

Towards a Historical Urban Landscape: Principles and approaches in recent built heritage and landscape regeneration projects in the Yorkshire region of England

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Abstract: There is a recent shift in focus in the design preservation and transformation of the built heritage from building objects to historical urban landscape in the Yorkshire region of U.K. The paper will discuss the conservation policies, design regeneration principles, approaches, and socio-economic impacts of two up-to-date exemplar projects -- ‘Albert Works’ in Sheffield in 2017, and ‘Square Chapel’ in Halifax in 2017. The paper points to a more culturally and socially-sensitive way of architectural design involving built heritage and historical urban landscape, which works with the as-found conditions of historical fabric and monuments, strategic design branding, economic returns in preserving and transforming the built heritage and landscape in the Yorkshire.

Keywords: Yorkshire; historical urban landscape; built heritage; design regeneration

Historical Urban Landscape

There is a shift in focus in heritage-led regeneration projects in the UK in recent years, from the focus on the single component of building and landscape heritage, or heritage conservation area, to an integrated and evolving historical urban landscape. The emergence of the conceptual framework of historical urban landscape, which was first put forward in UNESCO Vienna conference in 2005¹, has developed with its core concept in the UK based on Patrick Geddes’s urban heritage conservation of cultural landscape² and Gordon Cullen’s townscapes³. The spatial dimension of heritage has grown from ‘monument’ to the slightly larger concepts of site, thence to ‘setting’, areas and ‘landscapes’ and cities, and finally to the historical urban landscape. The various successive enlargements of ‘heritage’ have created an all-inclusive concept of the ‘historic environment’⁴. As Taylor summarized, central to the historical urban landscape are three underlying principles: understanding of the city as an evolving process -- living entity -- not merely a series of objects (buildings): here the idea of process embraces intangible cultural heritage values, *genius loci* and interaction between culture and nature; respect for the overall morphology of the city and its landscape setting so that future development does not overwhelm the landscape physically or its intangible meanings and values; understanding that conservation of physical material aspects of urban landscape must be balanced taking into account immaterial aspects to do with layers of meanings residing in the urban landscape⁵. The conceptual framework of historical urban landscape directs to a more holistic approach to built heritage environment in the UK, with an emphasis on the layers of historic and social values of those built fabric over time, rather than sticking to or returning to a particular time period. In this way, the UK has a subtle difference from, and beneath the surface difference there’s a very contrasting ideology with Viollet-le-Duc’s conceptual framework of restoration on historical built heritage and landscape,



as can be demonstrated from John Ruskin's statement on urban heritage fabric consists of varied assemblies⁶. Ruskin's principle and approach has a far-reaching impact in British conservation and regeneration from urban, architectural and landscape perspectives. Influenced strongly by John Ruskin, the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in the U.K, founded by William Morris and others in 1877, promotes that buildings should be preserved as found with minimal interventions, and any additions should be distinguished from the original one without confusing both statuses⁷. This point of view has also been reconfirmed in the Venice Charter, for example in its Article 12, stating that within restoration, replacements for missing parts must integrate harmoniously, whilst remaining distinguishable from the original as not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.⁸

Design Principles and Approaches

There are generally three design principles, associated with three design approaches, transforming built heritage and landscape in the Yorkshire region of England, U.K: the first is restoration, which refers to literal reconstruction to return or to represent the original characteristics in their fullest authenticity; the second is preservation, which refers to the minimal conservation of the as-found condition of the site and context, in order to maintain an alternative idea of authenticity and manage the future possible change. Its extreme version leads to a monumental-ization of heritage, which celebrates the vanquished past through the enhancement of ruin and decay; the third, a landscape-based approach, which is the topic of this paper and has become increasingly compelling within current local architectural professions and academia, seeks a point of balance and reconciliation between the old fragments and new additions, the past and future, the conservation and regeneration, through a sensitive and holistic design and planning approach. This approach to the built heritage often leads to a more culturally and socially resilient 'new-into-old' hybrid, which is not only focusing on the single historic built object or landscape zone, but on the layered, integrated whole historical urban landscape. It re-attaches significance and value on the reason and rationale to add, adjust and absorb the new contemporary addition in order to preserve the as-found historical urban landscape, which itself is not static, or authentic in rationalists' perspectives, but dynamic in process and responsive in use. This resilience embedded in a broader layering of urban landscape, rather than a single freestanding building object or landscape, is of highly strategic importance for heritage conservation and regeneration in order to manage the change in a sustainable way, both economically and socio-culturally.

To further demonstrate, two projects are selected for the following case studies, based on the three criteria: first, both projects were completed in the past three years, which should represent the most up-to-dated versions of urban landscape conservation and regeneration principles and approaches from Yorkshire region; second, both projects were initiated and done by Yorkshire local practitioners instead of national or global practice, which should express more specific locality and explain specific approaches to this particular region; third, and most important of all, that both projects approached and transformed very ordinary built field in a heritage context, ranging from not only the ordinary warehouse-to-workplace to the adaptive-reuse of disused hall at the building scale, but also their immediate surroundings at the level of urban landscape. Rather than those specially-proposed typologies in once-in-a-lifetime special commissions backed by strong patronages, these selected projects constitute the everyday fabric of an urban landscape and townscape, and would have more transferability to elsewhere in the Yorkshire regional context.



Albert Works in Sheffield, 2017



Figure 1 Before Regeneration



Figure 2 After Regeneration



Figure 3 New workplace's interior

In Sheffield, the largest South Yorkshire city, there is a great need and potential to regenerate post-industrial urban landscapes with many derelict warehouses and ordinary industrial buildings. Albert Works can be regarded one of the most successful regeneration projects in the recent decade. Located in the Cultural Industries Quarter, a conservation area designated in 2001, the warehouse building block of Albert Works started since early 1830s mainly for cutlery production (Figure 1). Although identified as ‘buildings of interest’ by the city council’s conservation team, the building had still been disused and abandoned for decades, until its renovation and conversion into a 1500-sqm digital company workplace (Figure 2) from the mid-2010s, done by Leeds-based architectural practice Cartwright Pickard Architects. The conservation policy of Cultural Industries Quarter highlights the high level of repair and recovery in the original building and the flexibility of new developments, in order to prevent the abandonment again. Built upon this foundation, the design team went beyond the contemporary functional fit of the historical structural shell, by reconsidering the role of this site for the city of Sheffield, which occupied nearly a full urban block with two street frontages. An architecture of urban interior – a double-height co-working hall (Figure 3) was realized, as an infill into the existing tight block through new steel structures and timber roofs. It provided a possibility for the new workplace to routinely open house as a social gathering hub for the historical neighbourhoods, in this way carefully sustained the historical social relationship between the original warehouse and its surroundings urban landscapes. In this sense for this heritage fabric, social process and spatial form were aligned within a piece of historical urban landscape. Down to the street level, the street-facing elevations of building block were restored and refurbished in its traditional red-brick construction, preserving the historical memory in link to the two existing streetscapes through sticking to the familiar form and configuration. However, the visual presence of two specific street elevations was articulated in a subtly-differentiated way into a contemporary moment, with a juxtaposition of contemporary brown-coloured metal and dark-coloured glazing with traditional masonry to capture contemporary change in this historical urban landscape. Behind the two street frontalities, the historical authenticity and future reversibility of this flexible contemporary working space (Figure 4) was as much ensured as possible by a series of light-weight plug-in furniture and the reuse of recycled shipping containers (Figure 5), with as less as possible structural touch and permanent link to the existing floors, walls and ceilings. Furthermore, a human-scaled landscape courtyard was designed to preserve the existing industrial chimney, again reinforced the site-specific heritage and place identity through new development and use from the point of view as a whole historical urban landscape. Albert Works has been very well received by its building users⁹, local community and external visitors that its approach has become a benchmark for the following redevelopment projects in the adjacent plots to the whole historical urban landscapes of the Cultural Industries Quarter of Sheffield.



Figure 4 Preserved existing walls and view connections to the street



Figure 5 Adaptively reuse of recycled shipping containers as plug-in meeting spaces of the red-brick shell

Square Chapel Arts Centre in Halifax, 2017



Figure 6 (left) Townscape of Halifax in 1988, with Piece Hall, Bradley Hall and Tower of church at the centre.

Figure 7 (right) Current streetscape of Halifax, view from the railway station and carpark area, most of the pre-industrial buildings have been well preserved as listed buildings by Historic England.



Figure 8 Competition winning model by Evans Vettori Architects, showing the new Square Chapel Arts Centre re-inhabits the left-over void between the Grade Listed I Piece Hall and Grade List II Bradley Hall buildings.

Located in the West Yorkshire, the town of Halifax had been heavily relied on the textile industry for hundreds of years before the dominant arriving of the industrial revolution. Halifax's greater cultural prosperity can be not only seen from its reputation as the 'Florence of the North', but also its

historical townscape (Figure 6) with two public buildings as its physical manifestation and centre – the Grade I listed Piece Hall built in 1779 and the Grade II listed Bradley Chapel built five years later. Piece Hall is a three-storey building containing as more as 315 individual units, and a central plaza providing market space also for trading pieces of cloth. The red brick building of Bradley Chapel has a typical Georgian front façade, sits adjacent to the key medieval street of the town as one of that sort of gate-way buildings along the street. The fates of both buildings went side by side with the family-based, hand-made weaving industry. Both decayed physically and mentally, and had been borrowed as Sunday school and informal settlements in post-war periods until its transaction back to the local community as an art space by only £25 in 1988. Theatrical and art performances went on regularly from then on, however without any spatial improvements of the buildings’ decaying social status and cultural role for the forgotten town. The situation of this piece of historical urban landscape has not changed until Matlock-based local architectural practice Evans Vettori Architects won an invited competition on this area which succeeded in finding out a lost and potential spatial link between the Piece Hall and Bradley Chapel. Their new design introduction of a new Arts Centre finally reinvented both heritage buildings back to a more welcomed and well-presented historical urban landscape branded for a contemporary Halifax (Figure 7). The team firstly got involved into the renovation of the central plaza of the Piece Hall, then identified a vacant triangle site in between the two listed building (Figure 8). Extensive community consultation then started, alongside with the discussions and meetings with the Arts Council and Halifax local council, to understand the value of the site as a part of historical urban landscape rather than a freestanding base or object. Both as listed buildings, there’s a very strict conservation policy and limited scopes for any renovation or redevelopment on the existing buildings’ interior and external change. The aesthetic, communal and heritage use value in the two historical buildings is so evident that any new contemporary addition would face how to preserve the as-found historical urban landscape without losing its contemporary development potentials. The resolved design from the perspective of historical urban landscape strategically put the new Arts Centre as a spatial linkage between the two listed heritage buildings, physically relinked through several pedestrian accesses and mentally relinked through a single continuous space covered by a single continuous roof. The roof derived its geometry and form from within the triangular site-specific in between two heritage halls (Figure 9), self-supported by three new steel structures in a resemblance of three old trees of the site, but also freeing any additional structural load to two enclosing walls from the two heritage buildings (Figure 10). The existing theatre was carefully refurbished with as much as-found elements conserved as possible; a new 120-seat auditorium was placed and hidden within a podium which also anchored the street pattern of the preserved medieval lane. More than doubled number of local users have been drawn back to this site for regular historical visits, art exhibitions and theatrical performances, or just a cup of tea with families and friends. From the original six founders, a staff of 55 now man the centre with 70 volunteers still coming in to do a shift, just because they want to. The new Arts Centre took £20k in their first opening week – the whole budget for this regeneration project was just £360k¹⁰. Here, the new Square Chapel Arts Centre not presented itself as a contemporary monumental building, but as a contemporary patchwork which was not only stitched into the existing historical fabric but also tailored the fragments between each existing components of this historical urban landscape as a whole. In this way, the sense of place and concept of heritage contexts for this historical gateway area of Halifax’s townscape were carefully maintained and sustainably managed in its most culturally-resilient meaning and approach.





Figure 9 New hall of Square Chapel Arts Centre, view from the renovated upper floor of Bradley Hall



Figure 10 Design regeneration based on contemporary spatial interventions working with the given walls, the left one from the existing Piece Hall and the front one's as-found back elevation of Bradley Hall.

Conclusion

The two selected cases in this paper open up a critical dialogue with the given heritage in the Yorkshire region of U.K through its transformative use for long-term sustainability as a part of an evolving historical urban landscape. The scales, conditions and effects of each case vary, but the design principles and approaches demonstrate a shared consistency towards a heritage-led regeneration with a broader perspective of historical urban landscape. Conservation and regeneration of built heritage and landscapes should be fast forward-looking, rather than merely looking back. It should be a resilient design process of managing change, which would be based on the strategic decision-making with a wider community on the as-found spatial resources and cultural continuity from a broader view of historical urban landscape. The championing of this shifting design principle and approaches in heritage-led regeneration projects should be based on a more evidence-based understanding that culturally-sensitive and resilient design can lead to a better understanding and preservation of the built heritage and landscapes, and can also trigger and direct the positive change and sustainable development of a locally-specific historical urban landscape. There is an urgent need to strike a point of balance, that both the historic authenticity and value and a sustainable future transformation for the built heritage and landscapes are ensured through conservation and regeneration of the historical urban landscape as large, by minimising physical interventions, by branding new strategic identities, and by embedding historical urban landscape as a continuous and constantly-changing whole. Within this fundamental principle and a series of diverse approaches tailored to diverse site contexts and external conditions, a strong counterpoint can be provided to those design forces that became rapidly and blindly involved in the ‘Disneyfication’ and ‘McDonaldisation’ of mass heritage tourism or tourism-led regeneration, hoping instead to readdress fundamental resilience within the built heritage and landscapes towards a historical urban landscape.

Illustration Credits

Figure 1; 2 @ Jaywing

Figure 3 @ Tom Kahler

Figure 6 @ Peter Hollings

Figure 4; 5; 7; 8; 9; 10 @ Xiang Ren



Notes and References

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⁹ Based on the author's interviews with current Albert Works user company Jaywing's director and staffs from May to November 2018.

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