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Contemporary Architecture in Urban Historical Context

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During my short introductory talk speaking from the English Heritage perspective I would like to consider the role and place of contemporary architecture in historic city centres. Can the old and new sit side by side or not? Do new architectural projects have a negative impact upon authenticity and integrity of urban heritage? Do “buffer zones” work and what is the value and effectiveness of heritage impact tools. Should we focus on sole buildings or on the landscape taking a holistic approach. How are developers to be enticed to take into account heritage values? And how do we calculate heritage values.

- Examples of contemporary architecture which went well and one that did not – Merrill Lynch Building, British Museum and Kings Cross Station.
- Heritage Works – this was a joint project between the British Property Federation, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and English Heritage who commissioned Deloitte to carry out this toolkit of good practice. A copy of Heritage Works is available for you but it starts by giving an overview, followed by the economic case highlighting the focus for a scheme, direct and indirect values and why, from a developer’s standpoint it is good to include historic buildings in their regeneration schemes. The document then goes on to show practically, how projects can be initiated, how to understand the asset, explains the need for early consultation, project preparation, design development, procurement and management of the development scheme. It then proceeds to give a detailed checklist for consents and finishes with a menu for sources of further information.
- As examples I highlight the Granary in Berwick, Brindleyplace in Birmingham, the Granary Kings Cross, London.
- Considering the value or otherwise of buffer zones and the effectiveness of heritage impact tools. Although, in theory, heritage impact tools have a place, in my experience they are all very well in theory but practical application is more questionable.
- In the UK, only the city of Durham is a World Heritage Site and has a buffer zone, whereas in London which has 3 World Heritage Sites, there are no buffer zones. However the UK does have a sophisticated planning mechanism and in London, we have viewing corridors where key views of historic buildings are protected. Recently, the government has introduced the National Heritage Protection Plan and guidance which I can commend to you as a really effective strategic overview for planning the integration of historic buildings within cities and new development schemes.

- The opportunities for using old sites by which I mean buildings of no architectural merit constructed say in the 1960s, 70s or 80s is constantly being looked at by developers and often these sites sit next to historic buildings.
- English Heritage has and will continue to be brave in challenging poor architectural design which does not respect the setting of historic buildings. In the past we have not been 100% successful but we have raised the issue and there has been intense public debate. This brings into question whether attention should be focused on an individual building or rather the landscape of that building surrounding it taking a holistic approach i.e. visual, noise, social interpretation etc. Some examples:- Royal Naval College Greenwich, the Lloyds Building listed Grade I, St Paul's Cathedral with the Shard in the background, St Ethelburga's Church Christopher Wren Grade I again completely overawed by the Gherkin.
- How is the private development sector to be enticed to take on heritage buildings and take into account heritage values? Developers and investors are not interested in heritage values but what are they interested in? Developers want to ensure that the historic building legislation is understandable not too complex and that the planning authority supports development and has the knowledge to do so. They need to be able to obtain funding and they really need to consider real market values, windows of opportunity, rental levels, return on cost, demand, vacancy rates, retention rates, ongoing maintenance costs equals service charge levels – competitiveness. Overall developers look at the risk factor and it must be remembered that they have a choice.
- English Heritage has carried out a long-term study with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors using IPD who are the leading property statistical analysts and it concluded after 10 years that historic office buildings performed, as investments as well as and in some cases better than their unlisted counterparts.
- Some key issues to consider are: addressing and neutralising conservation deficits. Making sure that if a developer is taking on a historic building and intending to incorporate modern architecture that the historic element is de-risked, this maybe by way of a specialist conservation expert or EH actually carrying out these works. Lateral thinking is essential. Example Gas Holders at Kings Cross.
- Understanding the value of conservation: English Heritage commissioned the Value of Conservation and this (useful tool) sets out the different methodologies available to demonstrate to government that heritage has a tangible value.
- Everybody will agree that new innovative architecture is essential and has to be desirable as it adds to the dynamism and desirability of a city. The question is whether architecture is driven by economics rather than artistic flair? It is important that architects respect and understand setting of historic buildings and if not negative effects are likely. Holistic planning approach is as I have said important but I question whether buffer zones are applicable in all but a few

areas although again, viewing corridors are certainly useful again in certain instances.

- To summarise, contemporary architecture can benefit urban heritage and vice versa. Good design may not cost more but all too often architectural design is driven by market conditions and in times of recession (or greed) often design and quality of materials suffer. Setting is all important but buffer zones have a limited use. Reducing the conservation deficit will entice developers into becoming involved with historic places which is essential.