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**Tough Choices:   
Heritage or Housing?**

Professor Simon Thurley

Planning is never out of the news and as far as I can remember, in what has been quite a long career in heritage, changing the planning system has always been a priority for government.

In 2012 came what I regard as a very welcome reform. This was the National Planning Policy Framework, the so called NPPF. At the time there was a lot of fuss about it; people don’t like change, but also there were legitimate concerns about its direction. However in the end we got what I believe is the most sophisticated planning framework in Europe and possibly in the world.

Like almost every other country in Europe our planning system is based on the principle of sustainable development. This is a concept originally defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, which coined what has become its most often-quoted definition: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainable Development is most frequently expressed in terms of three dimensions or pillars which are economic growth, social inclusion and environmental balance. Diagrams such as this are produced to illustrate the point.

The original Brundtland Commission and its definition was driven by concern about not using up more than our fair share of irreplaceable resources, including rainforests as well as fossil fuels - conserving resources for future generations so that they can meet their needs as well as we can. Our heritage is, of course, also an irreplaceable resource - like a rainforest, once it's gone, it is gone forever. And so many have argued that Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning should become a fourth pillar added to the first three. An edifice supported by environment, economics, social inclusion and culture.

For many countries across the world this is the conservation holy grail. Getting formal legal acceptance that culture – heritage, if you like, is part of the definition of sustainability. Ladies and Gentlemen in 2012 we got it. The NPPF has enshrined in its opening pages that part of being sustainable is ‘protecting and enhancing the historic environment’. Without doing this, in English planning guidance, you are not contributing to sustainable development.

It is easy to forget this as we gently get hot under the collar at various planning outrages. However all the evidence is that on the whole the NPPF has succeeded in getting heritage taken seriously as one of the key determinants of planning policy.

If only it were as simple as that. Politicians cannot leave anything alone. Since the publication of the NPPF there have been flurries of announcements and pronouncements about how the planning system is all wrong – it doesn’t work apparently. At the end of George Osborne’s reign at the Treasury we saw the publication of *Fixing the Foundations: Creating a More Prosperous Nation*, the government’s so-called productivity plan - a fifteen point plan to get national productivity up.

Now obviously, one of the things that has to be tackled is the planning system. Fixing the foundations tells us that ‘an excessively strict planning system can prevent land and other resources being used efficiently’. It then gives some evidence to prove that this really is the case in England: We were told that the planning system increases the cost of permission for major housing developments by £3 billion a year. We were also told that planning constraints on commercial development are equivalent to a 250% tax on office space.

This assault on the planning system has continued under the new Tory cabinet. Philip Hammond’s £5 billion plans to boost housebuilding came with, yes, you guessed it, a redrafting of the planning rules to introduce a presumption in favour of residential development.

This presumption is needed, the argument goes, because England is full of NIMBYs who are trying to stop housebuilders solve the housing crisis. Having abolished regional planning structures and delegated powers down to a local level, the government is now frustrated that local people and their elected members are not embracing all the housing and commercial development that the government wants. So the solution will be to take more powers back to Westminster to force things through.

Now, that’s not what the government is saying but it is what the government actually means. Basically despite the reduction of 7,000 pages of planning guidance achieved since 2012 the government still sees planning as an obstacle to economic development.

The protection of historic buildings in this country dates back to 1913. The Act of Parliament, that year, made it possible for the state to protect individual buildings that it judged to be of historic significance to the nation. It is from this act, hugely elaborated and expanded after the war, and then refined through the late twentieth century, that we have a national heritage protection system, which protects the fabric of places with, to use the terminology, special interest. The national system is a point designation system that protects single artefacts, a bit like objects in a museum. It’s worth remembering this point - the national heritage agency can protect single buildings, it can’t, using its powers of designation, protect places.

That power was, of course given to local government by the conservation areas legislation in 1967. Local authorities can designate places as being special on historic grounds and, if they choose to, can then police changes in order to ensure that their special character does not get eroded. But conservation areas are a blunt instrument. There are conservation areas in Neasden and in Bath. Both protect a special character but the job of protection is quite different.

When arguments for the conservation of buildings and archaeological remains developed from the nineteenth century they were based on the protection of fabric: on preserving the very bricks and stones from which our past was constructed. Most protective legislation today across the world is still based on this principle. However there is, in most countries, a very broad-based consensus against the destruction of historic places. Of course there are arguments at the margins about the desirability of preserving certain buildings or parts of buildings; but in most European countries the principal argument about protecting our heritage has been won. Very few think it acceptable to demolish medieval churches, raze eighteenth century houses or destroy Roman villas.

What is much more difficult is the preservation of the wider significance of these places. Because, of course, none of these buildings exist in isolation; they have a spatial and historical context. Look at Totnes, here we have a very special place, but one that is impossible to capture in legalistic terms of the planning system. Its beauty and charm lie in the very complex interaction between the rural and urban parts of its landscape. The setting of the settlement is as important as the individual components of the settlement itself.

So what we are now trying to protect is very different from the original concerns of our forefathers. It is a much more complex task – not a black and white question of will fabric be destroyed or not. In fact questions of conservation are like most other areas of twenty-first century governance. They are complex multi-layered issues ill-suited to the black and white decision-making mechanisms that have grown up since the Second World War.

So let’s take a look at a couple of planning cases and you will see exactly what I mean. First take the example of Malmsbury. This is an ancient settlement, in fact a ninth century burg, which sits on a flat Cotswolds hilltop at the convergence of two rivers. They flow within 100 yards of each other but are separated by a narrow and high isthmus, just a few yards across, which forces the Bristol Avon south and the Tetbury Avon east. This creates a rocky outcrop as a south-facing, gently sloping hilltop. This was a perfect site for our Saxon forebears to settle.

Here is the designation map for the town showing by a series of dots all the individual listed buildings and, of course, the whole of the centre is a shaded showing that it is a conservation area. However as you can see from this view none of this takes account of the crucial point about Malmsbury which is its unique setting, the boundaries between town and country essential to its character and to its history.

Some of you may know that a big planning battle was fought over Malmsbury over the last few years. It was proposed to build a large supermarket on the edge of the town in the site marked here. First it was to be Sainsbury’s, then the site was won by Waitrose. The battle is over and, for the conservationists lost, Waitrose have their supermarket. But should it really have been allowed?

Just look at how it destroys the historic relationship between town and country, just look how large it is in relation to the conservation area, just look at its effects in the long views of the town. Even if we are not arguing about conservation what effect does such a large supermarket have on the town centre shops in a place with a population of 6,000.

My point here is not to get hot under the collar about a bad planning decision, but to make the point that national heritage designations have little impact on the setting of a place like Malmsbury.

Let me give you another example of where the heritage protection system completely failed a historic town. This is Ely in the fens. At its heart is the fantastic cathedral, one of the most glorious and majestic sites anywhere in England. The cathedral is defined by its relationship to the surrounding fen, this is where Hereward the Wake hid out as he conducted his guerrilla war against the Normans; Ely is an island and the cathedral is at its highest point. But Ely is a big growth point in easy commuting distance of Cambridge, and indeed, London, and gradually the historic town has been ringed with areas of new housing.

What this housing has done is cut off the cathedral from its landscape, from most directions you cannot now see the relationship between the countryside and the town. You can’t appreciate the way it is built on the highest point of an island in the watery fens around it. Now Ely has lots of listed buildings and the cathedral is, of course, grade 1, but in deciding whether the setting of the town might be affected by a development - this grade one listing is worthless.

My advice is go to Ely quickly, now, this weekend or next, and take a walk along the river, enjoy the views, enjoy the peaceful ripple of the river Ouse, listen to the birds and watch the cathedral in the distance because very soon you will be standing by a massive dual carriageway that will slice through the fens obliterating not only the views but the tranquillity of the river walks.

This huge, brutal bypass has been approved partly because there was very limited heritage impact on designated assets. The cathedral is miles away from the bypass, so the bypass can’t be much of a problem.

So roads and supermarkets are two examples of how the countryside is being eaten up round our historic towns without giving any thought to how these places sit within the landscape and how heritage legislation cannot do anything about it because it protects individual buildings and not special historic places. But neither roads nor supermarkets are anything compared to the big issue of housing.

You will know the basic facts about housing. There is political consensus on the fact that we need more houses and, actually, amongst voters 69% of us think that housing is one of the big issues of the day. The bare facts appear simple. Due to an aging population, immigration and people living alone we will need more than 5m new homes in the next 25 years. So there is pressure to expand the housing stock, only not enough houses are being built. It has been estimated that we need 233,000 houses a year but at the moment we are only building half that. The consequence is that list of people want to move into houses that don’t exist and the houses we have are rising in price very fast. Between 1971 and 2012 house prices increased by 4,268% and we know that if the price of a supermarket chicken had risen at the same rate over the same period it would now cost an eye-watering £51.33.

Now this is a very complex area and I am in danger of simplifying things too much. But why can’t the market provide the housing we need in the right places, at an affordable cost and to a good quality? There is a lot of disagreement about this. Some blame the housebuilders, some blame the councils, some blame the planning system and some blame so-called NIMBYs. Well, in my view the problem isn’t any of these alone and that is because new housing, new neighbourhoods and most new buildings are incredibly unpopular with the pubic. They see that precious England that defines us is being raped by developers, ignorant councils and incompetent architects and the heritage protection legislation that they think can help them is completely powerless.

Like everything this has some history to it. The last time there was a huge housing crisis was in the 1960s and early 70s. This was a period in which architects managed to persuade politicians that people would be happier, healthier and more prosperous if they moved into blocks of flats set in large open spaces. So over 1.5m houses were knocked down and replaced by tower blocks.

Some parts of London the councils planned to demolish every Victorian and Edwardian House. When he was heritage minister Lord Mackintosh, who as the leader of Hackney Council in the mid-60s was Andrew Mackintosh planned to demolish all the houses in Hackney and replace them with concrete high rise. When I asked him about this many years later he said that I was too young to understand the sense of mission that the generation who had been on the beaches of D Day had. They wanted to make the world a better place and a new architecture was one of the ways to do it.

This was a terrible period when town and city centres which had been spared the processes of industry and had escaped Hitler’s bombs were simply bulldozed to make way for ring roads car parks and large-scale high rise housing developments.

While initially these developments were popular it very soon became apparent that it was all a terrible disaster and places where being ripped apart by councils and their architects departments and by 1975 it all ground to a halt. Previous phases of development and previous styles of architecture had been stopped by architects, critics, politicians, but the housebuilding of the 60s and early 70s were stopped popular revolt. The public hated it. There was a terrible disjunction that had never happened before, between the population and architects.

But it’s not only the buildings it is the spaces around them. Thousands of years ago man worked out what the nicest urban environments looked like. They worked out how to build towns and cities that felt good to live in, that fostered good feelings and good behaviours. The components were very simple the street, the footpath, the square and the park. These are the simple but effective components of every place you have ever been that you like. You can add some refinements to it if you like – a river, a lake, a bridge; but basically streets work. What happened in the 60s was that people abandoned streets. Tower blocks were set in lawns, car parks and open spaces – these spaces never became cherished communal gardens they became wind corridors, dog lavatories, places to fly tip, race motorbikes and abandon cars. So people not only turned against the buildings but against whole places. Places that looked great on an architect’s plan but which in reality were completely inhuman.

This is why people are against housing development. They don’t trust architects, they don’t trust house-builders and they don’t trust councils to listen to them. As a result 2/3 of British adults say they would never even consider buying a new house. Only 21% of us say a new home is our favoured option. Surveys tell one story – the economic facts tell the same one. The Halifax building society tells us that the prices fetched by traditional pre 1920 houses in a conventional street have risen 54% faster than homes built since 1960.

There has been a huge amount of research into what sort of houses people like and want to live in. and the facts are unequivocal nearly 90% of people aspire to live in a house in a street. And here we came to the problem. The housebuilders know that – they after all are enterprises wanting to sell their products to consumers. But the system we have now is not only fearsomely unpopular it is a vicious circle that is destroying the character of that countryside that we all love so much.

The house-building is not done any more by small independent developers, or at least not often. It is controlled by volume housebuilders. There are very large companies with a duty to their shareholders whose business model relies on huge economies of scale. They are extremely powerful lobbying central government and bullying and threatening local authorities. A third of all new houses in 2014 were built by just five firms

This is basically how it works: a target is set for a number of houses to be built by the local authority. The council allocates a large amount of land for housebuilding. The developers cherry pick the easiest bits to develop. The developers than build slowly to avoid flooding the market and to keep prices high. So the targets are not met and the councils have to allocate more land. The developers cherry pick again and so the vicious circle continues to turn. All the time the background is against vocal and passionate local opposition. People who want at all costs to stop the new houses being built.

So here’s Ely again, this is the north Ely housing development site. You can see the way the development here is designed to fill in the gap between the town and the A10 bypass to the north. This is a site that will be developed by a single developer with a single permission from the local authority. This is how everyone likes it. A farmer sells his fields in one transaction. The developer puts in one application to the council. The council takes one decision. And bingo! You get an instant new bit of the town built by a national house developer who will pull a basic design off his computer and impose it on the place. So it doesn’t matter if you are in Turo, Lancaster, Godalming, Hereford or Ely you get the same design of house.

So you see the volume house builders are basically land speculators. Getting planning permission for housing increases the value of the land that they have bought. So take an area of agricultural land in outer London. If you somehow get permission to build on it you increase its value by 20,000% that is to say from the agricultural going-rate of £19,000 an acre to something like £4m an acre. So you make your money by purchasing land and then getting planning on it.

Building is a secondary activity. You build at a speed that covers the cost of capital and yields around a 20% margin but not so fast that it either floods the market or eats up their supply of land. If the price of the land goes up the quality of what you build goes down because to maintain the margin you squeeze the design. More plastic, less brick, more standardisation smaller units. So a house that you sell for £220K only cost you £80k to build. The land value is another 80k, planning gain, in other words a tax by the planning authority costs you another £40k and 20K is profit.

But don’t the local authorities care about the quality of design and build? I’m afraid the answer is no – not nearly enough. Most authorities are far too focussed on technical compliance rather than design. Basically what has happened is that bureaucrats have got control over the places where we live.

Some of you may have followed the saga of Mount Pleasant in Islington. This is the vast former Post Office site that royal mail want to develop in a £100m scheme. They have engaged good architects but what they have produced is terrible and is opposed by almost everyone who lives nearby. The scheme will create 680 homes in ten tower blocks some 15 stories high but will not have streets, pavements, and squares as we know them. There will be so-called public realm which means privately owned spaces controlled by security guards.

The local community action group commissioned their own designs for the site to prove that something could be done that looked like London and was a more human scale. The proposals as they stood, they argued, could be anywhere. They proposed streets leading to a central circus. Their buildings were five or six stories and had housing for 730 houses 7% more than the proposed scheme. 99% of local residents supported this solution over the Post office’s scheme.

This scheme was called in by Boris Johnson when he was mayor and given the permission by him while calling the local objectors *Bourgeois nimbys*. Nearby in Shoreditch Boris also took decision-making away from the local council to determine a massive development of office and residential buildings himself. Emasculated Local councillors furious took themselves to protesting erecting a massive poster earlier this year.

So essentially I believe the politicians are asking the wrong question. They ask how can we build more homes… how can we force them through faster? They should ask how can we make housebuilding more popular? So the plan should be to find ways of making people want new houses, to argue for them and lobby for them instead of fighting against them the whole time. We need a revolution that puts people back in charge of where they live. We need places on a human scale and that satisfy basic human needs such as community, interaction,

So what can be done? Well the first point is that heritage legislation as it stands can do little or nothing to protect historic towns and so we need to turn to other methods to achieve our ends.

First is the issue raised by my examples at Malmsbury and Ely. Historic buildings have setting, people have long argued to protect these. But historic settlements have settings to and these are just as important as the setting of individual buildings. The needs to keep the core of places distinct and compact without bleeding out into the countryside.

Part of the issue here is density. Historic settlements are actually generally very dense. This is a brilliant map done by Spencer de Grey and his team at Fosters and Partners who have been campaigning on this issue. The map shows King’s Lynn a market town in north Norfolk of about 40,000 people. In 1200 it had a population of around 5,000 people. That was big at the time, the place was a major port. However the number of people in each hectare was round 89-90. As the Tudors, Stuarts and Georgians expanded the town with terraces and townhouses the density was still quite high at over 80 per hectare, but just look what happened after that. By 1988 housing was being built at less than half the density – only 30 people, and new housing proposed as part of the town’s draft plan suggests a density of on 21 per hectare.

However most historic settlements have a significant amount of space that can be redeveloped. Some of this is vacant spaces above shops, empty buildings but a lot of it is brown field land. After the railway cam to Lynn in the mid nineteenth century the town went to sleep. Its port scaled down and, the town stagnated in size. After the war Lynn signed a London overspill agreement and in preparation for the influx of new residents who were to work in the under-construction food-processing plants work began to modernise the town. Everyone would travel by car it was thought so the big priority was to build roads and car parks. Luckily some of the most destructive plans were halted but this plan here shows the 36 hectares of surface car parking in Lynn today.

It has to be admitted that much of this is put here in the out-of-town retail park, but 85,000 square meters of it is in the historic core. They almost all are in places where old houses and cottages were demolished in the 1960s when people were relocated to new blocks on the edge of the town centre. So the car parks are areas of old housing.

Now Lynn, like many towns of its type has a huge shopping hinterland. Perhaps 400,000 people rely on Lynn’s shops and services so people do need to drive into the town centre if the town wants to remain economically successful.

But look at this. Here is a surface car park where it takes 21 square metres to park a car. So this little blot on the townscape can park 58 cars in 1,215 square metres. Not far away is the town’s only multi-story car park. It parks 645 cars in 3,900 square meters, which is only 6 sqm per car. With a quick bit of calculation you can work out that by building another multi-story you can release at least 6 hectares of land.

Then if you assume that only half of each of the town centre car parks was built on you can build 92,000 sqm of housing gives over 1,000 new dwellings without the town increasing in size one inch. It also revitalises the town centre, reduces car growth, reduces infrastructure. In this way the whole housing allocation of King’s Lynn can be met without taking another inch of countryside and without increasing car usage and while rejuvenating the down centre both demographically and economically.

Now the best way to discuss these issues is by way of example, but please don’t think that King’s Lynn is not typical. It is. Almost every historic town in England has large amounts of brownfield land, many carparks and old commercial sites that can be built-up in exactly the same way.

The government recognises the importance of brownfield land and, in its productivity plan, makes it clear that this will be a big area of focus: it wants to create what it calls ‘an urban planning revolution in brown field sites’. 73 councils across England will pilot one of the new brownfield registers, which will provide house builders with up-to-date information on all brownfield sites available for housing locally. The idea is that these registers will help housebuilders identify suitable sites quickly, speeding up the construction of new homes. Permission will be given in principle to develop subject to ‘technical issues’. We are not there yet so we don’t know how this permission in principle will work but let’s remember while it is great to fast track brownfield over greenfield, everyone should welcome that, these sites are often in the centre of historic settlements in the most sensitive and important locations – design will be crucial.

How do we deal with the overbearing homogenising power of the volume house designs? It is possible that one of the other big themes in the government’s productivity plan might help with this. Devolution is a big feature of the government’s vision for England. Devolution, as we have seen in Scotland and Wales, reinforces a sense of identity and identity in this sense is intimately tied up with a sense of place. The place where you live, where you come from, make up a big part of your identity. So in theory devolved powers should be interested in reinforcing a sense of place. I think there is some evidence to suggest this is happening in Cornwall.

Over the last 10 years Cornwall has blazed the trail for landscape assessment in England, producing the first County wide landscape assessment as early as 1994. Further studies have laid the foundations for a proper evidence base for future landscape policy and landscape strategies in Cornwall. In theory Cornwall County Council’s work can help you to see how your actions affect the landscape around you and what you can do to help look after the unique character of Cornwall. There are 40 Landscape Character Areas and these bring together information about the natural, historic and visual environment as well as giving advice about planning and land management. So are we going to see new housing in Cornwall reflecting the strong local traditons? I really hope so.

But there is something else that can be done. As so often looking back into history can help us out, and when you look at all the most successful housing developments historically they tend to be those done by the great estates. In London this would be Grosvenor, Portman and the others. All these estates, and new firms like British Land, Hammerson or Delancey all have a long term stake in the development. They are not there to make a quick in and out. They build and retain a stake in the development. So they will build a better quality of place and manage it for long term returns. A ground rent is a valuable thing and if it is only £200 a large development is very valuable. So if a way could be found to encourage long-term ownership by the estates you would probably get better quality building.

But I think we can also come at this from another direction. It is sometimes hard to see where we sit in an historical perspective; but let’s remember that when the history books are written in a hundred years’ time our lives will fall into the chapter that describes the aftermath of the Second World War. I sometimes forget that the war had only ended 17 years before I was born, really not long. This has been a period in European history profoundly influenced by the total mobilisation of nations in war effort: a period that has seen a massive growth in the apparatus of the state and huge shift in responsibility from individuals to governments.

The balance is perhaps now beginning to swing the other way. People’s attitude to government and to participation in democracy is changing; the vote to leave the EU was an exertion of popular protest against political consensus. The mechanisms that most states use to make decisions, to weigh up issues and come to a consensus were built in the 1940s and 50s. Society is now fundamentally different. So are we in fact identifying the right solution in calling for governments to encourage the right thing to be done for heritage - I’m not so sure that this is the whole answer anymore, if it ever was.

So perhaps we should look more closely at the role of the individual to champion our heritage. If we can argue that heritage is built into the model for sustainable development either as part of a fourth pillar or as an integral part of environmental sustainability, we can ensure that proper weight is given to it by individual action. All over Europe we see examples of people acting themselves to assert the value they put on heritage.

So here is a bigger philosophical problem, a debate about who owns heritage and who should take responsibility for it.

The idea of the Commons dates back to the middle ages as an institutional arrangement for the collective management of property of natural resources, including grazing land, forests, irrigation systems and fisheries. In English it survives principally as a term to describe land held communally for the benefits of a single community. Such common resources, however, have always faced social dilemmas. In particular, resources managed collectively are always at risk of overuse, because communal ownership threatens their very existence.

Social scientists have recognised a potential ‘tragedy of the Commons’: in situations where self-interested individuals, acting independently, fail to cooperate and behave in the interest of the whole group's long-term future by depleting the common resource. Solutions to this dilemma are traditionally either intervention by the state and centralized management which is what came in and after the Second World War, or privatisation and market-based approaches that grew up from the 1980s.

Elinor Ostrom, the Nobel winning political economist, pointed out that neither centralized management nor privatisation of the Commons, although they might work, provide an ideal solution to the problem of managing shared assets. She scientifically demonstrated that the tragedy of the Commons is not inevitable: communities can develop a ‘third way of governance’ at community level succeeding in avoiding unproductive conflicts.

Now, this is important because heritage is fundamentally a common. The views of Ely and Malmsbury, the character of King’s Lynn and the atmosphere of Mount Pleasant are all common goods held communally by everyone who lives there. Deterioration or destruction of those landscapes or heritage, and an underestimation of the value of heritage in policy decisions, are basically expressions of the ‘tragedy of the Commons’.

This is seen in so many developing countries where historic areas are over exploited thus destroying the very thing that attracted people in the first place. The tragedy of the Algarve where, without consideration of the long-term impacts, the coast was developed for high volume, low cost tourism.

Ostrom’s third way of governance is about community cultural responsibility – a way out of the heritage tragedy of the Commons. In fact several recent developments in both European and UK policy have focused on the collective and social dimension of heritage and community-led development. Neighbourhood planning represents an attempt by central government to translate responsibility for the Commons to local people.

Localism is therefore a political expression of the idea of the Commons and provides a possible policy vehicle for arguing for responsibility for heritage Commons being transferred to local people.

But there are two principal issues with the idea of the Commons. The first is a perception amongst people that it is the responsibility of the state to safeguard collective heritage assets rather than the duty of citizens. This can lead to reluctance to take on responsibilities. However the very environment that we are trying to protect was originally created by communal and private initiative, rather than planning or state action, and therefore the model should be possible to replicate.

The second problem is the potential clash between the people and the experts that the notion of the Commons represents. If a community want to sweep away heritage of national value as part of their desire to manage their common heritage, experts (i.e. university professors, the amenity societies, Historic England) and local communities might oppose each other. So lots of people in Malmsbury apparently wanted a Waitrose and the majority of citizens of Ely wanted a bypass. So the experts and the people disagreed in what was most in the common interest.

So how can we encourage people to take on responsibility for their places, and have pride in their common history and heritage. I think central government could help, and here I float an idea.

Liverpool’s selection as European capital of Culture and the subsequent successful delivery of a year of cultural events in 2008 was an important moment in defining the power of culture to transform both the image and reality of a city. The City of Culture convinced politicians that culture was a positive economic force rather than a cost to the city’s economy. It was the perceived success of Liverpool 08 that led to the announcement, in July 2009, that there would be a UK capital of culture in 2013. This was awarded to Londonderry. A second UK capital of Culture will be staged in Hull in 2017.

There is clarity in Hull that enriching the city’s heritage will make it more attractive for business. Therefore they are developing a cultural strategy with a five point plan. This will reposition Hull’s place in the world with ambitious, well marketed projects that grow the cultural economy and develop strong independent cultural institutions. This is an interesting and important development because it relies on shifting responsibility for cultural provision from the city to the citizens and to business.

At the moment you would have to wait a long time until your turn came round as a city to be a capital of culture. But how about a scheme that gave recognition to historic towns stimulating pride and helping to kick-start a wider sense of responsibility for the way the place looks.

I think the government should look at a new designation. Not a planning designation, we have too many of these, but a designation that recognises the special character of certain historic places. That character which I have argued tonight cannot be protected by any existing part of the heritage protections system and can only be protected by people realising what they have and working themselves to save and enhance it.

The DCMS could designate a number, perhaps a fixed number, of towns as heritage towns, now the word heritage is not good as it implies fossilization, so the actual name might be different, but you get my gist, you get a badge, a label, a designation and you become a heritage town. This gives you access to extra advice and support, to a network of national and international places who have the same issues as you. It might even get you access to a special pot of cash that you can use to promote your place.

This system exists in many other countries. It is always galling to say that the French do things bettter over there, but they have just such a scheme. They have their Villes ou pays d’art et D’histoire. These were founded in 1985 and are administered by the ministry of culture. So far 167 places have the designation and the purposes of the scheme are to

* Raise awareness of the special heritage of a place and stimulate tourism to it
* Introduce young people in the towns to their history and heritage and help them be proud of it
* Encourage public enjoyment of art and architecture in the town

You only keep the label if you keep up standards. So that is one idea that could build local pride and perhaps encourage people to act communally with pride in their local heritage.

So we need a different way forward. A way that makes house building popular, that does not set up council and housebuilders against residents who they call nimbys. We need to instil a sense of shared pride in the history and heritage of places – and until we get this we will not take the aggro out of the system and we will not build the houses we need.

Next time I shall be looking in a bit more detail about what happened when you try and build new buildings in old places. I look forward to seeing you then.

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