

JOINT PLANNING LAW CONFERENCE

MAKING THE MOST OF OUR HERITAGE?

ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: ADAPTING THE OLD

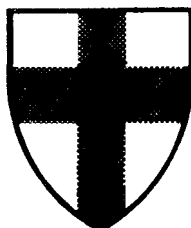
BY

NICHOLAS P H FALK, BA(Oxon), MBA(Stanford), Ph.D(London).

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In preparing a paper for an audience of lawyers, surveyors and planners, it is possibly best if I explain my starting point. My interest in the 'adaptive use' of buildings (to use the American phrase) stems from an economist's interest in fully utilising scarce resources, and a consultant's interest in managing change smoothly. However above all it comes from personal experience of the problems of regenerating run-down areas, using their most obvious under-utilised resources, the buildings and environment that previous generations have left behind, and which some call our 'heritage'.

In over 12 years of devising schemes to regenerate historic industrial areas as diverse as Bradford's Little Germany and Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, Stroud's Valleys and Sheffield's Kelham Island, not to mention early lessons from Covent Garden and Rotherhithe in London's docklands, I am continually struck by the waste of resources, both physical and human, as a result of delays and conflicts over 'adapting the old' to new uses. The delays, I believe, are due not so much to lack of demand (as is often argued) but to the narrow way in which we often look at conservation.

In this paper I therefore want to focus on three issues that affect what is saved. These are, first, why should we be so concerned about adapting old buildings to new uses; second, how can the costs of refurbishment be reduced; and third, what extra incentives are needed.

THE GOALS OF CONSERVATION

Heritage, today, is under attack. No sooner, it seems, did the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monument Commission change its

name to English Heritage than attacks began to be launched on our apparent obsession with the past. Robert Hewison, in a witty review of what he calls The Heritage Industry, complains that too many resources are being put into recreating a 'rosy coloured' view of the past, rather than developing new industries to replace what we have lost. The groundswell of conservationist thinking, which was originally stimulated by the obsession of developers and local authorities for knocking down everything that 'gets in the way of progress', may now be starting to shift the other way. As it is neither feasible nor desirable to turn much more of Britain into a museum, it is perhaps time to think again about the objectives of conservation, and the various measures we use to moderate development pressures and to keep things 'the way they were'.

The Ancient Monuments Act dates from 1913, when apparently British castles were being threatened by American millionaire buyers. Today our cities are facing threats on a scale that has not been experienced since the war-time blitz, or before that when the Victorians built the railways. The first to go were the docks and waterside warehouses, victims of the container revolution in the 1970's. The factories and mills closed as manufacturing industry contracted, unable to compete for the most part with cheaper or better foreign products. Now it is the turn of mental hospitals and other institutional buildings, and soon the traditional high streets and 60's shopping centres will feel the wind of change. The former are becoming redundant as a result of changes in population and in public policy. The latter are the casualties of retail warehouses, and new centres with ample parking. What we are witnessing is the death of the traditional city, focussed around the railway stations through which most of the goods and people moved, and the emergence of new activity at the peripheries, closer to the motorways that form the new arteries. Also, brain power is replacing muscle and steam power as the driving force of the current industrial revolution.

It is not surprising then that there should be a sense of outrage in response to so much change and uncertainty. Inner city communities boil over with indignation over the loss of employment and the effects of over-crowding and poverty. Rural communities rise in anger over proposals for new shopping centres or housing developments in their midst (and the newest immigrants will often be the most active protectors!). Yet, it is argued, we cannot keep everything the way it was. The economist's 'salvation', the laws of supply and demand, should prevail. How can these strong arguments be reconciled with what seem almost trivial considerations about what things look like?

If I am right about the fundamental shifts that are taking place in our economy, then we may well be fighting on the wrong battleground. The conventional arguments over conservation are fought in terms of the appearance of the building, or its historical significance. Both of these seem to me somewhat arbitrary criteria, and do not reflect the reasons why the man or woman in the street is concerned about conserving familiar places. Almost any building can be treated as a unique example of something, and unfortunately we have not yet done the kinds of systematic studies that are needed to establish the relative significance of different sites. For example, who is to know whether the Dartford Workhouse (a group of buildings I was once asked to help save) is of any special significance, without some form of the survey to place it in context? All we can rely on are the efforts of bodies like SAVE and the Civic Trust, who are under-resourced, and occasional 'stock taking' exercises, like the one on mills in Yorkshire which the National Records Office is co-ordinating.

Rather than crudely arguing that things are good or bad because they are old or beautiful, is it not better to think again about the real reasons why conservation appeals to the 'man in the street' as well as the Prince of Wales! The wealth of reasons for being interested in the buildings of the past, are revealed

in David Lowenthal's massive book The Past Is a Foreign Country. He summarises the benefits as 'familiarity, reaffirmation and validation, identity, guidance, enrichment and escape'. He describes the valued attributes as 'antiquity, continuity, termination and sequence'. These are complex ideas borne out by a survey of reasons why people in Guildford wanted old buildings conserved which found that the main reasons were attractiveness, variety and historical associations.

My own research, which is summarised in Our Industrial Heritage : A Resource for the Future? a Bossom Lecture given to the Royal Society of Arts in 1984, identified three underlying reasons for wanting to conserve and re-use old buildings, which hopefully strike a chord with most people. The first, and probably most popular, I call the 'minimisation of waste' argument.

It pains many people to see good buildings being neglected and going to waste. Most people think that it is common sense (whatever the argument about energy saving) that new uses should be found for them wherever possible. In the USA, the President of Digital Equipment, who is one of the leading exponents of the idea that old mills make good accommodation for high-tech firms, explains this on the basis of 'the old Yankee Make Do and Mend' principle. Cheap mill space has enabled firms involved in micro-computers around Boston to get established and expand fast without high overheads and in the process has helped the historic towns like Lowell find a new role. This is essentially an economist's argument about efficiency from society's point of view. It is often more appropriate to ask whether an old building can be re-used at less cost than replacing it, as opposed to the simple developers' viewpoint of asking what will produce the highest land value.

Unfortunately, the present system of spot listing and public inquiries does not minimise waste. While it generally ensures that the best old buildings are not pulled down, it often wastes

resources by allowing buildings to decay in the process. A good example of this can be found at Sowerby Bridge Mills in Calderdale. The cost of repairing the fabric of Carlton Mill (which has suffered from fire damage and neglect) is now £45 per sq. ft., whereas fitting out for office use is £45 per sq. ft. Yet examples like nearby Dean Clough Mills show the basic viability of re-using mills as described in URBED's guide to Re-using Redundant Buildings, published by H.M.S.O. In this case the refurbishment costs were between £2 and £20 per square foot. Furthermore, neglect of historic buildings in the heart of a town like Sowerby Bridge depress the surrounding area and requires public grants which would be better spent in attracting new uses, imposing a further social cost.

The second principle, which I call 'natural balance', is essentially an ecological concept. It is about creating sustainable places and liveable communities. By avoiding replacing everything at once, we allow places to evolve and, judging from where people most like to live, this is one of the formulas for success. So rather than looking at architecture as if it were primarily a form of art, is it not more sensible to consider buildings and streets as containers for human activity, or as theatres that are required to put on many different acts? Again, from society's point of view, instead of asking whether a new building looks better than what exists we should be asking what function does, and could, a redundant place perform. For, generally, old buildings will enable a wider mix of activities to flourish than new ones, thus allowing the 'pioneers', whether they be artists looking for cheap studios or people wanting somewhere spacious and central to live, to show the way forward.

Many of the concerns expressed most eloquently by the Prince of Wales relate to the feeling of ordinary people that grandiose redevelopment schemes lead to places losing a sense of balance. This is most obvious perhaps in the redevelopment of town centres. Public inquiries, like that over Wimbledon Town Centre

have shown the force of local opinion, which objects to seeing established uses, from fire stations to churches and town halls, make way for monolithic shopping and office complexes. These battles have helped to prove the viability of more incremental approaches that turn old buildings to new uses at less cost in environmental and social as well as economic terms.

The final principle, which writers like John Rawls and David Harvey consider most important of all, is 'social justice'. This is the idea of 'equitability', and its test is whether change ensures that those who are worst off improve their position (or at least do not lose out). Many planning disputes are essentially about 'who wins and who loses', as Herbert Gans has stressed. There is a sense in which many old buildings are not just the private property of their owners, but are also public property, because they are part of the familiar street scene. Their destruction can cause a sense of grief or anger, particularly when it is associated with the loss of employment, and the handing over of the site to newcomers.

The relevance of the principle of social justice has been highlighted in well publicised public inquiries such as the one on Limehouse Basin which led eventually to the Limehouse Petition. Here local people were campaigning against the infilling of a dock that linked the Thames with the inland waterways, and in favour of using the natural resources of the site to widen the opportunities for the existing community. In this case, the community's arguments were accepted by the Inspector but overturned by the Secretary of State for the Environment. However, I am hopeful that the case put forward in our planning brief for a new village on the Shenley Hospital site with its concept of a 'community partnership agreement' to guarantee benefits for local people, will provide a useful precedent for taking social justice into account.

If it is true, as I have argued, that our feelings about old buildings go far deeper than just appearances, then it is clear why many people think it is folly simply to preserve facades (though even this may be better than nothing at all). The case for conservation is therefore about far more than the appearance of things. It is about the need for anchors or roots in what often appears as an uncontrollable world. The re-use of old buildings or landscapes can therefore be a good starting point for a long term process of regenerating areas that have lost their traditional role.

POLICIES FOR MINIMISING COSTS

So far I have argued that some of what we call our heritage is in effect public property so that its neglect makes us all poorer. This makes it important to stop buildings decaying to the point where re-use is uneconomic. How then can we learn to reconcile the past and the future and to minimise the costs of change? For it is vital to have a system that encourages all concerned - property owners, developers, investors and regulatory bodies as well as interest groups and users - to collaborate in finding new uses where practically possible. It is also important, because resources are limited, that funds are allocated where they produce greatest value for money long-term. Above all, this means switching from the building equivalent of occasional heart transplants and brain surgery to a more general practice of care and maintenance. All too often my firm is faced with trying to put together large scale financial packages which would never have been needed if the owner had only looked after the property. Just as society takes children 'into care' and away from parents who persistently neglect them, so society may need to take over the care of good redundant buildings once the danger signals are clearly visible.

I want therefore to propose a series of policies which public authorities in areas with problems of redundant buildings can apply. They basically involve applying current powers in a more co-ordinated and forceful manner. I have called these policies taking stock of space, mothballing major buildings, facelifting prominent areas, promoting balanced incremental development, and setting up alternative developers.

Taking stock of empty space

The first step in deciding where efforts should be focussed is to establish the potential for re-use. This means understanding the nature of the empty and under-utilised space, in term for example of size and configuration, level of vacancy, the condition of the buildings and the qualities of the location. (rather than just its historic or architectural importance). From our early research, we developed techniques which have been disseminated through, for example, the Architects Journal's Handbook on Reusing Redundant Buildings for Small Enterprises, (later published as a book by the Architectural Press). The problem is in finding the money to collect information required.

While consultants have a role in setting such systems up, I believe there is plenty of scope for colleges to join forces with local authorities to undertake periodic surveys, so that like the census, we have a picture of how the environment is changing in areas that are undergoing change. This work could provide an excellent way of teaching students of the different building professions how to tackle the problems of development. Such a process of 'building audits' should in my view also be periodically expected of public organisations, like health authorities, and the results published to encourage good practice in making use of the building stock. They would, for example, enable health authorities to make more considered decisions about which hospitals to close and which to modernise. This is going to be increasingly important now that the circular on hospital

development in the Green Belt emphasises the importance of finding new uses where possible.

Mothballing redundant buildings

The best way of caring for buildings is to ensure they are in use. Unfortunately all too often owners sit on their properties and perhaps pursue grandiose redevelopment schemes, while the buildings rot for lack of the most basic maintenance. Windows and locks are broken and not replaced. People steal the lead off the roofs, and strip the interiors. Fires are commonplace. Once the process of decay has started it accelerates rapidly. Wet and dry rot then damages the structure and puts up the costs of re-use to quite uneconomic levels. At the same time the depressing look of derelict buildings destroys confidence in an area. It is a waste of resources to allow buildings to be left to rot, and one that a crowded island cannot afford.

It may take many years before buildings are brought back into use, but so long as they are looked after, they represent a store of value. The rapid rise of Lowell, Massachusetts, as a centre for electronics and as a tourist destination shows the wisdom of hanging on to a heritage of mills, rather than demolishing them when there is nothing to take their place. Something similar now seems to be happening in Calderdale in West Yorkshire and in the Stroud Valleys in Gloucestershire as a result of successful pioneering initiatives by local entrepreneurs.

Though local authorities have powers to require owners to repair listed buildings they are rarely used, partly because of the fear of being forced into purchasing the buildings and being left with huge liabilities. I believe the time to take over these buildings is before they start to deteriorate too rapidly. One possibility would be to have maintenance teams who take corrective action, such as boarding up windows and clearing out gutters - once a historic building has been empty for more than,

say, a year. Properly supervised, these could also be useful as job creation and training projects. This task could well be undertaken by environmental or building preservation trusts, on which I will say more later.

It is also important to encourage new owners to take over buildings that represent a challenge. One way would be to require that historic buildings that are empty for more than, say, three years are put on the market, on the principle as land on the government's Derelict Land Register. By historic I mean buildings that are listed or stand within a Conservation Area. Short-term uses, such as artists studios or community projects could also be encouraged by local authorities negotiating a licence on behalf of properly run groups so that buildings were handed back when a development scheme was ready to go ahead. An alternative is to reintroduce the equivalent of empty property rates for historic buildings to provide an incentive for owners to act, with rate relief given when investment is made (rather than the current practice where rates are charged when the property is ready for occupation). The general principle should be that owners of historic buildings are in effect trustees with obligations to look after their property or dispose of it.

Facelifting noticeable areas

It is often important to change people's attitudes so that they can see the potential of a building or area for serving a new function. This can mean as little as clearing out canals, or cleaning buildings so that they catch the eye. It can go further and involve imaginative landscaping, like riverside walks, that encourage people to go into areas they were previously unaware of.

One example is the 'Little Germany' quarter in Bradford. This fine collection of stone warehouses largely built in the 1870's, was known only to conservationists. As a result of a commission

in 1986 from Bradford City Council and the English Tourist Board, we set up a Task Force of officers with the Council, and also an Improvement Trust of concerned local businesses. Together, in under six months, a new square was designed and built, using funding from the Manpower Services Commission and the Urban Programme. The square was then used to hold a festival (which is now an annual event). The resulting publicity and activity led to the area being discovered and to more ambitious projects being promoted. These include not only the City Council moving some of its own offices into the area but also schemes for housing, a design centre, and a major private art gallery, which total over £10 million in investment.

In situations like Bradford, owners are unlikely to have either the resources or situation to improve the environment, and here public or voluntary bodies must step in. Not-for-profit bodies like the Groundwork Trusts and others with an interest in 'greening' play a valuable role not only in physically transforming run-down areas, but also in helping to animate them with new activities.

Such measures can play an important role in making developers and investors aware of the potential. They work best if they arise from the community. Unfortunately, in many areas that have lost their traditional role, people are too despondent to take initiatives on their own. In such cases public bodies have to step in. However rather than simply handing jobs to outside contractors, I have found that there are almost always local people who are concerned and who, given guidance and help, can play a positive role in restoring run-down areas to life.

Promoting balanced incremental development strategies

Where there is not the potential for spontaneous development, for example because demand is too depressed or there are problems of access and infrastructure, it is important to agree some kind of

plan or strategy that can be used to get things moving. Public investment 'up-front' is usually critical, and it is vital that it goes into projects that have a catalytic effect. Too often there has been a tendency for public bodies to undertake schemes that the private sector might have done, while neglecting improvements to the environment and infrastructure that only the public sector will pay for.

In situations ranging from Birmingham's 'Jewellery Quarter' to Exeter's historic riverside we have found it possible to devise strategies that rely on private developers doing most of the work, but where the local authority takes the lead, and provides the necessary vision and confidence. Such schemes are rarely achievable in one go. Instead they involve what I have termed Balanced Incremental Development. At each stage, rather as in building a bridge, the aim is to create something that will stand on its own, and which has both some commercial basis as well as public benefits. By starting where it is easiest, rather than going for 'worst first', confidence can be raised steadily.

It is vital to realise that the initial works must often be publicly funded. My research into the frequently quoted American success stories such as Baltimore and Lowell shows that behind all the private 'hype' are major public investments, which have succeeded in changing the area's image and in creating new 'draws' that bring people into the area from outside. Where American cities have often scored over our British cities is in managing to engage the interest and active support of locally-based property owners and financiers who have carried on to make the development successful. I believe that one of our major challenges now is to create the financial and other mechanisms that will encourage a positive local spirit in run-down areas, and initiatives like the Sheffield Partnership or Glasgow Action illustrate what can be done.

Setting up development partnerships

The final stage in the process is having the right organisation in place to develop a successful project. All the case studies we know have shown up the importance of the right 'driving force' (as illustrated, for example, in our Good Practice Handbook Re-using Redundant Buildings, published by H.M.S.O. for the Department of the Environment). Interestingly, property 'know-how' is rarely a qualification. Rather it is a single-minded commitment to making things happen, a combination of vision and 'guts'. What about situations where the entrepreneurial drive is thin on the ground? In practice I have found that in most parts of the country there are people who want to get involved in re-use projects, but who are frequently unrecognised by those in authority. Official and elected members are often seduced by the idea of major developers or financial institutions taking an interest in their areas, and are distrustful of the smaller local entrepreneur who lacks financial resources. In such situations, there is a good case for setting up development trusts or 'partnerships' to act as intermediaries. These are non-profit companies, limited by guarantee, that may have charitable status. Their role is to promote schemes that are in advance of the market, packaging finance from a variety of public sources. They are in a better position to negotiate with private developers, because they are not bound by Council standing orders. Yet their purpose is public benefit.

There are now plenty of examples of successful trusts, and indeed there are over 60 building preservation trusts, to take just one type. To succeed, trusts need professional support and full-time 'enablers' and yet few can afford the fees involved at the beginning. There is a strong case for encouraging professional associations and major firms to support such initiatives (following perhaps a similar philosophy to Business in the Community), with secondments and voluntary work. Community Architecture has come into prominence through the interest of the

Prince of Wales. I believe that rather than developing a new breed of 'community architects' it will be more practical for those in major professional practices of all kinds - lawyers and accountants too - to see it as part of career development to become involved in community service. There is a need to ensure that in every major town and city there is an effective agency concerned with putting our heritage to good use, and not just in mourning its passing.

PROVIDING INCENTIVES

The final issue I have tried to consider is who should bear the cost. If long established buildings and areas can be considered to some extent public property, then it follows that their owners are often in effect 'trustees' or 'tenants', rather like the situation with National Trust properties, who have obligations to keep the buildings in good order. But while this sounds fine in principle, there are enormous differences in supply and demand and therefore the value of property in different parts of the country. Yet the costs of renovation are generally similar, and depend largely on how long the building has been neglected. So some form of subsidy is needed for bringing empty buildings back into use.

The system of conservation areas and listing provides the right basic framework for dealing with the problem, provided that we make more systematic efforts to set priorities. In my view there is a need to use the system of starring outstanding buildings or conservation areas to provide extra public funds for the re-use of empty buildings. It is often necessary to 'package' funds from different sources, or to create a kind of 'funding cocktail' if enough funds are to be attracted to both restore the structure and adapt the building to a new use.

Much development, and this applies particularly to 'adaptive re-use' is inevitably speculative, and it is often re-use of old

buildings that first introduces new uses into a run-down area. For example the first new housing in inner city areas has often involved the re-use of riverside warehouses. Local authorities have neither the funds, nor always the imagination to promote regeneration. The private sector is usually reluctant to risk funds where there are no successful precedents.

One solution is for the restoration of important buildings to be seen as 'loss leaders' in the process of urban regeneration. This might be done by encouraging public agencies like English Heritage to pump-prime regeneration schemes in conservation areas in 'designated urban areas'. For example where buildings are owned by local authorities or trusts there should be 100% grants for the renovation if these can be 'flagship schemes' in the regeneration process, plus grants towards the 'software' costs of planning and project management. It is also in these situations that public agencies should be encouraged to take over neglected buildings, compensating their owners out of the eventual proceeds.

The 'pioneers' also need encouragement and the best way (as has been proved convincingly with USA) is to use tax incentives, which can be syndicated. One idea that merits exploration is to attract local 'risk capital' using the concept of 'limited partnerships' for projects that will take a while to pay off. Variants of the Business Expansion scheme could well be appropriate, which could be confined to historic buildings or designated areas to meet Treasury concerns about controlling public expenditure and avoiding inflationary pressures.

CONCLUSION

I have argued first that the scale of the changes taking place in our industrial cities calls for new approaches to adapting old buildings to new uses. Instead of primarily looking at old buildings as if they were works of art, we should take more

account of the principles of minimisation of waste, natural balance and social justice.

Second, I have outlined a series of practical policies for minimising the overall cost of adapting buildings to new uses by catching them before they begin to decay. However, this means increased public expenditure at the early stages of the regeneration process. This, I believe, can be justified on the grounds that familiar, prominent or historic buildings are to some extent public property.

Third, I have suggested that grants should be made more readily available towards 'flagship schemes', that is the restoration and re-use of major buildings that will help show the way in which a run-down area might go. I have also urged the recommendation of the use of tax incentives for restoration, on the American model, but focussed on empty buildings in designated priority areas to ensure the greatest leverage.

However, all these ideas will come to nothing unless there is a fundamental shift in the attitudes and practices of people involved in development which I recognise are moulded, to a great extent, by the institutions which supply the bulk of the finance, and by the institutions which provide professional training.

I am convinced that the kind of entrepreneurial skills that successful developers or project managers seem to possess can be acquired, but at the moment the kind of training needed is not available. Hence, my final suggestion is that we need, as part of the post graduate and 'post experience' training system, a centre or series of short courses that can bring people from different professions together. I have in mind using the kind of methods that were originally used in American business schools, and which have helped produce a change of attitudes within the management in British industry. By tackling projects using a multi-disciplinary approach and the kind of techniques I have

described, I believe we could not only make conservation a more financially attractive option, but also raise the standards of the development industry in the process.

Dr. Nicholas Falk

Organisers



THE LAW SOCIETY

113 Chancery Lane London WC2A 1PL
Telephone 01-242 1222

Telex 261203
Dx 56 LOND/CHANCERY LN
Fax 2&3 01-405 9522
Telecom Gold 74 NFL 2006