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# Role of Historic Buildings in Urban Regeneration

## RIBA comments submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Housing, Planning, Local Government & the Regions Committee

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Royal Institute of British Architects is one of the most influential architectural institutions in the world, and has been promoting architecture and architects since being awarded its Royal Charter in 1837. The 30,000-strong professional institute represents 85% of registered architects in the UK through its regional structure as well as a significant number of international members. Our mission statement is simple – to advance architecture by demonstrating benefit to society and promoting excellence in the profession.
- 1.2 The RIBA greatly welcomes the Committee's inquiry and considers it extremely timely in the light of the Government's own review of heritage protection legislation. George Ferguson (President, RIBA) is a leading regeneration architect, and would be very happy to appear as an oral witness to the Committee to give both a personal perspective on the role of historic buildings in urban regeneration as well addressing the inquiry's terms of reference on behalf of the architectural profession.

### 2. The contribution of historic buildings to urban regeneration

- 2.1 Buildings, more than any other factor, identify an urban community. Famous examples such as Liverpool's Three Graces or Bath's terraces are testament to this. People often have a particularly intense identity with the historic buildings which surround them.
- 2.2 Historic buildings and structures can lend value to more recent, appropriate, developments, such as the highly successful Brindley Place in Birmingham, or more obviously, the Temple Bar area of Dublin, which was saved by an architect led campaign. Conversely, our historic buildings can become devalued by inappropriate development which "steals" their intrinsic value, exemplified by the recently developed Temple Quay development in Bristol adjacent to the historic Temple Meads Station. Urban regeneration needs to be approached with a combination of architectural and planning sensitivity and flair. Architects are very aware that it is a much greater challenge for completely new places to succeed in capturing peoples' imagination or engendering affection to the same extent as those places that are based on historic buildings and areas. This has much to do with the fact that many old buildings and places break the planning and building regulation rules as applied to new development, such as the proximity of buildings and the width of streets, and the institutional requirements of car parking provision etc.

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- 2.3 In recent years the recognition and definition of historic areas has changed. Victorian and Edwardian industrial buildings have now become the focus for regeneration efforts. This has become particularly noticeable in terms of the recent regeneration of historic waterfronts – docks, canals and riversides. It is a paradox that Britain has learned much about the regenerative effect of developing such historic areas from the relatively young United States. Organisations such as the Rouse Corporation in cities including New York, Boston, Philadelphia and San Francisco have produced important models that have led to the dramatic regeneration of run-down urban centres, many of whose lessons have been replicated here. Home-grown models such as Clough Mills in Halifax are showing how the imaginative use of historic buildings can become the anchor of regeneration in previously depressed areas.
- 2.4 Bristol – fundamentally a medieval city which has been added to in every subsequent age – serves as a useful case study for urban regeneration. The architectural historian and curator of the Soane Museum, Sir John Summerson (1904-92), said of Bristol that if he were to take a foreigner to a British city outside London which reflected everything that had happened – he couldn't do better than take them to Bristol. Bristol is also the adopted home of the current RIBA President George Ferguson who has been very involved in its regeneration.
- 2.5 In Bristol, as in many other cities, higher values for both commercial and residential property are to be found in the historic areas, which have become the focus for regeneration. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Clifton hillside led the way, but the focus has now turned to the Bristol Harbourside – the former Bristol Docks - which has been rescued from a lengthy period of industrial decline and has become the focus of new mixed uses. Alongside premium residential property, the area has become a new and successful area for entertainment and cultural activity. The Arnolfini Gallery has been joined by the At-Bristol science and education complex: other cultural attractions and a large number of bars and restaurants which have brought life to a previously neglected part of the city. The success has been dependent upon the creative re-use of abandoned industrial buildings and the creation of new city spaces.
- 2.6 George Ferguson's own Tobacco Factory Project is a fine example of heritage-led regeneration. The project emerged from the threatened demolition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century former Imperial Tobacco factories – over 800,000 square feet - designed by Sir Frank Wills between 1900 and 1910 on the Raleigh Road estate in South Bristol. In the face of resistance by the local authority and English Heritage to seek listed building status for the factory buildings, and following rejection of his proposal to develop the complex as a “sustainable urban village” in the early 1990s, George Ferguson bought one factory building from the Receiver in an attempt to prevent total demolition, and encouraged a manufacturer to occupy another.
- 2.7 Over the last seven years, George Ferguson has developed the Tobacco Factory as a multi-use building housing a theatre, restaurant, cafe bar, a ‘fame’ school and offices. This has been widely acknowledged as the principal driving force for the remarkable regeneration of the area and is to be the subject of a research project by the University of the West of England into the regeneration result of the project. It was necessarily an economic project that

was carried out as an individual initiative without any form of subsidy, and against all commercial agency advice. It is telling that it has now become the prime local example used by agents to demonstrate the benefits of such historic building and mixed cultural and commercial use.

**3. The role and effectiveness of the public agencies responsible for the built and historic environment in encouraging urban regeneration**

3.1 English Heritage, while carrying out its proper role of protecting and enhancing our built heritage, should reduce the dominance of its more archaeology-led approach to historic buildings and encourage the combination of respect and design flair that is exemplified by such projects as the British Museum Great Court or the creative re-use of Covent Garden's market buildings. There needs to be a reduction of the bureaucratic processes that have become such a disincentive to historic building grant application, and a more liberal attitude to the accreditation of architects for historic building work to create opportunities for those who are brilliant designers as well as those who specialise in careful repair. English Heritage nevertheless serve an important purpose as grant-makers and as supporters of the many Building Preservation Trusts that have a vital role to play in historic building regeneration.

3.2 The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment is a great force for good in the field of architecture which we regard as a crucial partner in the challenging game of architecture and place-making. They can, however, sometimes seem blinded by an adherence to particular forms of contemporary architecture and an enthusiasm for tall buildings, occasionally with an element of apparent disregard to the appropriate settings of historic buildings and areas.

3.3 The Regional Development Agencies are playing a vital role in many regeneration schemes across the country. It might be said that their role could and should be more enabling than direct - using their influence and funding to attract the appropriate developer and putting together appropriate partnerships such as historic building trusts, housing associations and commercial organisations, together with the necessary gap funding to ensure delivery.

3.4 The Environment Agency is playing an important role in discouraging inappropriate development on flood plains. However it has applied similar stringency to the redevelopment of some historic dockyards which are not worsening the situation by their reuse and may be threatened by the economic and aesthetic consequences of the measures advocated. It would seem that there should be a more pragmatic approach to managing the risk in such cases rather than imposing stringent physical conditions.

3.5 Many local authorities have realised the regenerative potential of their heritage to breathe new life into formerly run-down areas. Newcastle City Council and Gateshead City Council are an excellent example of how traditional rival local authorities can work together.

3.6 Little evidence remains of the River Tyne's heavy industry which dominated their Quayside apart from a number of former warehouse buildings. Many of these have become anchors for regeneration – such as the former Baltic Flour Mill in Gateshead and an old Co-operative Warehouse in Newcastle which are now respectively the outstanding Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and a stylish modern hotel. They have been joined by imaginative and brave modern interventions – including Norman Foster's Sage music centre in Gateshead and Wilkinson Eyre's Millennium Bridge which joins the two river banks and won the 2002 RIBA Stirling Prize for Architecture. New and old are linked by a riverside walk interspersed with bars, restaurants and public art. Culture and recreation are used as a force for regeneration which in turn has attracted new service-sector businesses to the area. It has developed its own dynamic, based on the existing historic fabric.

**4. Whether those organisations carrying out regeneration projects give sufficient regard to historic buildings**

4.1 Butlers Wharf in Southwark is an outstanding example of a commercially-developed regeneration project which benefited particularly from the imagination and flair of Terence Conran. Much the same could be said of Castlefields in Manchester, where local entrepreneurs Jim Ramsbottom and the renowned Urban Splash have made such a spectacular difference with a mix of old and new buildings. This has been one of the principal catalysts for the regeneration of Manchester with similar efforts now being applied to Liverpool and Salford.

4.2 George Ferguson's own practice is currently working on the regeneration of Royal William Yard in Plymouth with Urban Splash, who were invited in by the South West RDA after many of the more conventional national developers had bowed out. This is proving to generate values considerably above prevailing local prices because of the marketing strength of the historic site itself and the appealing combination of new and old. The Phoenix Trust is also involved with the site and can be said to have lit the touch paper that has enabled development to proceed on a site that has lain fallow for many years.

4.3 There are too many cases where development has had insufficient or scant regard for the historic environment. This has too often applied to town centre retail development, with some particularly poor examples being the Fleet Street Development in Torquay Old Town and the Eastgate Centre in Inverness. Both of these failed to utilise the historic environment in a positive manner that would have given greater economic sustainability.

**5. Whether the planning system and the listing of historic buildings aid or hinder urban regeneration**

5.1 We consider English Heritage to be the appropriate body to be responsible for designation of buildings and monuments of historic importance. We believe, however, that the RIBA can make an informed contribution to the process and would like to make a case for the architectural profession, through the RIBA, to be directly represented on English Heritage.

- 5.2 The RIBA believes that the sole criteria for listing should be those of architectural, cultural and historic importance and that matters of viability and economy – in other words the potential to contribute to urban regeneration – should continue to be dealt with through the Listed Building Consent process. However we would propose that a structure that has deteriorated to the extent that it has lost its architectural, cultural or historic integrity could be justified to have lost the criteria that might otherwise have justified listing.
- 5.3 We support the Government’s current proposal to bring together the different heritage protection regimes. We see no good reason to change the well established grades of listing.
- 5.4 Expertise within the planning system is an important issue and can hinder proper consideration of heritage and urban regeneration issues. While there may be a case for the establishment of local lists for planning guidance only – as suggested by the Government, we advise that “the List” should continue to be held and maintained centrally where greater expertise lies. English Heritage is best able to judge when it can delegate individual listed building consent decisions to the relevant local authority, dependent on a combination of the importance of the case and the extent of local expertise. It should have the power to do so, but, with some notable exceptions there is a lamentable lack of conservation and historic building experience within many local authorities.
- 5.5 The listing and listed building consent process must be more transparent. The RIBA encourages the notion of greater transparency, including a requirement for summary “statements of significance” with new listings that give outline guidance to stakeholders of relative importance. Statements would require review at the time of listed building consent, to include the significance of new discoveries and contemporary changes, which become part of the history of the structure or complex, and are sometimes of great significance themselves. Guidance in favour of structure and brevity should be clear and statutory to avoid a medley of different forms of statement and over-zealous demands on owners.
- 5.6 The listing system – in particular spot-listing - has major implications for individuals’ property rights and owners’ ability to bring about regenerative change. We would therefore expect full explanation of the process and consequences to be attached to every listing proposal. To prevent the possibility of abuse of an open consultative/decision period, it is accepted that the structure or complex concerned should be deemed to be fully protected as listed until a designation order is made. We suggest that might be limited to a guidance period of 4 weeks with a maximum of 12 weeks from the announcement that listing is to be considered.
- 5.7 The RIBA supports the right of appeal to the Secretary of State, both for and against listing. The Secretary of State should judge as to the level of inquiry appropriate to each case. Clear criteria should be set down as to the case for appeal. Cost should be awarded against those seen to be bringing a vexatious or time-wasting case. The right to appeal should be restricted to owners and relevant third parties, such as the individual or group or authority that had instigated the listing process.

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**6. Whether all Government Departments take adequate account of the historic environment**

- 6.1 Whitehall's reputation is patchy. Although the Department for Culture, Media and Sport tries its best to be a good champion for the historic environment within Whitehall, it remains the poor relation in terms of departmental funding and the concerns of its sectors are often overlooked.
- 6.2 A current example is VAT on construction work. The European Commission has recently published a proposal to amend the current Council Directive permitting reduced rates of VAT. For many years the architecture and heritage sectors have been calling for VAT rates to be harmonised in respect of new building, conversions and refurbishment. The Government's own Urban Task Force (chaired by the Lord Rogers of Riverside) also called for this measure in its Report in 1999.
- 6.3 All have argued that the current VAT regime – where VAT is chargeable on repair of existing dwellings but not on new buildings - creates anomalies that both discourage against the re-use or repair of existing buildings, and encourage urban sprawl. The Government seemingly remains reluctant to take up the case for harmonisation – even in the face of its own continued commitments to promoting greater brownfield development and urban regeneration. In our inner cities, where many different kinds of buildings lie disused or in poor repair, regeneration can make a huge difference. Yet developers face disincentives through the current VAT regime to breathe new life into declining neighbourhoods. Harmonised VAT could help to arrest this continuing decline.
- 6.4 The Government has a rare opportunity to secure a VAT regime that is both coherent among different building categories, and consistent with its wider planning objectives. DCMS should be fighting hard within Government to make the case for harmonised VAT as the sponsoring department for both architecture and the historic environment. We remain to be convinced that they are doing all they can.
- 6.5 Under the current heritage protection regime, DCMS and ODPM both share oversight of English Heritage. DCMS, until recently the sole sponsor of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, has persuaded ODPM to generously fund parts of CABE's activity. We are encouraged that this framework for co-operation exists and it appears to work well.
- 6.6 We are concerned, however, that DCMS may lack sufficient policy input into the work of the ODPM. While we warmly welcomed and we pleased to contribute to the current review of heritage protection legislation by DCMS, we are nevertheless worried that its timescale is out of synch with the thinking behind the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill and the Bill's current progress through Parliament. It seems to us that the Bill would be an ideal legislative opportunity to make many of the changes envisaged in the heritage protection review. Yet we fear that the DCMS's stately progress of the review may mean we have "missed the boat". It may be some time before we have another similar legislative opportunity.

**7. Whether fiscal and legislative changes should be made**

- 7.1 We consider the harmonisation of VAT on all forms of construction to be a priority. We have rehearsed the case for harmonisation in section 6 of this memorandum.
- 7.2 The RIBA would like to make a specific new proposal. We suggest that a pilot study is carried out into the encouragement of the removal or radical remodelling of buildings or structures that are perceived to be particularly detrimental to the appearance and character of conservation areas. This would entail the identification of such buildings and structures on a statutory “hit list” – Grade X listing. Grade X listed buildings and structures would be eligible for demolition/alteration grants where it helps to tip the economic balance and is seen to help with positive and appropriate regeneration.
- 7.3 As mentioned in paragraph 5.4 of this memorandum, there are lamentable gaps within local authorities who have historically been weak in this area, but have in recent years lost yet more of their most able people to the private sector. It is the intention of the RIBA to build on conservation and historic building skills within the architectural profession through the education system and through continuing professional development. But swift change can only be brought about through substantial additional investment in training of both the profession and trades, and the definition of thresholds that should be reached by every planning authority.
- 7.4 As we have already stated, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport remains a poor relation in Whitehall. Within that Department, the heritage sector has seemed for some time like a neglected child – often overlooked in favour of more vociferous sectors such as sport or the arts. During previous Comprehensive Spending Reviews – where substantial additional funding has been lavished upon the sports and arts sectors – the heritage sector has had to make do with the promise of “jam tomorrow”. But we now face the tightest Comprehensive Spending Review since the Government came into office in 1997. Already there is word of frozen budgets and, in some cases, even cuts. We hope that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will not give up on the heritage sector and will begin to treat it as a funding priority.