Heritage, culture and regeneration: the role of coal in the future of Cardiff Bay

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ABSTRACT: This paper is concerned with relationships between transforming economies of post-industrial cities, ways of framing the histories and roles of built heritage in regeneration, and strategies of spatial intervention in historic sites. In the first section, these relationships are briefly set out in terms of existing literature on heritage roles in the culture-related redevelopment of post-industrial spaces and in UK regeneration processes in recent years, and on the politics of built heritage preservation. In the second, they are explored through a case study of the almost derelict Coal Exchange in Cardiff Bay which faces an uncertain future as authorities dispute its value, condition and potentials post economic crisis. Finally, the paper argues for the need for an integrated approach to the analysis of heritage value which allows for a multiplicity of readings of the role of the past in the present to be linked to strategic regional and urban directions, design processes and future development.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The role of heritage in culture-related urban development strategies worldwide

Heritage preservation in cities is seen as one of the most important trends in culture-related revitalisation strategies worldwide. In terms of postmodern planning and design, this is seen to exemplify the movement away from modernistic urges to comprehensively redevelop the city and erase its past towards the promotion of more eclectic engagements with urban and architectural history (Harvey, 1989) and with the socio-spatial complexities of unreconstructed urban places (building on Jacobs’ 1961 critique). It is also seen to represent the shift from production to consumption-based urban growth which has created the impetus for cities to develop strategies for attracting mobile consumers as new sources of income. As Zukin argues, culture, in the context of the transforming global economy, has ‘taken on [an] instrumental meaning’ as cultural activities and spaces have become primary sources of wealth creation (Zukin, S., 2004). Architectural heritage can, in theory, be an important asset for cities seeking to cultivate visual and cultural distinctiveness or cultural capital in the face of competition. Criticism from the 1980s has been levelled at the ‘serial reproduction’ (Harvey, 1989) and homogeneity of both strategies and consumption spaces of post-industrial redevelopment, such as the ubiquitous waterfront develop-
ments (Marshall, 2001) of port city harbours from Melbourne to Baltimore and even to Cardiff Bay. However, claims to distinctiveness are seen to have themselves become such widespread features of urban boosterism that they have produced generic results – a global panoply of themed environments (Gottdiener, 1997), iconic structures, cultural buildings, mega event landscapes, sanitised heritage and the ‘museumification’ (Debaray, 2004; Richard and Wilson, 2006) or ‘staging’ (Lau, 2010) of urban life. In addition, the ‘symbolic economy’ is shaped by power and capital in ways that are seen to contribute to processes of uneven development and the circumscription of narratives that urban places are able to tell (Zukin, 2010). Critical voices have, in a number of ways, highlighted the need for new approaches to heritage regeneration, that tie it in more meaningful ways to the production as well as the consumption of culture in cities, to forces of socio-economic regeneration and local governance, and that engage understandings of the significance of the social and political construction of heritage for urban thinking with the processes and practices of architectural conservation and adaptation.

1.2 The role of heritage in UK regeneration processes

In the UK, though heritage preservation and regeneration were not always viewed as complementary, an increasing association between them has occurred over the last thirty to forty years. To a large extent, this has taken place in a neoliberal planning context within which conservation has been encouraged to realise the economic potentials of historic buildings, and historic buildings have been assigned value in the strategic turn to ‘culture’ in urban renewal (Strange and Witney, 2003). However, it also reflects growing concern over the relationship between conservation and sustainable development (English Heritage, 1997; 2008; CADW, 2011). Britain’s major conservation bodies have in recent years framed their heritage-protecting agenda in terms of sustainable socio-economic development goals by defining heritage-led regeneration as the ‘improvement of disadvantaged people or places through the delivery of a heritage focused project’ (Palmer, 2008, p. 1). English Heritage emphasises the value of cultivating ‘social capital’ (International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies (for EH), 2009) and also ‘social resilience’ through inclusive conservation. In turn, CADW in Wales emphasises that ‘the historic environment is a shared resource’ and the need therefore for everyone to ‘be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment’ (2011, pp. 11-12). Realising these ideals in practice relies on the systematic integration of multiple actors and participants in decision-making processes. Scholarship in the area of the governance of heritage conservation consistently flags up issues relating to challenge of securing effective participation by communities (for example, Strange and Witney, 2003; Pendlebury, Townshend and Gilroy, 2004).

1.3 The politics of built heritage preservation

These issues lie at the heart of the politics of heritage preservation and their complex relationship to urban history and memory. The politics of heritage centre on questions of ownership, authority and value influencing the ways in which historical narratives are transmitted through the built environment. Scholarship in this area focuses on how official or dominant notions of identity or nationhood are woven into authorised heritage preservation, conservation and presentation strategies. It is also concerned with how these may purposely or otherwise repress or even erase alternative interpretations of urban legacy, of the relative value of different urban spaces and even of history (Johnson, 1999; Harrison, 2009).

The above three themes are now explored through the case of the Coal Exchange in the wider context of the post-industrial redevelopment of Cardiff Bay. We consider the relationship be-
between Cardiff’s transforming economy, regeneration strategies for the Bay area as a whole and the current politics of heritage preservation centred on the Coal Exchange.

2 THE COAL AND SHIPPING EXCHANGE IN CARDIFF BAY

![Figure 1. Coal Exchange Brokers](image)

2.1 The industrial urban development and post-industrial decline of Cardiff Bay

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Cardiff became the major port for exporting highly-prized South Wales coal to the industrialising world (Thomas, 1999). In 1874, output was 16.5 million tons but, by 1914, it had reached 53.9 million tons, making Cardiff the world’s largest coal-exporting port. The development of the whole city, which was largely accomplished between 1850 and 1914 and which included the reconstruction of the castle, and the development of the city’s civic and commercial centres were closely connected to the growth of the port (Punter, 2006; Thomas, 1999). Cardiff’s development history is indeed one shaped by the articulation of this connection through the patronage and spatial planning of the 2nd and 3rd Marquises of Bute who controlled the port and were the city’s major landowners.

Our focal site adjacent to the port, the Coal and Shipping Exchange, was designed and built initially between 1883 and 1886, but extended and adapted up until 1911, in the context of this broader urban growth. Designed by architect Edwin Seward of the firm James, Seward & Thomas, it was the place where leading businessmen of the day — owners of shipping firms, coal mines and of allied businesses — met to carry out their business transactions (Blake, 2005). It is located on the site of the former public space of Mount Stuart Square and forms part of a cluster of nineteenth century commercial buildings. The brick and limestone building draws, in general terms, on French Renaissance (City and County of Cardiff, 2009) and Second Empire precedents with its classically ordered tiered elevations, slate and lead pitched roofs and square-
based dome to the east. It was built in several phases which are reflected in the changing materiality, composition and level of detail of its elevations and in the somewhat haphazard roof-scape and plan of cellular office spaces distributed around the timber-panelled and iron and glass roofed space of the central Coal and Shipping Hall. These architectural and material irregularities in turn are thought to reflect evolving levels of confidence in the coal trade and can, in these terms, be seen to articulate the economic development process up until 1914.

The coal trade began a long period of decline beginning with the First World War and continuing up until the end of the 1970s. The international dimension of the city's economy declined with the port. Only 70 years after its construction, in 1958, The Coal Exchange closed and coal exports ceased shortly after, in 1964. By the 1970s, decline had produced a wasteland of vacant industrial buildings amid large tracts of dock and railway infrastructure situated between the city centre and the Bay’s polluted tidal basin. With the decline of the port, the historically cosmopolitan seafaring and dock-working population of Cardiff Bay fell. This in turn led to dereliction in residential Butetown which had been renowned for its liveliness. In the 1960s, most of Butetown’s remaining terraced housing was demolished as part of a slum clearance programme and replaced by modern council housing. The urban regeneration goals of the 1980s were framed in this post-industrial context.

2.2 The place of heritage in the neoliberal generic city development of Cardiff Bay

In 1987, Cardiff Bay Development Corporation (CBDC) was established to lead the redevelopment of the area of Cardiff Bay — 2700 acres of land. The CBDC promoted the Bay as the ‘the
most exciting waterfront development in Europe’. As several commentators have argued, this urban boosterism was developed as part of a bid to sell the location to private investors. The CBDC promoted property-led regeneration using land acquisition powers, a large capital fund for infrastructure, specific development incentives, direct subsidies for flagship projects and *laissez-faire* planning (Imrie and Thomas, 1993; Punter, 2006). It marked a shift from welfare and service-led planning towards growth-oriented economic development (Punter, 2006).

Heritage did not play an important role in this economic and spatial transformation process as Cardiff’s authorities sought to shed the legacy of decline and economic marginalisation through redevelopment. In a bid to recreate global links, the CBDC looked to models of waterfront redevelopment for inspiration including Barcelona and Baltimore, so promoting itself as a potential future equivalent to prospective investors and urban cultural tourists.

At the same time, the CBDC generated a set of generic objectives for the urban regeneration of the area designed to appeal to developers. In the articulation of these objectives, no statement is made about heritage, or about how the existing environmental, infrastructural and social qualities of the Bay could be driving forces for regeneration. Thus, whilst an desire to promote culture as a driving force for a new economy is evidenced by developments of cultural venues such as the Millennium Centre, the government spaces of the Welsh Assembly and of cultural industry spaces such as the BBC studios, much of the tangible evidence of the culture of the coal trading past has been erased, dislocated from its original port-scape context or neglected. Prominent new buildings are superficially iconic set pieces by well-known architectural practices, yet in general lack the quality of other such buildings. Design and investment are often concentrated in specific architectural elements which address the public realm — such as the front facade of the BBC studios by FAT and the publically accessible areas of the Welsh Assembly by Richard Rogers — but which appear, on closer inspection, as stage sets to far less celebrated built fabric behind. This issue is reflected at the scale of the Bay as well where the unifying ground of the public space that curves around the waterfront and the masterplanned Lloyd George Avenue that links the Bay to the city centre do not succeed in overcoming the sense of discontinuity and...
disconnection between new public buildings and areas of speculative commercial and residential development. Cardiff has not succeeded in deploying the urban qualities of Barcelona nor the scale and density of development in Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. But, arguably, it has not yet managed to create a distinctively ‘local’ alternative to these places either.

Butetown and Mount Stuart Square are both areas at the heart of the Bay that appear to have fallen off the regeneration map. In 1980, Mount Stuart Square was designated a Conservation Area, encompassing several Grade I, II* and II listed buildings. However, this appears to have had little influence apart from to have encouraged its relative neglect by developers. It has not been integrated spatially with new developments. On the one hand, this has produced an ‘interior’ to the redeveloped Bay of grade C office space, creative studios and grass-roots arts organisations such as Coal Exchange Events. On the other, it has led to the gradual degradation of historical fabric which has, in turn, gradually emptied the area of life.

2.3. The politics of dislocated heritage

The Coal Exchange, along with many of the buildings of Mount Stuart Square, is in poor condition. This condition is reflective of several overlaid processes extending from the decline of the coal industry to the CBDC’s disinterest in heritage to the inability of the private sector in recent times to develop an economically viable model for preservation and reuse.

The building was purchased from the CBDC on its demise by private developers Macob who obtained planning permission in 2006 for a substantial ‘conversion, including demolition of two thirds of the listed building’ (Cardiff Council, 2014). This permission was hotly contested by heritage bodies who successfully appealed for its review. With the collapse in the residential property market in 2008 occurring before this had been completed, the scheme became unviable and was never implemented.

The uncertain future that this has created for the building reflects a mismatch, seen from a market perspective, between evaluations of the economic cost of conservation and of the scope for profit-making in a particular economic climate. Interestingly, Cardiff Council, Macob and heritage bodies share a sense of the building’s symbolic and cultural value for the city and for Wales. However, the politics of the Coal Exchange’s preservation have come to centre on questions of how and whether it is necessary to assign a monetary value to this symbolic worth, how to justify investment in the context of constrained public finances, and of how, in a practical sense, to actually pay for it.

The difficulties of addressing these questions have been reflected in a series of claims, counter-claims and proposals which have been made over the past year of our research and studio. Since early 2013, Cardiff Council has been involved in a process of negotiation with Macob with a view to either development partnership or purchase of the building. Based on a commissioned survey by RVW Consulting connected to this negotiation, Cardiff Council has claimed to be convinced of the building’s structural instability, and the impossibility of wholesale preservation. In response, in mid-2013, the Council’s Fire Officer issued a prohibition notice and closed large areas of the building. The Council’s ‘public protection unit’ also issued notices under Section 78 of the Building Act (1984) to prohibit the use of the Exchange Hall. A scheme has been developed by Council-appointed architectural consultants which, it is claimed, safeguards the most symbolically important elements of the building, yet which appears to be largely a façade retention strategy.

CADW, on the other side of the fence, claim to be unprepared to defend any scheme that involves complete or partial redevelopment. They ground their position on their establish policy
framework for assessing the integrated ‘evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal’ values of heritage (CADW, 2011). Whilst this framework might seem to suggest the potential for systematic analyses of multiple values to be undertaken with a view to balance or political reconciliation, in this case, they are used to legitimate inflexible support for total conservation. More at the fringes, a number of other groups have become involved including the Victorian Society and the Cardiff Civic Forum and the renowned conservation engineering firm Mann Williams who have offices in Mount Stuart Square. Mann Williams have been in a position to develop an alternative ‘expert view’ of the building’s condition and used this to create a campaign that led to the presentation of a petition to ‘Save Cardiff Coal Exchange’ to the Welsh Assembly in March 2014. They contest accounts of structural failure and the need for multi-million pound investment which underpins the logic of substantial redevelopment. The possibility has been presented in this context that the Council may have used legal instruments to block access to the building to anyone who may be able to construct a valid opposition to their deep-seated desire for redevelopment. If true, this action would appear to fly in the face of conservation policy centred on inclusivity in heritage-related decision-making. It is also worth adding that the press have been active in reporting the enfolding politics of these processes.

If one key problem here relates to mismatched values – the economic versus the cultural and symbolic - then another is founded in a general lack of consideration of the building’s place in history. In conversations with Council and CADW representatives alike, the historical significance of the building is summed up in relatively simple terms, often using the narrative of the first ever one million pound cheque being signed here. Neither the façade retention nor total conservation scheme options are based on more than a superficial reading of the building’s heritage value or, indeed, of Cardiff’s urban, architectural and social history. What is missing is an extended account of the building as a testament of growth and decline, of inhabitation and abandonment, of structural integrity and ruin — as a place with a past which in Massey’s terms ‘is as open to a multiplicity of readings as is the present’ (Massey, 1995).

3.0 INNOVATIVE METHODOLOGIES FOR HERITAGE-LED REGENERATION

How could an extended understanding of heritage deal with the problem of contested values? In the light of the above analysis, we propose that the following concepts are crucial for the Coal Exchange.

- Drawing on a longstanding tradition of valuing ruins as well as adaptations and restorations, the Coal Exchange and Mount Stuart Square the potential to be appreciated in terms of the rich array of processes they have undergone over time, including damage and decay (see Armstrong, 2007).
- The Coal Exchange is a reflection of the city’s profile at the turn of the last century, including its role in the world. How can this inform a conceptual framework for its future?
- The economic potential of heritage given its appeal for cultural tourism, though in a way which learns from recent critical work in heritage tourism studies.
- The construction of the past offered by the local authorities and their agents fails to encompass the perspectives of local people who are both part of the legacy of the coal industry and of the place today, and should play a vital role in its future.
- The remains of Cardiff’s industrial port could be a component in a future Welsh Coal Industry cultural landscape, including sites such as the Blaenavon UNESCO World Heritage site. This is strategic for developing awareness of how this industry has defined both the current landscape of Wales and the urban evolution of Cardiff.
In our ongoing research, we ask what strategies could be developed to express these extended understandings of heritage. How could this interact with the present and the future of the Coal Exchange Building?

As a first step in addressing this question, we argue that the extended qualities of heritage could be recovered in the Coal Exchange and other dilapidated buildings in Cardiff Bay through an innovative methodology which takes all the complexity of the city into account. Recent work in the field of integral urbanism is useful in this regard for the emphasis it places on establishing connection and communication at multiple borders and boundaries between places, people, activities and temporalities without obliterating difference (Ellin, 2013).

This methodology for addressing urban regeneration starts with an inventory of the expanded meanings of heritage in a wider spatial and cultural context. After all that can be valued and enhanced and all that may be underperforming has been identified, the integral approach proposed would address what is missing and could be added. This would be achieved by balancing economic, social, aesthetic, and environmental values, and developed through dialogue between planners, developers, conservation bodies, architects and the community.

4 CONCLUSIONS: SUMMARY OF KEY PROPOSITIONS

This paper has looked at the politics of built heritage preservation in the context of Cardiff’s Coal Exchange. It sought, firstly, to contextualise the issue within a wider discourse relating to the role of heritage in cultural regeneration in the UK and worldwide. In the substantive part of the paper, we looked at how the scope for sustainable and inclusive principles of heritage-led regeneration in Britain today can be eroded in practice as a result of the faith placed by authorities and developers alike in private, speculative development logics, even in the context of economic crisis. We argue for the need for a different perspective on heritage conservation premised on the value of integrating a wider set of issues and ways of understanding the past. As we do so, the very sense of urgency created by the current state of uncertainty is reflected in the building and demands to be taken seriously – in the melancholically stopped clock in the lobby to the silent Trading Hall where the inscription based on a line in Vergil’s Georgis reminds: ‘Tempus Fugit’.

Figure 4: Clock in the entrance lobby to the Trading Hall
REFERENCES

Ela Palmer Heritage. 2008. The social impacts of heritage-led regeneration. [www.elapalmerheritage.co.uk]