

6. The Grainger Town project: sustaining the historic city centre of Newcastle upon Tyne, England

Robert Pickard

Introduction

Grainger Town, the name given to the historic core of this city, covers approximately 36 hectares and occupies much of the southern part of Newcastle's historic core. The area takes its name from the "speculative developer", Richard Grainger, who built a relatively substantial proportion of the area between 1835 and 1842, including a planned commercial centre within the city's medieval street pattern.

This development produced a series of elegant and unique streets, namely Grey Street, Grainger Street and Clayton Street, containing much of what is known as "Tyneside Classical" architecture. When the commercial centre was completed it generated a clear sense of civic pride. Grey Street has been described as one of the best architectural streets in England.

As well as a multitude of 19th-century buildings, the area also contains the buildings of a 13th-century mediaeval Dominican friary, a 17th-century former merchant house and the remnants of the old town walls. The importance of the historic core of Newcastle is recognised by the fact that 244 out of approximately 640 buildings (i.e. 38%) are "listed buildings": protected for their special architectural or historic interest. Moreover, there is a higher than average number of the highest-quality listed buildings (30% are graded I and II* compared with the national average of 6% in these categories). The area's richness of character is further highlighted by the fact that virtually all the area is included within Newcastle's designated Central Conservation Area and all of it within the City Centre Area of Archaeological Interest.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s Grainger Town was in a state of urban decline as a result of economic transition, employment changes with the decline of traditional industries, social and community issues, poor environmental quality and physical obsolescence. The initial demise of Grainger Town began in the early 1970s with the migration north of the city's core retail (shopping) area including the development of a large shopping centre, namely Eldon Square, which resulted in the demolition of some historic buildings. Further disruption occurred in the 1980s due to a large number of businesses drifting out to suburban locations as a result of cheaper land rental values, transportation issues and the footloose nature of the service sector. This effect on office space in Grainger Town was further compounded by the regeneration of Newcastle's river quayside to the south during the late 1980s and 1990s with the assistance of substantial public investment from the central-government-created regeneration agency, the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation. The developments along Newcastle's quayside also absorbed

much of the demand for growth of leisure amenities such as restaurants, cafés and bars. The combination of these issues resulted in high vacancy rates within the buildings of Grainger Town (especially in the upper floors) and poor building conditions.

In 1992, Newcastle City Council, English Heritage (the government's statutory adviser on the historic environment) and the central government Department of the Environment jointly commissioned a study of the area. It was found that the area suffered from a lack of economic confidence, under-use of buildings, fabric decay and other environment-related problems including traffic congestion and environmental erosion caused by traffic. The study set out a conservation-based strategy, which was essentially a planning framework for the area, although it did propose a regeneration strategy that could be developed in partnership with the private sector.

In a subsequent detailed survey of the condition and vacancy of buildings in the area it was found that there was a high number of listed buildings "at risk" (244) in terms of disrepair or vacancy (47% against the national average of 7%) and a considerable number in a "marginal" condition and vulnerable to becoming "at risk" (29% against the national average of 14%).



Grainger Town – Sustaining the historic centre of Newcastle upon Tyne. Grey Street is architecturally one of England's finest streets, at the heart of the Grainger Town Project. (R. Pickard)

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A Conservation Areas Partnership Scheme (CAPS) was established in Grainger Town in 1994, covering an area of 36 hectares of the city centre (this was one of 15 pilot CAPS partnership funding schemes in the country operated jointly by local councils and English Heritage). The creation of CAPS ensured that the area's conservation budget rose to nearly £500 000 (previously the conservation budget for the whole city had been a mere £60 000 per annum). In the same year, a small three-year Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) regeneration funding scheme provided by English Partnerships (a national regeneration agency) also started, which provided grant aid for converting the upper floors of listed properties for residential use (known as "Living Over the Shop" (LOTS)).

However, as time progressed the area suffered further problems despite some successes in rehabilitating buildings with grant aid being offered for up to 80% of costs. The number of people in employment in the Grainger Town area fell by nearly 5 000 between 1992 and 1997 and there was also a decrease in businesses (approximately 200 fewer businesses) and residents in the area. The city council and English Heritage along with English Partnerships agreed that the area could no longer be left to take care of itself and was in need of a comprehensive regeneration strategy but in a way that would secure the past (that is, the heritage qualities of the area) while securing its long-term future (in other words, a sustainable approach).

In 1996 consultants EDAW were commissioned to produce a regeneration strategy for Grainger Town and to prepare a bid for government funding. A detailed analysis of the area's problems was immediately undertaken. Grainger Town represented a complex urban system, which would have to be tackled in a "holistic" way. They produced a vision statement to reflect the aspirations for Grainger Town in 2006 – to be a dynamic and competitive location with a high-quality environment that would play a major role in the regional economy, becoming a distinctive place with a safe and attractive location in which to work, live and visit.

The project was developed through a six-year regeneration scheme (1997-2003), which aimed at securing £120 million in regeneration funding from public and private sectors (at a ratio of 1:2).

Funding

The project's core funding – originally estimated to be £40 million from the public sector – came from five separate agencies, two of which supplied specifically conservation funds whilst the others provided general regeneration funds, some of which were incidentally used for conservation purposes but in a more generalised improvement context. The actual public funding achieved by the end of the project in 2003 included:

- Newcastle City Council and English Heritage – funding of over £4 million in total was mainly directed through two partnership funding schemes, first through the CAPS

scheme and secondly through a subsequent Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS). These funds were used to provide grant aid of 60-80% of costs to private owners or occupiers of decayed historic or vacant buildings to repair them and to improve shop-fronts to a traditional appearance and for the secondment of staff to the project delivery team.

Any local authority wishing to "bid" for money through a HERS programme would have to develop area-based strategy encompassing five key objectives:

1. rescue buildings at risk and those vulnerable to deterioration;
2. invest in the regeneration of areas including the reuse of buildings which are important in terms of economic prosperity as well as future local employment opportunities;
3. reinforce, revitalise or renew the economic base of areas;
4. encourage the reoccupation of under-used upper floors above high street properties, neighbourhood business and shops for residential or employment-generating activities thereby helping to bring life back to declining town and village centres;
5. assist with building repair costs, to help sustain the broader economic contribution made by local business to the local community, and to increase employment opportunities or residential accommodation to meet local needs.

The winning of the HERS scheme proved to be the catalyst for much more public and private investment from a wide range of agencies:

- Tyneside Training and Enterprise Council (subsequently known as the Learning and Skills Council) – one of a network of Training and Enterprise Councils set up in disadvantaged areas to develop vocational training initiatives and encourage local business enterprise – provided funding to help to bring new life to the area, in particular, through assisting the generation and development of new uses in vacant upper floors of historic buildings.
- English Partnerships (the national regeneration agency which was subsequently divided regionally into regional development agencies with One NorthEast, the regional development agency for the north-east region of England, becoming a funding partner) – contributing £25 million (over half of the project's public funds), which was primarily used to assist private owners of partially occupied historic buildings to refurbish their upper floors into new residential or office uses.
- The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) – following the LOTS scheme (see above), two further successful bids for funding were made to the SRB totalling £11 million. This provided support for a wide range of regeneration activities including for economic development, infrastructure improvements for improving the environment of the area (such as pedestrianisation schemes to improve the "public realm", in other words, the external environment) and training and employment initiatives.

There were also other supporting funds attracted from public sources:

- Heritage Lottery Fund – funding of about £100 000 to support the repair of Grey's Monument, a landmark structure.
- European funding – totalling in excess of £1.8 million from the European Regional Development Fund (funds to support business development, job creation and cultural developments) and the European Social Fund (funds to support training and youth enterprise developments). A grant of up to £600 000 was given to restore and rehabilitate an important 18th-century building as office premises.

Regeneration themes

The investment sought to strengthen and develop Grainger Town as a mixed-use historic urban quarter based on seven inter-related "regeneration themes":

- business development and enterprise – to encourage the development of existing companies, generate new entrepreneurial activity and broaden the area's economic base;
- commercial development – to secure investment and economic activity in a range of uses, including office, retail, leisure and culture, leading to the repair and reuse of historic buildings and the redevelopment of key sites;
- access to opportunity – to improve training and employment opportunities for the long-term unemployed in adjoining inner city wards;
- housing – to increase the residential population through the provision of a wide range of affordable housing for rent and sale;
- quality of environment – to improve the quality of the environment and public spaces to enhance Grainger Town's competitiveness as an area in which to work, live and visit;
- arts, culture and tourism – to promote Grainger Town as a centre for arts, culture and tourism;
- management, marketing and promotion – to improve the overall management and marketing of the area.

Although "conservation" was not directly mentioned as an activity, due to the area's high heritage value and because the project was originally conceived in an attempt to conserve Grainger Town, the practice of integrated conservation was deemed to be of relevance to each of the seven regeneration themes.

Management and dialogue

A company limited by guarantee (the Grainger Town Partnership) was set up to manage and deliver the regeneration programme. This had a board of 20 directors from the

public and private sectors and community interests (public: local authority six and other public agencies six; private sector six and local residents two) and was a partnership of equals with no single body in overall control. The board was supported by a business forum and a residents' forum, as well as specialist advisory panels such as urban design and public arts panels. The project was implemented by a dedicated project delivery team of 14 officers, which was based locally within the area (some of the staff were seconded from the city council's planning and conservation team of officials). In addition, a number of expert panels were convened by consultants in relation to commercial and residential property interests for the evaluation of the project.

The wider community interests within Grainger Town were regularly updated on progress throughout the project via the publication of *Grainger Town News* four times per year and information was published to provide assistance and advice on all aspects of the regeneration of the area including the various grant schemes available.

Achievements

By the end of the project timescale (2003) the forecasted private sector investment of £80 million had been substantially exceeded (£145 million).

Altogether, a total of 121 buildings of historical importance had been improved and brought back into use, 51 in excess of the target set by the government. Over 80 000m² of new or improved floor space had been developed or provided through the rehabilitation of buildings.

A number of initiatives helped create a total of 286 new businesses, well above the target of 199. In terms of commercial property the project had an overall positive effect on the office, retail and leisure property sectors enabling a large proportion of vacant sites and buildings of historical importance to be brought back into use, thus significantly aiding the conservation-led regeneration of the area.

The partnership recorded the creation of 1 506 jobs, against the target figure of 1 900, however, it was anticipated that by 2006 a total of 2 300 jobs would have been created. A significant amount of work had been created for local workers in the construction industry in repairing, restoring and rehabilitating historic buildings and new training opportunities had increased local skills. The project almost achieved the "lifetime" target for the number of construction job weeks by March 2003 (actual 82 658; lifetime target 89 980). The Grainger Town Partnership forecasted that the number of construction job weeks would rise to about 120 000 by March 2006 as a result of the outstanding developments.

The residential population had been increased through the provision of a wide range of affordable (social) housing for rent and private housing for sale by the creation of 289 housing units.

Improvements and enhancement of the quality of the environment within the area had helped to increase developer, investor and consumer confidence in the area.

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A range of public art installations and cultural events/festivals had enhanced public spaces and helped to promote the revitalisation of Grainger Town. Marketing and promotion activities had increased the public's awareness of the value of the area's built heritage.



Grey Street (a) and Grey Street (b). Numbers 2 to 12 Grey Street. This listed building was unoccupied for over 20 years and suffered considerable disrepair. After the threat of a repair notice and the possibility of compulsory acquisition, the building was rehabilitated and is now a fashionable hotel. (R. Pickard)

Conclusions

The Grainger Town project provides a good exemplar for the idea that heritage conservation can be an effective catalyst for social and economic sustainable development. The achievements have transformed the physical, economic and demographic state of the Grainger Town area. It has ensured a quality solution to the urban problem in terms of enhancing local distinctiveness, developing a more "liveable" city, assisting local entrepreneurs, fostering community cohesion and contributing to sustainable development.

The project has contributed to:

- Investment – the action has attracted companies to locate, people to live, businesses to invest and tourists to visit.
- Sense of place – members of the local community enjoy living in this historic centre creating a sense of community cohesion particularly by the mix of social and private housing created through the rehabilitation of historic buildings.
- Sustainability – the reuse of historic buildings has minimised the exploitation of resources and has helped to sustain employment and training particularly in building craft trades.
- Quality of life – sustaining the historic environment of Grainger Town has contributed to the quality of life and enriched people's understanding of the diversity and changing nature of their community.

In this respect the project is a good exemplar for the principles established in the Faro Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005). Section II of the Convention deals with the "Contribution of cultural heritage to society and human development" through four articles:

- Article 7: Cultural heritage and dialogue – the project ensured that different elements of the community were consulted and involved in the decision-making process.
- Article 8: Environment, heritage and quality of life – the project promoted an integrated approach including the use of risk assessments and fostered a shared responsibility towards places in which people live or would wish to live, as well as enhancing the cultural environment.
- Article 9: Sustainable use of the heritage – the project sustained knowledge of traditional skills and the use of traditional materials, respected the integrity and values of built heritage, promoted the principles of sustainable management and encouraged maintenance, conservation and other work.
- Article 10: Cultural heritage and economic activity – the project provided information and technical assistance and increased awareness for all actors so that they could understand the economic potential of the heritage and establish the appeal of the area for inhabitants, tourists and new enterprises thereby sustaining economic activity but without jeopardising the character and interests of the cultural built heritage.

Moreover, the project meets the criteria of Section III of the Convention which deals with "Shared responsibility for cultural heritage and public participation" (see Articles 11 and 12 in particular). Apart from the representation on the Grainger Town board the wider community was consulted at all stages of the project's development and there was a

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Clearly the success of the project would not have been possible without:

- the creation of a strong partnership between the public sectors, private sectors, local businesses and local residents;
- identifying the initial need to build confidence in the area – this was achieved through the initial improvements to the area's public realm which gave a clear signal about the commitment to change and created a climate that stimulated private investment;
- the commitment of substantial public financial expenditure from several agencies – without this initial injection of funding the project would have been largely in-effective.

The success of the Grainger Town project is now viewed as a demonstration of best practice having gained national and international recognition through the winning of various prestigious awards:

- 2002: Best Practice Award from the British Urban Regeneration Association.
- 2002: Commendation for planning achievement by the Royal Town Planning Institute.
- 2002: Buildings shortlisted for conservation award by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS).
- 2003: Winner of the European Union Prize for Culture Heritage/Europa Nostra Award in recognition of "its use of culture to breathe new life into the city landscape".
- 2003: Best Completed Project Award from the Association of Town Centre Management.
- 2004: Royal Town Planning Institute Award, the Silver Cup.

Moreover, following a conference entitled "Investing in the heritage" hosted by the Grainger Town Partnership in 2002, a European network – INHERIT – based around the concept of investing in heritage to regenerate Europe's historic cities was established. This network was formed during the last year of the project by the partnership in conjunction with the city council and the European Association of Historic Towns and Regions (EAHTR). It aims to identify examples of good practice, produce guidelines on how to implement sustainable heritage-led regeneration and report on the effectiveness of EU regional policies relating to cultural heritage and regeneration.

European
Heritage

Sustainable development strategies in Europe




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