

## Heritage and Regeneration: The Ipswich Waterfront

Notes on a lecture from the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust Annual General Meeting – October 29 2014 at Isaac's on the Waterfront



**Dr Geraint Coles**, *Lecturer in Cultural Heritage at University Campus Suffolk Business School*

Dr Coles began by outlining his career. Born in Liverpool he developed a passion for the built environment and the patterns of human settlement. Attracted equally by architecture and archaeology he eventually studied archaeology at Sheffield University and went on to teach the subject for 18 years at Edinburgh University. He came to the new university in Ipswich a year ago as 'Lecturer in Heritage Management' and brings to the town his long experience of practical regeneration projects which have aimed to bring 'new life to ancient buildings' and to engage local people in projects which can help to bring new life and prosperity to the whole community as well as profit to the developers. In his talk he presented some possible new directions for the development of Ipswich – and especially the Waterfront - from an 'outsider's vision'.

He argued that successful regeneration needs to find a meeting between on the one hand the resources that might be drawn from developers and various sources of grant aid and on the other the needs and aspirations of local communities. He made the distinction between the creation of a heritage site that was simply a tourist 'destination' and a more desirable regeneration which could create a 'viable place with meaning and purpose', a place that would have on-going activity and would be genuinely owned by the community.

He explored the concept of 'psycho-geography' – a study which aims to tap into what people really feel about their environment. He argued that the one-size fits all approach sometimes taken by local authorities, planners and government agencies is likely to be too rigid to accommodate the various ways in which people respond to their lives and activities in their locality. He exemplified this point by reference to the way in which local landmarks (the naked Lewis' statue in Liverpool, for instance) can take on very specific meanings for people and shape the ways in which they use the spaces round them – their 'mental map' is a varied and diverse experience – 'a whole mesh of stories working together'. Planning effective regeneration has to respond to and embed this essential diversity.

Many of Dr Coles' illustrations were taken from a significant project he led – the regeneration of the once derelict Chesterfield Canal. This project eventually drew in £310m in a public/private partnership and grew into a major plan for the regeneration of the town of Chesterfield. As part of the project the railway keeper's cottage at Hollingwood Hub, Staveley was restored and a community centre built adjacent to the canal. The area had been in challenging circumstances. Referred to in the local vernacular as 'Mau Mau territory' this was a run-down area where the fear of vandalism was acute and the neglected towpath was littered with spent needles. Dr Coles' before and after slides illustrated the effects of

voluntary work including 'Guerrilla gardening' projects which spread into neighbouring areas, transforming neglected verges and open spaces. Volunteers were also involved in completely re-building a canal basin and adjacent locks. Schools were actively involved so that young people could experience first-hand the gains for their community. The fears that anti-social behaviour might ruin the project proved to be unfounded.

Dr Coles then focussed on the situation of Ipswich, arguing that 'ownership is the key'. He illustrated the point by describing the cycle of decay, regeneration with low-rent premises available for artists and start-up business, and final priced-up gentrification that characterised the experience of the 'Jewellery Quarter' in Birmingham. He explained that in Ipswich we should be guided by the demographic of the town which shows a higher proportion of families than in other towns in the south of a similar size. His vision for The Waterfront would be to make it even more attractive for families to visit and re-visit. He felt that small-scale urban development with considerable variety would be more likely to succeed and satisfy diverse needs rather than larger scale provision. The heterogeneity of Ipswich should prompt a mosaic or patchwork quilt approach to development. To develop this argument he identified four propositions.

Firstly, that **'the Waterfront should not stop at the dockside'**. Opportunities should be taken to make more use of waterways for access. If it were possible to create a tidal barrage a steady water level could be established for the Gipping, opening up possibilities for non-road access, together with recreational use – perhaps even echoes of the old Alderman Road canal scene. At present towpaths are too narrow in places to allow two people to walk side by side: a more welcoming environment might encourage much greater use of these routes. Who knows, a water taxi service might even be possible. Ultimately, a restored navigation to Stowmarket could provide access into the countryside. Dr Coles emphasised that these schemes could build on the work done in the 1980s many years ago by Ipswich Society volunteers in partnership with the IBC to create 'A Better River for Ipswich'. The experience of Boston, Lincolnshire, might serve as an example of what could be done, and at present there are government grants available to upgrade urban waterways.

Secondly, we should **consider places as linkages to create a mosaic effect between the Waterside and the town centre**. Currently the westbound inner-ring road constitutes a barrier which is difficult to surmount. We perhaps need a mind shift away from serving the needs of the motor car towards serving more effectively the needs of people. Interesting and attractive buildings between the dock and the town centre are stranded by the motor car. Perhaps by considering the possibilities of northern re-routing of traffic or other schemes it might be possible to deepen the waterfront effect, so that networks of connections are made incorporating heterogeneous small scale vistas and spaces attractive and interesting to people.

Thirdly, we should **diversify the offer by embracing the rich heritage of Ipswich**. At present, some might argue that a visit to the Waterfront consists of looking at a marina of yachts very few can afford, and having a pizza. Dr Coles argues there is little at present for families and children to bring them back again and again. The maritime collection is limited to one brave small display. The Transport Museum is lost in the middle of a housing estate. We should aim to have a permanent 'learning museum' on the Waterfront, with frequently changing displays. Perhaps the Suffolk Record Office could be housed. Perhaps the most significant aspect could be the Gyppeswyck Centre to celebrate Ipswich's unique national status as the first discrete Anglo Saxon town, and thus the place where 'England' and the English Language' began. (This was of course a notion championed by Peter Underwood among others many years ago, and is still a huge unrealized dream for the town). Dr Coles

pointed out the way in which Yorvick has been a sustained success for the city of York, thanks to imaginative and popular approaches to the presentation of history.

Lastly, Dr Coles argued that we should **exploit the opportunities created by the new university**. We should hope our graduates would want to stay in Ipswich and contribute to the local community. We could retain them by making sure there were affordable spaces for start-up business and other creative activities. Development should not be driven by commercial considerations alone: rather, we should look for opportunities for gain and trade-off so that there is a real community spin-off. Even in Silicon Valley, 45% of new start-ups fail, but 55% succeed. Dr Coles believes that with the right framework and the right people we can create a vibrant future for Ipswich. Engaged communities do succeed. When volunteers are trained and trusted, then great things can happen.

Dr Coles was warmly thanked by Nick Jacob, the Chairman of the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust for his stimulating address.

*(Notes by Bob Allen)*



*Dr Coles (centre) with an expectant audience at Isaacs on the Waterfront, Ipswich.*

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