

# Conservation and Regeneration in the Nottingham Lace Market.

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## 1. Introduction

The future of the UK cultural heritage is addressed in an important report published by English Heritage in August 2000 **The Power of Place- the future of the historic environment.**(English Heritage www site, 2000) The report carries five main messages which together can be seen as the central components of contemporary UK cultural heritage policy. These are:

- Most people in the UK place a high value on the cultural/historic environment. They also think that public funds should be used to protect historic environments and that such concerns should play an important part in the regeneration of our towns and cities
- The UK is now a multi-cultural society and everybody's heritage should be recognised. Local communities should be consulted about heritage policies.
- Traditionally historic conservation strategies have been addressed to individual sites buildings. This is no longer adequate as it is clear that people value places in their totality. Significance has to be attributed to places encompassing sites and buildings.
- All groups in society have a part to play in looking after the historic environment. It is important to form partnerships which represent a wide range of stakeholders eg. Central and local government, amenity societies, community groups, owners and developers, educational institutions.
- The basis of effective policies for protecting historic environments is sound knowledge derived from thorough historical research, refined by open debate. Such knowledge will accommodate multiple narratives and the divergent values that people place on their surroundings.

The important shift that seems to have taken place in the UK over the past two decades with respect to the protection of historic environments is a move away from focusing on individual buildings and sites with aesthetic or architectural merit towards valuing places in their totality because of their association with popular culture and social history. This does not mean a neglect of architectural and artistic values, rather a broader and more inclusive approach towards urban and rural landscapes and how they might be protected and enhanced.

This is not a simple process and in policy terms will present new challenges to those concerned with cultural heritage.

Restoring significant shared meanings for many neglected urban places first involves claiming the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of ... history not just its architectural monuments. This means emphasising the building types, such as tenement, factory, church etc that have housed working peoples everyday lives. Second, it involves finding creative ways to interpret modest buildings as part of the flow of contemporary city life. (Hayden pp10-11,1995.)

The UK Report on historic environments published in 2000 based on detailed consultation papers and a nationwide MORI survey of 3000 people poll reflects the views expressed by Dolores Hayden in the USA. The UK, like many other nations, has over the past three decades become a multi-cultural society, it has also become more aware of its past with regard to class and gender. This has resulted in a more complex social histories and geographies that reflect multiple narratives. This in turn means that urban and rural landscapes have acquired richer layers of meaning and value for people.

Place rather than site or building has now become the focus of protecting historic environments. Places have a role in peoples lives and can make contribution to their cultural and economic well being. Historic cultural environments are made up of more than bricks and mortar, they are also made up of layer upon layer of human activity. Each generation leaves its mark. Strategies towards places means preserving what is valuable from the past even while adapting to change with new buildings and the creation of new landscapes. The UK report provides survey evidence that most people believe that change is necessary and desirable. Keeping the best of the past provides good reasons for promoting good new building and high quality design.

Underlying the shift in public attitudes is the knowledge of what has been lost in the last half century. Savage urban redevelopment and `renewal' has battered places and important collective memories have been thoughtlessly wiped clean. Other urban places that have escaped the bulldozer have suffered decades of neglect and under investment. We have lived through a period when there has been massive disrespect of peoples lives and culture as embodied in urban infrastructure and streetscapes. The same has happened in rural areas where the imperatives of agri-business have prevailed over historic rural landscapes. The dominance of the automobile and the officially perceived need for new roads has destroyed the tranquillity of the countryside. Among the responses to this official government led vandalism has been the rise of voluntary citizen based heritage organisations like the National Trust, Friends of the Earth, Save, Civic Trust and local amenity societies. These organisations have served to raise public awareness as well as providing greater knowledge of the ways and means of protecting cultural heritage. At the same time it is not clear that governmental agencies, owners and private developers have learned as rapidly as they might have. There is a it seems a need for more partnership working in the field of protecting historic cultural environments.

## **2. The Nottingham Lace Market.**

In this paper we address the issue of UK cultural heritage policy through the lens of a particular case study, the Nottingham Lace Market. This is a central city district which is adjacent to Nottingham City centre. In many respects what has happened in the Nottingham Lace Market over the past two decades has been mirrored in other Victorian city centres over the past two decades. The economic and political forces that are shaping the future of the Nottingham Lace Market are not specific to Nottingham, although there are obviously some unique local features, in general the same forces can be seen as operative elsewhere in other UK cities like Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds. Essentially what is happening in Nottingham is that a former industrial area developed in the nineteenth century, the Lace Market, is undergoing a process of regeneration as the area is being transformed from what was perceived as a redundant industrial space to a new cultural and professional service commercial centre

The Lace Market district was developed during the nineteenth century. Essentially what had been a domestic trade became industrialised with the development of machinery for mass producing lace. This in turn led to the need for large buildings to house the machinery and workers. There was also a need for extensive warehousing. The architecture and streetscaping of the Lace Market was a responses to these needs. Nottingham became one of the leading centres of Lace production in the nineteenth century. The major producers vied

with each other to build the grandest factories. Often the owners copied the front elevations of stately homes on the frontages their factories. The factories themselves were showplaces of industrial pride. Most of these structures are remain although the industry itself has virtually disappeared. The built environment remains as a reminder of a historic industrial legacy.

The physical core of the Lace Market built environment was and is represented by a number of large & distinctive industrial buildings that had been developed in the nineteenth century for the purposes of producing and distributing Lace for national and international markets. The industrial wealth of nineteenth century Nottingham had been closely linked to the lace industry. The lace industry in Nottingham suffered a rapid decline in the early twentieth century. There was no obvious use for these large buildings. By the nineteen fifties many had fallen into disuse or multi - occupancy. Some had been demolished to provide more space for car parking and city centre relief roads. The area as whole was seen by local planners as a place that could be comprehensively refashioned to support the nearby city centre. During the 1960's the area as whole was generally seen as an eyesore and in terminal decline. By the late 1960's there was a shift in the way that Victorian architecture was valued and in 1969 the old lace warehouses were seen as having historical architectural significance. The area as a whole was designated as a Conservation Area by national government as a response to local civic initiative. This was one of the first such areas to be so declared under contemporary civic amenity legislation. Among other things it signalled the start of a re-evaluation of Victorian industrial architecture in Britain. In this sense the moves in Nottingham were not unique, other cities like Leeds, Bradford, Manchester had similar areas and buildings.

The central question facing local planners subsequent to designation of Conservation Area status was what would be the economic role of the Lace Market district? The new policy in the early 1970's shifted to renovation and the area was declared to be a Industrial Improvement Area. The local authorities now sought to overcome urban industrial blight by providing grants to restore and repair industrial buildings. The new planning strategy aimed at internally reconstructing the buildings whilst preserving the external facades. The hope was that the refurbished spaces would be taken up by textile firms and associated companies and that the traditional economic role of the district would be re-affirmed. To this end the Lace Market Development Company was formed as a public private partnership between the City and County Councils and private investors. However it had become very clear by the late 1980's was that while the fashion trade might still have a role to play in the development of the Lace Market it was unlikely to be a leading role as originally envisaged. The industrial strategy first adopted in the nineteen seventies really did no more than assume that it was possible to re-invent the past. With city centre rents generally rising during the 1980's the rents of Lace Market spaces exceeded those for industrial use and property developers began to offer spaces in the rehabilitated buildings for office space. The demand for these premises was high and rents continued to rise. The Lace Market could be viewed as an early example of commercial gentrification. The demands for office space was coming from small professional service firms. Lawyers, accountants, IT companies, architects, cvarious kinds of consultants etc. It was not possible to stop the loss of textile and clothing companies.

During the nineteen nineties there were two reviews of the Lace Market development strategy by the City of Nottingham, the lead planning authority. The first review was in 1992 when there was a recession when the Council said it had proved not possible to achieve property based regeneration. It was decided that efforts to regenerate the Lace Market had to be broadened. The new strategy included tourism with the opening of two new museums, one devoted to the Lace Industry the other on Criminal Justice based in the former Shire Hall and County Gaol. Pedestrian links were established between the Lace Market and Nottingham Castle. The underground cave system was opened to the public and proved very popular.

A second initiative was in the retail sector which promoted Hockley, a major thoroughfare as a shopping centre. A third initiative, and as it transpired has been very successful, was the encouragement of residential development. A fourth element was the promotion of the conversion of the largest lace factories, the Adams building into a further education college.

This was a major project and attracted UK government and European Community funds. The Adams building was perhaps one the most outstanding examples of Victorian industrial architecture in the Lace Market. Nottingham New College as it is now called has been highly successful in developing relevant educational programmes to for city centre employers including training for the fashion trade and IT enterprise. Finally and by no means least the

The Broadway Cinema and Media Centre in the Lace Market had a growing national and international reputation. Nottingham City Council have deliberately assisted in developing the media sector and the Broadway Cinema. This has resulted in the Lace Market being perceived as the cultural quarter of Nottingham.

By the mid nineties it was evident that the clothing and textiles industry would continue to decline. Not least because of the challenge of competition from textile firms based in developing countries. The companies remaining were predominantly small companies employing fewer than twenty five people. There were only just over a thousand people employed in this sector. The commercial office sector constituted over 50% of the employment in the area. The main reasons for supporting the clothing and textiles trade was because it was still important as an employer and especially in its contribution to the Lace Market 'identity' Overall then the City Council found that its economic and physical planning policies had to be very flexible and pragmatic if they wished to use market forces to regenerate the Lace Market.

By the end of the nineteen nineties it can legitimately be claimed that the regeneration of the Lace Market has been success for the Nottingham. The historic environment has been protected and enhanced, and it would be justifiable for Nottingham City Council to propose that it be designated as a National Heritage Area. In terms of heritage protection, economic development and town planning this is very much a success story from which conclusions can be drawn that might be applicable elsewhere.

### **3. Conclusions.**

- The original declaration of the Lace Market as a conservation area was very much an act of faith based on a value judgement. At the time, (1969) Victorian architecture was a minority taste and still somewhat unfashionable. It is important to recognise that there had to be an open debate and good arguments made to justify conservation area status. That this decision was justified can be seen in the ways that similar areas in other cities like Bradford, Birmingham and Manchester have been protected and transformed. Had the the town planning 'modernisers' of the early sixties won the argument about the future of the area there would have been a very disruptive inner ring road system, extensive car parking in the Lace Market, and quite possibly more high rise office blocks offering inferior office space. Civic Amenity Societies and other similar citizen associations are important for articulating values for historic environments. This has certainly been the case in Nottingham.
- Although the changes were not initiated by the Nottingham City Council or County Council, as local planning authorities it was necessary for them to become committed to a conservation strategy. Once the City & County Council had accepted the need for a conservation strategy then it became important for them find the means to make it work. Although there were private sector and voluntary interests in the area it was important for the local authorities to become actively committed to change.

- In Nottingham over the past two decades there have been active partnerships constantly working on and exploring possibilities for the Lace Market. The Local Authorities as planning agencies and property holders, private sector companies and property developers, the local civic amenity interests. The creation of a forum to promote the area was necessary to keep things moving even during periods of recession, like the early nineties.
- One of the reasons why the Lace Market has been successfully protected is because the various agencies were pragmatic and responsive to change. At the outset no one knew what would work. It was a process of trial and error and a readiness to drop plans that were not succeeding. Had there been a strict blueprint type process it would not have been feasible to save the area. As it turned out it needed both a willingness to respond to the market and a readiness to make substantial public investments in the area.

The Nottingham Lace Market district has become an integral part of the city centre amenities providing much needed flexible office space, an alternative retail centre as well as tourist and leisure amenities with bars, clubs, restaurants and major entertainment centres like the Nottingham Ice Rink. This together with the Broadway Cinema and Media centre has enabled Nottingham to present itself as one of the more dynamic provincial cities in the UK. At the same time important Victorian architectural heritage buildings have been preserved and found a new lease of life.