation managers. This work is not yet available online, but the clear public interest in the resource indicates that much wider availability would serve to consolidate public engagement with the historic environment.

Fig.5: *bringing historical evidence to people in the street; demonstrating Liverpool's Historic Landscape Characterisation database*

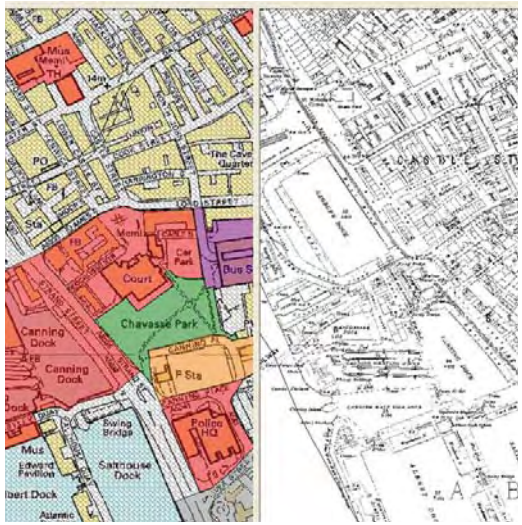

Fig.4

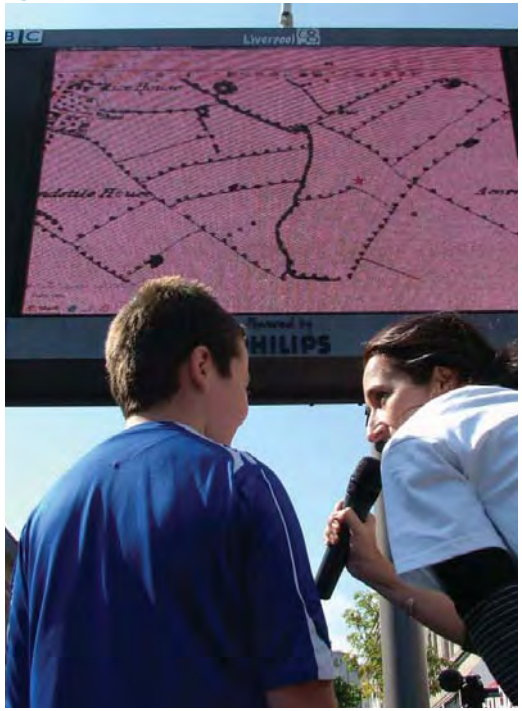

Fig.5

Fig.6

Fig.7

The second component of the research module was a project designed to present the key characteristics of Liverpool's architectural heritage to the public in a series of affordable and accessible publications. Much had been written on the city's historic buildings, but fresh examination served as a reminder of Liverpool's extraordinary legacy and provided timely new insights to inform the regeneration programme. The objective was to define aspects of the city's architecture and of its landscapes which either reflected its essentially commercial function or demonstrated how the city evolved socially, environmentally and culturally. Together the strands of research told the story of a great trading city meeting the challenges of rapid urban growth to produce the landscapes we see today. Each title also examined the conservation of this legacy: the thread running through the books was the question of how these buildings and landscapes could play a part in the city's future.

Commercial buildings mark Liverpool out as different from many other cities. Trade was handled in hundreds of warehouses, both in the dock estate and in the streets beyond, in the centre of the city and in areas inland from the docks. Whole streets were made up of warehouses, forming canyon-like frontages. No other English city apart from London had such a concentration of this building type, and it could be argued that warehouses were an essential component of Liverpool's historic identity *(Fig.6)*. One of the books therefore took warehouses as its subject to demonstrate the role that they had played in Liverpool's hey-day. It also illustrates how these buildings, long redundant for their original purpose, can be adapted to a range of new uses, providing residential, cultural and modern-day commercial spaces with a character deeply rooted in the city's history.

Fig.6: *historic warehouses in the city centre have been re-used as shops, offices and apartments (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

Much of the business of trade was handled in exchanges and offices rather than in warehouses, and Liverpool's central business district is still testimony to the prosperity generated by the city's global reach. Shipping company offices, banks, insurance houses and office buildings, some of them displaying pioneering architectural features, form a concentrated mass on a scale unlike that of most other provincial cities *(Fig.7)*. A second book therefore took the central business district for special study. The fact that this district forms the heart of the World Heritage Site places special demands on conservation, in respect of both changes to historic buildings and the design of new structures: the starting point for the planning of change, it is argued, must be the character of the area conferred by its historic buildings.

Fig.7: *The streets in Liverpool's central business district are lined with impressive commercial buildings dating from the city's period of greatest prosperity (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

The social and cultural character of Liverpool was studied in two further publications, on places of worship and on charitable institutions. The city had an ethnically and religiously diverse population from an early date and this is reflected in a range of Christian, Jewish and Muslim churches, chapels, synagogues and mosques. Some are of outstanding importance, but many face an uncertain future. The same is true of the buildings of charitable institutions constructed to address the social and moral problems created by rapid urban growth in the 19th century. Among them are institutions which reveal Liverpool's role as a port: homes for sailors, an orphanage for the children of sea-faring fathers, churches for sailor communities, and so on (*Fig.8*). These and other buildings, therefore, are important reminders of the city's trading past and of the social issues of a troubled period in its history.

Fig.8: *The Scandinavian Seamen's Church (1883-4) was built to provide shelter and support for itinerant sailors; it still supports resident and visiting Scandinavians (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

The final two books are focused on landscapes rather than on buildings. A solution to some of the environmental problems of 19th century Liverpool was sought in the construction of a ring of great parks around the city, which came to pride itself on its provision of open space for its people. Some of the landscapes are amongst the finest of their age. But again, conservation is a major concern as resources to maintain and present these places become more limited. They are, however, seen as playing an important role in social cohesion and health initiatives, and they contribute significantly to creating a distinct sense of place for local communities. The lives of local communities are addressed most directly by the last of the titles in the series, on the development of the suburb of Anfield, famous as the home of Liverpool Football Club. The book tells the story of development from a rural landscape to initial development as a villa suburb and later to completion as a densely built-up area of small terraced houses. The book's title, Ordinary Landscapes, Special Places, summarises its themes and points to the dual significance of the city's suburbs: lacking great architectural highlights, everyday suburban landscapes nevertheless underpinned Liverpool's commercial economy, and they are the setting for the lives of generations of people, giving a strong sense of belonging and identity (*Fig.9*).

Fig.9: *the suburb of Anfield lies a mile inland from the waterfront and docks; its dominant landscape features are Stanley Park and Liverpool Football Club's Anfield stadium, both in the foreground of this aerial view (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

HELP's research programme, resulting in the Historic Landscape Characterisation database and the books, was concerned with the identity of a great port city and was intended to inform the planning of change. Retaining special character in the modern city is not simply an exercise in nostalgia for there is a great deal of evidence that it is valued in a number of ways: distinctiveness is a saleable commodity in regeneration, and Liverpool – as with all historic port cities – has this in abundance. It was HELP's aim to ensure that plans for the future were based on good understanding of the past so that the revitalised city could celebrate a proud history in the conservation of its buildings and landscapes.

Fig.8

Fig.9

Fig.10

Fig.11

Fig.10: *the Royal Liver Building (1908-11) at night (© English Heritage, National Monuments Record)*

Fig.11: *Albert Dock, Liverpool, now a retail, leisure and cultural centre (© English Heritage,National Monuments Record)*

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