

## Interpretation: the vital 'added value' for regeneration?

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### Summary

Our proposition is that interpretation is not a driver for regeneration, but should be viewed as a valuable delivery mechanism that supports conservation and infrastructure investment, helping to achieve key economic and social objectives.

### How vital is interpretation?

Regeneration is the transformation of places, particularly those experiencing environmental, social and / or economic decline. Interpretive planners and designers are increasingly aware of the government's agenda for regeneration and particularly of the use of the historic environment as a driver. What is the role for interpretation within this agenda? Can interpretation claim to be a driver for regeneration?

In this paper, the conference theme of 'Interpretation as a driver for cultural regeneration' will be explored and challenged, through a consideration of what cultural regeneration means and through a number of case studies from PLB's recent project experience. The projects we have chosen are contrasting in scale and location - a small market town in Derbyshire, a North East city space and a rural project in Warwickshire - however similarities can be drawn between them all, illustrating the role of interpretation in three very different regeneration programmes

### ***The relationship between culture and regeneration***

In 2004, a report to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) entitled *The Contribution of Culture to Regeneration in the UK*<sup>1</sup> defined regeneration as

*Breathing new life and vitality into an ailing community, industry and area [bringing] sustainable, long-term improvements to local quality of life*

Key words in this definition, and ones which we must consider in relation to interpretation's role in regeneration are '*new life and vitality*', '*sustainable, long-term*' and '*quality of life*'.

More specifically the report provided three ways in which the relationship between culture and regeneration can be considered:

- As culture-led regeneration in which culture is the catalyst for the regeneration activity
- As cultural regeneration, where culture is fully integrated into a strategy for regeneration
- And lastly, as culture and regeneration in which culture is not integrated but rather is an add-on to the main regeneration project and often on a small scale.

<sup>1</sup> Evans, G. and Shaw, P. (2004), *The Contribution of Culture to Regeneration*, London: London Metropolitan University

Our experience of working in the sector suggests that in most, if not all cases, interpretation fits within the latter description, offering added value to any regeneration plans, although the extent and significance of that value can vary considerably.

### ***Heritage-led regeneration and the role of interpretation<sup>2</sup>***

Buxton, Derbyshire is a small market town with a rural hinterland and is used by many as a base from which to explore the Peak District. Once a popular historic spa town with fine Georgian and Victorian architecture, it has experienced economic and social decline over the last one hundred years. The town's infrastructure and architectural heritage has declined to a point where many of its outstanding Grade 1 listed former spa buildings were empty for many years and at risk of degradation and even loss<sup>3</sup>.

The Local Authority adopted a strategy of heritage-led regeneration with the focus on investing in conservation-led regeneration and improving the public realm. The spa heritage was seen as central to this, as was an emphasis on sustainable investment and business activity, anticipating regeneration investment in excess of £50 million. Job creation, retention of skills, in short a step-change in the economic, social and environmental aspects of the town, its buildings and public spaces was required.



The decorative interior of the Assembly Rooms (awaiting restoration), located within the Grade 1 listed building by John Carr.

<sup>2</sup> Tuffrey, R. *et al* (2004) Investing in Heritage: financing small town regeneration Case Study: Buxton, Bristol: English Historic Towns Forum

<sup>3</sup> Many of the buildings were on the English Heritage 'Buildings at Risk Register'

The Buxton Crescent and Spa project is a public : private partnership to develop a four star hotel, and 21<sup>st</sup> century thermal spa complex within one of the finest 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings in Britain. Through conservation of the fabric of this iconic building, with the original Assembly Rooms and associated Pump Room, continuity of use and of its historic significance will be ensured by building on the world-wide interest in and trend for spa treatments and holistic therapy. Situated in the core historic area of Buxton, the improvements to the buildings will help to revitalise the surrounding public spaces and to reinforce the town as a key destination in the Peak District.

The drivers for the project consist primarily of the conservation of the historic fabric; continuity of use and significance; revitalisation of the public realm and skills development for townspeople. But what of the role for interpretation?

Interpretation's role is a challenging one and perhaps contradictory. The scheme is based on a mix of private funding from developers Trevor Osbourne Property Group and the operators, Danubius Hotels and Spa, and public funds through a Heritage Lottery Fund bid. Provision of interpretation in small visitor and Tourist Information facility and public access to the key historic rooms of the building, including the fine Assembly Rooms and some historic bedrooms has been made integral to the public financing of the project. However, interpretation is not essential to the experience or indeed to the spa operation. The impact and benefit of interpretive provision will be measured in the extent of public access and in learning outcomes.

Interpretation will add value to the experience, providing appreciation and greater insight into the spa and social heritage stories (achieved through guided tours and events). The impacts of visitor access and of providing tours and permanent interpretation may prove frustrating to the hotel operator, who needs to maximise profits through commercial use of the spaces. PLB's advice to the operator and local authority is to use interpretation to add value and enable premium pricing for special events, and to deliver a strategic approach to the promotion and appreciation of Buxton's spa heritage. This approach, coupled with the local authority's foresight in developing the heritage led investment programme, should enable the continuing revitalisation of this ancient spa resort.

### ***Revitalising a historic cityscape***

The Heart of the City of Newcastle is an area that few would know or recognise from the title. The historic core of Newcastle, the location of the original New Castle, and the Cathedral Church of St Nicholas has long been forgotten or ignored. It is located between two areas that have been the focus for regeneration in the city in recent years: Grainger Town, which has been an exemplar of successful regeneration, and the Quayside.



Five minutes walk from Newcastle Central station, the Heart of the City contains all the layers of the city's history, from Roman foundations to the 19<sup>th</sup> century's industrial expansion.

The driver for the project was originally the conservation and development of the Cathedral Church of St Nicholas with a view to increasing visitor facilities and education provision there. The imminent removal from the Black Gate (one of the castle's entrances and now as stand-alone building) of the Society of Antiquaries' library to become part of the Great North Museum opened up the possibility of a partnership project linking the Cathedral, the Society and the City of Newcastle Council, who owns the Black Gate and Castle Keep. The re-use of the Black Gate's spaces, the conservation of key historic buildings and increasing footfall and use of the public realm in general were central to the project which was the subject of a Heritage Lottery Fund bid.

Interpretation was the last aspect to be commissioned, when PLB began an interpretive plan in 2007. Clearly not a driver or a catalyst for the project or for the revitalisation of this historic area, interpretation instead has proven to be the means of enhancing and emphasising the identity of Newcastle's 'heart'. The brief, and the resulting plan and design proposals, aim to unite the disparate buildings, and the very distinct partner organisations. Such a focus on identity and unity is both essential for the presentation of the project to funders and for bringing new life into the area that will be attractive to visitors and local people.

The interpretive proposals are driving the public realm and landscaping, utilising historic routes, building on the concept of the Hostmen who would have welcomed traders to the city, and engendering a sense of discovery and reflection which echoes the spaces and views across the site. Interpretation will help to reveal the complex layers and fascinating stories of the Heart of the City, which might otherwise remain as a place to pass by or through to reach other, more 'modern' or previously revitalised city locations. It will support the education activities in the Castle Keep, the Black Gate and the Cathedral. Interpretation was not, however, the reason for the project, and how interpretation's contribution to regeneration here can and will be measured must be questioned. Will it be purely in the contribution the interpretive plan makes to the, hopefully successful, funding bid? If locals and visitors in 10 years time know of and recognise the Heart of the City as a place with its own identity, will that be the measure of interpretation success? Or will any increase in footfall and spend within the Cathedral shop and restaurant be down to interpretation?

### ***Regeneration in a rural setting***

Chedham's Yard in Warwickshire was the winner of *Restoration Village*, the BBC-run competition for conservation-led regeneration projects in 2006. The former village forge and wheelwright's workshop sat as a time capsule in heart of Wellesbourne, every tool left just as it was when 'Bill' Chedham, the last member of the family business, closed the door for the final time. The project is very much community-led, growing out of a desire to regain and retain a sense of the village's identity in the face of growing development as part of Birmingham's commuter belt. The vision of the community group leading the campaign was originally to create a heritage centre and museum at the site with interpretation at its core.



Chedham's Yard, the former village forge and wheelwright's workshop – ready for restoration and revitalisation!

In the development of a Conservation Statement and proposals for the site in 2005, prior to the BBC 'Restoration' series, PLB identified that interpretation alone could not be a sustainable, long-term driver for Chedham's Yard. Constraints of location, access and space meant that a museum or visitor centre alone would not generate sufficient revenue to ensure the conservation and use of this vernacular heritage and its collection.

The solutions that developed placed interpretation in a secondary role to craft skills development and learning. Further work being undertaken by PLB in 2007-8 is showing that these social regeneration aspects also cannot stand-alone and must be underpinned by sound proposals for economic regeneration. Updated development proposals are likely to include enabling development (including new build and restored structures) to facilitate multi-purpose community spaces, small business use, and even holiday or residential letting. Interpretation will continue through community engagement with the collections, archives, oral history and learning programmes, both on and off site.

Success will be measured in securing the Yard's final conservation and adaptation for continuing, as well as new, complementary uses, generating sufficient revenue to care for the site and to promote its special qualities as the 'heart' of rural Wellesbourne. Therefore, while funders such as the Heritage Lottery Fund have access, community engagement and learning as key strategic aims, along with conservation, interpretation will always have a role to play in the regeneration of the historic environment.

### ***Recognising interpretation in regeneration***

If interpretation, as we have seen, is not a key driver for regeneration, its role is certainly being recognised in some quarters. The British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) is an organisation that champions good examples of many regeneration projects and holds annual awards. PLB's interpretive planning and delivery scheme at Bugsworth Basin (in Derbyshire), on behalf of British Waterways, received a commendation at the prestigious 2007 awards. Interpretation formed an integral part of the development and regeneration scheme, adding value to the infrastructure and public realm. British Waterways are great advocates of interpretation as an important part of the regeneration process and are one of the few organisations to understand the contribution that interpretation can make as part of the early master-planning stages.



Bugsworth Basin  
– towpath  
interpretation  
recognised as  
good practice in  
the 2007 BURA  
Awards

It is therefore appropriate that a British Waterways project should be recognised for this distinction, since much of their canal regeneration activity includes interpretation, which enhances the users' experience of the restored towpaths, locks and canal heritage.

### ***Interpretation - the soft centre of regeneration?***

What do these case studies tell us about the role of interpretation in regeneration? In Buxton interpretation was never vital to the re-use of the buildings but was essential to provide match funding from public sources. In Newcastle interpretation might be seen to be an afterthought, very much a case of culture *and* regeneration, yet interpretation has a key role to play in achieving a sense of unity and of identity which will enable funding and bring the area back use. And at Chedham's Yard the original desire of the community to make the site a visitor centre and museum with interpretation as its core was not viable or sustainable as a means of regeneration and other uses, with social and economic benefits are leading the development ideas instead.

It has been demonstrated that as long as funding sources, in particular the Heritage Lottery Fund, place a requirement for public access alongside the conservation objectives there will be a need and a role for interpretation in regeneration projects. Certainly through the inclusion of interpretation within regeneration schemes, projects can achieve the sense of *identity*, the *revitalisation* of space and place and the enhancement of *quality of life* which are key components of regeneration, as defined before. It is these softer benefits, the social capital, which interpretation adds to cultural regeneration.

Interpretation is not really a driver; however, interpretation can certainly provide a delivery mechanism to help achieve regeneration objectives, adding value to major capital investment in conservation and infrastructure that in turn is able to demonstrate the required economic and social outcomes.

Authors' note:

Carolyn established PLB, based in Malton, North Yorkshire, in 1990 as a creative consultancy specialising in the conservation, planning and presentation of cultural and natural heritage sites. Sarah joined PLB in 2002. Between them they have developed interpretation for everything from cityscapes to landscapes, museums to monuments.

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