

# The Future of Our World Heritage

Draft Discussion Paper published by  
Merseyside Civic Society, November 2021

Merseyside Civic Society would welcome  
your views and contributions to this debate.  
Please email [secretary@merseysidecivicsociety.org](mailto:secretary@merseysidecivicsociety.org)  
before 31 January 2022.



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Society

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 On 21 July 2021, Liverpool Maritime Mercantile City was deleted from the World Heritage List following a secret ballot at the 44th meeting of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in China.
- 1.2 The decision came at a moment of political turmoil, following the arrest of the mayor Joe Anderson and others on suspicion of fraud, bribery, corruption and misconduct in public office. The subsequent Best Value Inspection Report by Max Caller into the governance of Liverpool City Council, published in March 2021, concluded "that there can be no confidence that the Council will be able to take and implement all the required decisions in a sensible timescale" (Caller, 2021: 3). A new mayor was elected in May 2021 raising false hopes that UNESCO would give Liverpool City Council additional time.
- 1.3 Like many others in the city region, Merseyside Civic Society was disappointed with the decision. Notwithstanding some real threats to our heritage, we acknowledge the improvements to Liverpool's heritage assets through regeneration since inscription and argued that the "value of Liverpool as a world heritage city goes far beyond the narrow encapsulation of the original citation" (Davenport, 2021).
- 1.4 While Liverpool lost its World Heritage status, it still has world class heritage which needs protection. But it also forms an important turning point to reflect on the meaning of our heritage and its future. We would like our membership to formulate our ambition for protecting and enhancing our world heritage.

## 2. What WHS was about and how we lost it

- 2.1 Liverpool became inscribed in the World Heritage list in 2004, following a positive recommendation by ICOMOS, a professional body that advises UNESCO on world heritage.
  - 2.2 ICOMOS (2004: 131) cited the following reasons for inscription:
    - "Liverpool was a major centre generating innovative technologies and methods in dock construction and port management in the 18th and 19th centuries. It thus contributed to the building up of the international mercantile systems throughout the British Commonwealth.
    - The city and the port of Liverpool are an exceptional testimony to the development of maritime mercantile culture in the 18th and 19th centuries, contributing to the building up of the British Empire. It was a centre for the slave trade, until its abolition in 1807, and to emigration from northern Europe to America.
    - Liverpool is an outstanding example of a world mercantile port city, which represents the early development of global trading and cultural connections throughout the British Empire."
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2.3 The site or property in UNESCO jargon was Liverpool – Maritime Mercantile City and consisted of 6 areas (Pier Head, Albert Dock and Wapping Dock, Stanley Dock Conservation Area, Commercial Centre, Cultural Quarter and Lower Duke Street) which are surrounded by a ‘fairly large’ buffer zone (ICOMOS, 2004). The size of the actual area was approx. 136ha and the buffer zone approx. 750ha (see Figure 1).

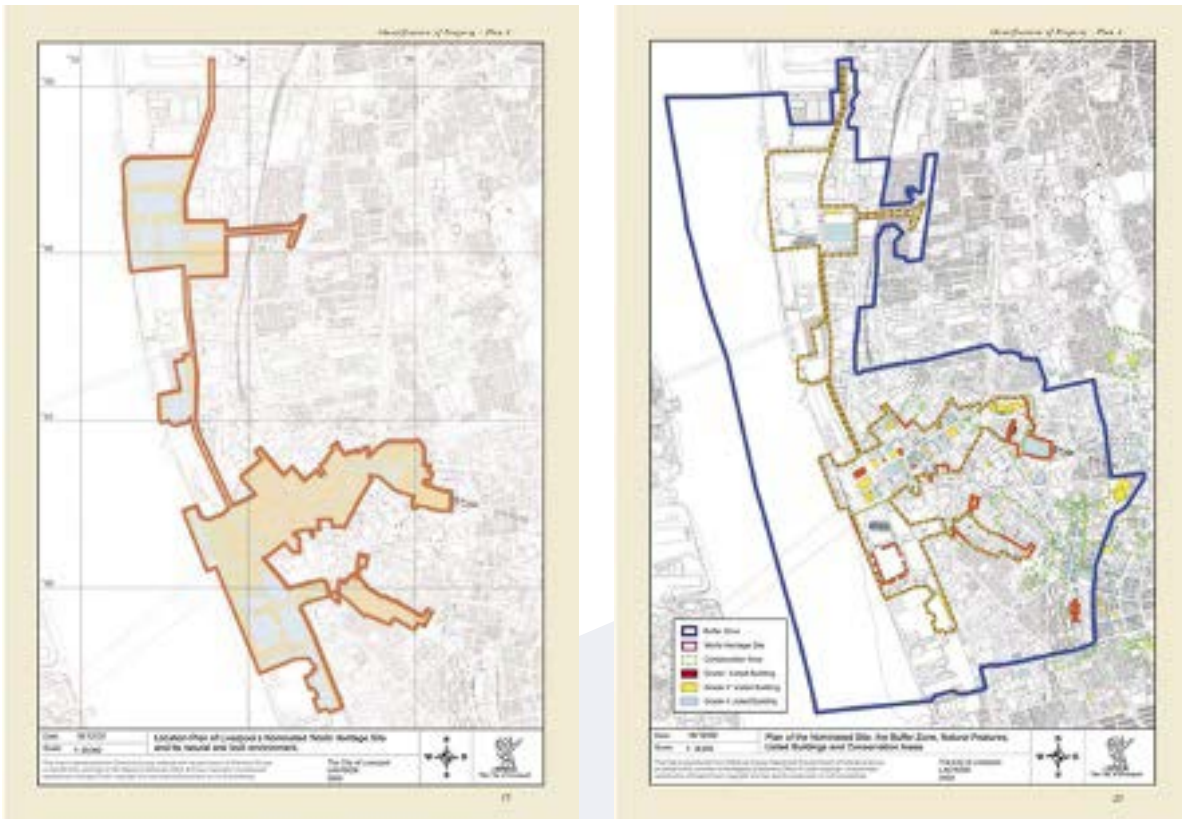


Figure 1. Boundaries of World Heritage Site and Buffer Zone (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2003)

2.3 From the very start, development was putting Liverpool's World Heritage status at risk. Already in its recommendation for listing, ICOMOS expressed concerns about proposed developments – the Museum of Liverpool, the new Ferry Terminal and Mann Island – but the conclusion of the UNESCO Reactive Monitoring Missions in 2006 and again in 2011 was that these developments were ‘insufficient grounds for Danger Listing’ (UNESCO, 2011).

2.4 However, the massive redevelopment proposed by Peel in 2010, transforming the waterfront into a Shanghai on the Mersey, was sufficient reason to ultimately put Liverpool on the World Heritage at Risk List in 2012. The 2011 Reactive Monitoring Mission concluded that “if the proposed Liverpool Waters scheme as outlined during the mission would be implemented, the World Heritage property would be irreversibly damaged, due to a serious deterioration of its architectural and town-planning coherence, a serious loss of historical authenticity, and an important loss of cultural significance” (UNESCO, 2011: 3).

2.5 The new Everton stadium was the straw that broke the camel's back, though UNESCO cited as main reason its “repeated serious concerns over the impact of the proposed ‘Liverpool Waters’ development in the form presented in the approved Outline Planning Consent (2013-2042) which constitutes an ascertained threat to the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property” (UNESCO, 2021). UNESCO had clearly advised against the proposed new football stadium, which would require infill of Bramley-Moore Dock, described as “completely unacceptable” by ICOMOS (2021).

2.6 Three main views why Liverpool has lost its World Heritage Site status can be discerned: One group of critics clearly side with UNESCO and lay the blame with Liverpool City Council who did not do enough to protect the site and that the Government would let it happen (Wainwright, 2021). Others ultimately argue that UNESCO's view on heritage is irreconcilable with a dynamic city (Parkinson, 2021). Finally, there is the view that Unesco has made an unreasonable decision by focussing on management rather than heritage value (Chetwyn, forthcoming).

### 3. What's Next?

3.1 Merseyside Civic Society regrets UNESCO's decision to delete Liverpool from the World Heritage List, but also recognises that the challenges remain the same: reconciling the need for development with the aim to protect and enhance our heritage.

3.2 We are at a turning point which allows us to reflect on some fundamental aspects of the future of our world heritage. What do we want to keep, drop or enhance from policies protecting Liverpool's WHS?

3.3 MCS proposes the following statements for discussion:

*Properly protect our listed buildings and conservation areas*

3.4 Listed buildings are recognised as being important to our national identity. They form a central part of the country's cultural heritage. They are considered to be an irreplaceable record which informs our understanding and appreciation of both the past and the present. Buildings are included in the statutory list because of their special architectural or historic interest and are Graded I, II\* or II depending on their relative importance. Inclusion in the list means that consent is required for the demolition of a building, in whole or in part, or for any works of alteration or extension, either internal or external, that is likely to affect its special interest. Under the provision of the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) it is a criminal offence to carry out works to a listed building without consent from the relevant Local Planning Authority. Once lost, individual listed buildings together with the essential fabric of historic areas cannot be replaced.

3.5 Conservation Areas are defined in the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) as areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. Local Planning Authorities have a duty under Section 69 of the Act to review designations from time to time and can be undertaken not only as part of a review of its local plan process but at any point in time that is considered appropriate to meet the requirements of the aforementioned Act.

3.6 The decision in 2004 by UNESCO to 'inscribe' a part of Liverpool's historic core and a section of the intact dock system did not confer any additional statutory powers to those already in place. But it was to be treated as a material consideration in respect of the formal assessment of applications for planning permission by Liverpool City Council as the Local Planning Authority that would have an effect on the character and appearance of the defined World Heritage Site (WHS).

3.7 Supplementary Planning Documents were produced and formally approved to provide the necessary guidance to developers and the Planning Committee to ensure that good architectural design was achieved in order to maintain the quality of the area whilst bringing about the regeneration of those parts of the WHS that had been neglected for many years.

- 3.8 The World Heritage status has been withdrawn primarily due to the apparent lack of adherence to Liverpool City Council's own published guidance. Nevertheless, the national statutory powers remain in place. As such the protection of the historic environment can be achieved by enforcing the powers available to the Local Planning Authority and Members of the Planning Committee.
- 3.9 Liverpool City Council's emerging policy on Heritage is short in detailed guidance compared with the extant UDP dated November 2002 (originally adopted for Development Control purposes in 1996).
- 3.10 However, the emerging heritage policy is supported by the National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2021), but it cannot include or repeat Government guidance verbatim. As a result of this the Society considers that additional support/guidance should be provided to owner/occupiers of recognised heritage assets. To achieve this, the Society is to produce a series of white papers (policies) to support owner/occupiers and ward councillors understand that the historic environment is important and that its protection in terms of its embedded carbon footprint helps maintain the character appearance of an area.

*Recognise the economic value of heritage and urban design*

- 3.11 Most of the City region's heritage is in productive use, providing commercial space, residential accommodation, and space for community, recreational and other uses. Heritage has cultural value derived from the past, but is now part of the infrastructure of the City Region's towns, villages, rural areas and City Centre.
- 3.12 Historic buildings can provide flexible and affordable floor space, essential for supporting enterprise. The catalyst in such areas is low rental levels and flexible floorspace, which are essential to support micro and small businesses, start-ups, creative enterprises and knowledge-based employment. Heritage has supported sometimes dramatic physical and economic transformations, especially in parts of the City Region that have experienced commercial or industrial decline. Examples are the regeneration of Ropewalks, the Baltic Triangle and the Fabric District. Historic environments can help to project a positive image and distinctive environment to attract investment, jobs, population and visitors to the area's various centres.
- 3.13 Historic places and buildings are key to attracting tourists and visitors, supporting a range of local businesses. Tourism is a significant part of the local economy in much of the City Region, including the City Centre.
- 3.14 Historic area grant schemes funded by Lottery or Historic England monies have been a catalyst for change in some parts of the City Region, helping to create investor and business confidence.
- 3.15 Historic environments help to attract shoppers and visitors to the City Region, creating competitive advantage for the various centres. The High Street Task Force and others have recognised that heritage is a significant factor in developing strategies for the recovery of high streets and town centres, which is especially important post-COVID.
- 3.16 Evidence has shown that historic centres tend to have higher proportions of independent businesses and specialist shops, supporting choice and diversity. Historic buildings also add to the variety, choice and quality of housing in the City Region, from well-established terraced streets to new apartments in converted industrial buildings. Conversions have been an important part in creating a City Centre residential population.

- 3.17 Historic buildings represent a huge investment of embodied energy in their materials and construction. Demolition and landfill represent a loss of this embodied energy. Historic buildings are often durable and adaptable. Often, replacement buildings are less durable. Historic places often have high-density building patterns and were designed for a low-carbon economy in terms of movement and activity patterns. Historic centres tend to have more sustainable characteristics in terms of fine grain of mixed use (more facilities in walking distance), pedestrian permeability, concentrations of facilities, public transport links, high density urban forms and green infrastructure, such as parks. So, refurbishment of the City Region's historic buildings and places contributes to more sustainable forms of growth and economic development.
- 3.18 The maintenance and repair of historic buildings creates skilled employment (professional, technical, skilled manual and vocational), including craft-based jobs. Building refurbishment generates higher levels of pay and investment in local economies.

#### *Liverpool Maritime and Mercantile City*

- 3.19 What is it that constitutes our World Heritage and what needs protection? The discussion should be conceptual as well as geographic, though it inevitably will include some specific sites or buildings. It should include tangible and intangible heritage. This is in line with the inscription of 2004, and yet has not been embraced by either UNESCO or the city itself. This must change.
- 3.20 Themes may include, but not be limited to:
- Maritime innovation and rivalries (Liverpool vs. London/Chester etc.)
  - Leavetaking and migration
  - 'World' city
  - Colony and Empire
  - Cultural currencies & cultural exchange
  - Slave trade
- 3.21 Liverpool was founded in the 13th century, a few streets around a tidal pool, offering shelter from storms. Liverpool's origins about the 'pool' from which it takes its name are lost to much of its citizenry. The pool and the stream that fed it are long buried, but the tidal ghost of the watercourse has been known to flood cellars from Liverpool One, along Matthew Street and up towards the Plateau of St. George's. Though preserved in the space beneath the Grosvenor development of Liverpool One, the pool and Old Dock are poorly served and signposted, both literally and figuratively. As both namesake and technological spark to the surge in Liverpool's development in Steer's Old Dock, this landlocked site should be a key part of the heritage narrative that accepts that the shoreline has flexed as its utility has shifted, silted up, been extended and modified.
- 3.22 Though Liverpool One sits upon and follows the ancient street plan, it masks these deep histories. From the marsh of Frog Lane, which later became the sailor's 'Paradise Street', to the vanished hulk of the Customs House above, poor and uncoordinated interpretation risks a disservice to the layered maritime history of the town. Where private ownership dominates such public spaces (and this is not limited to Liverpool One), partnerships to interpretation and preservation should be key, and not simply time-limited development considerations. The visitor entrance, for instance, that was constructed to serve this critical part of the city's heritage has instead been turned into a Starbucks.

- 3.23 As with other significant port cities, though Liverpool may claim many examples of exceptionalism, the story of modern maritime freight moving outside of outdated urban infrastructure is not unique. Cities like Istanbul, New York, Sydney, Hamburg and others have taken outdated infrastructure elements and formed them into urban leisure facilities, residential areas and venues, etc. Our view of Heritage is not simply preservationist and takes into account the natural development of a city that serves its citizens. A utilised historic site is always better than 'Hard-hat Heritage' and dereliction.
- 3.24 Care should be taken to remove the rose-tinted spectacles of the 'preservation' narrative. The 'Royal' Albert Dock for example, though a great regeneration story, is not a preservation of a working dock space, it is an excavation of an almost completely silted-up site, restored with a significant volume of 1980s modern construction, leaving its authenticity open to debate. Much of the historic usable dock estate has physically migrated, with infill unexceptional. The present shoreline is not that of previous centuries. The most significant example is the Old Dock, long since buried beneath the customs house, and only partially exposed in the Liverpool One Development. The Waterfront has long been a moving, malleable space and rigid 'preservation' is not the historic truth.
- 3.25 We propose instead, that the physical be taken in the context of the intangible, and the material be representative of the human, where the historic built landscape follows the function of serving the population of the city and its hinterland. Lost sites and structures should be signposted and celebrated through partnership with private landowners and the civic bodies. Inaccessible hard-hat heritage should be opened up through imaginative reuse and high quality design and interpretation. Intangible narratives, whether historical or contemporary, can add to the case for preservation of under-appreciated but significant structures and zones, and suggest a blueprint for meaningful and high quality adaptation and redevelopment that should serve the needs of the city's people first.

#### *The river runs through the city*

- 3.26 The Port of Liverpool comprises the tidal estuary of the River Mersey and the docks in Bootle, Birkenhead, and Liverpool itself. 'Liverpool Bay' extends to a line between Point Lynas [Anglesey] and Formby Point. At the heart of the port is the historic 'Maritime Mercantile City'. Some have talked of 'the ocean flowing through Liverpool'. A phrase that we have used is 'The river runs through the city, not past one side of it'. With this in mind, perhaps we should be considering the pros and cons of putting a greater focus on the river itself, and extending the definition of the 'Maritime Mercantile City' to include parts of Birkenhead.
- 3.27 The MCS argued, in its White Paper on the World Heritage Site, that both sides of the river are of vital importance. The ferry crossing from Birkenhead to the pool of Liverpool was inaugurated by the monks of Birkenhead Priory in 1150 AD and Liverpool was given a Royal Charter by King John in 1207. Victorian Birkenhead was laid out as a new town, to relieve overcrowding in the fast-growing city, but the grand vision [glimpsed in the park and Hamilton Square] was left unfulfilled. However, the best views of Liverpool are from Birkenhead, and one of the finest riverside landmarks is Herbert Rowse's Queensway Tunnel Ventilation Tower.

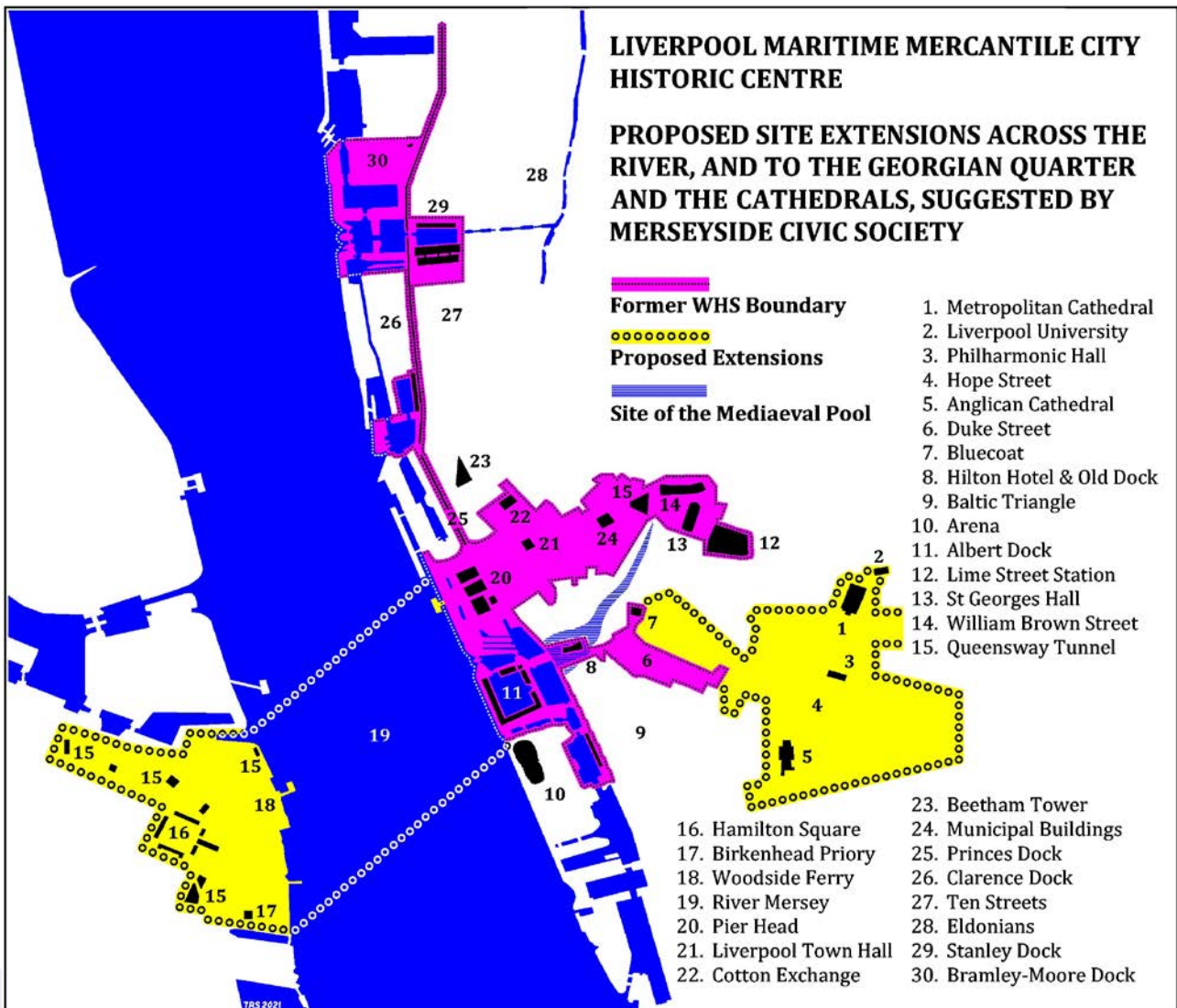


Fig. 2. Proposed boundaries of Liverpool Maritime and Mercantile City (Map: Trevor Skempton)

*Iconic buildings, not compromises*

3.28 The waterfront is the most visible and defining feature of any city, but even more so in Liverpool. Since the 1960s, the port has gradually retreated from the waterfront, which meant that large areas of the docklands became derelict. These changes have had a significant impact on the city but also provided the possibility for the city to reconnect with its waterfront. The same applies to Birkenhead across the Mersey.

3.29 The World Heritage Site formed a significant part of Liverpool’s waterfront and attempts to redevelop the docks have been at the heart of UNESCO’s decision to delete Liverpool from the World Heritage List. The Peel Group, which acquired the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company in 2005, owns most of the waterfront and markets it as Liverpool and Wirral Waters.

3.30 Despite the loss of World Heritage status, the need to reconcile development with heritage protection remains. As many commentators have pointed out, Liverpool still has world class heritage and the former World Heritage Site still enjoys – at least on paper – the same level of protection, through Conservation Area and Listed Building status.



- 3.31 Liverpool has seen excellent examples of heritage-led development throughout the years, the regeneration of the Albert Dock in the 1980s, the Bluecoat, St. George's Plateau with St. Georges Hall, the World Museum and the Central Library. Liverpool One helped to retain the old street pattern and brought a derelict site in the heart of the city centre back in use. The Titanic Hotel in Stanley Dock and currently the Tobacco Warehouse shows that it is possible to retain some of our finest buildings. All these developments have given new meaning to old buildings. The Everyman Theatre is an interesting example of how even a new building can contribute to heritage by reusing the old brick. That is not to say that there is nothing which could have been done better. Also, the 'novelty' effect of the Albert Dock has worn off over time and may be in need of refreshing (Parkinson and Lord, 2017).
- 3.32 The quality of new developments on the waterfront, however, has been mixed and a frequent bone of contention, not only with UNESCO. Many prize-winning architects have left their marks in Liverpool, but perhaps not their best buildings. Whether or not one liked Will Alsop's Fourth Grace, the Museum of Liverpool by Danish architects 3XN that was developed instead has received many unfavourable reviews and in 2011 was nominated for the Carbuncle Cup for the ugliest building completed over the past 12 months, a title which the nearby Ferry Terminal by Hamilton Architects 'won' in 2009 (Moore, 2011). The architecture of the office blocks in Princes Dock can be found everywhere. The mediocre quality of new developments also applies to Liverpool's 'other' waterfront on the Wirral.
- 3.33 Other port cities have shown how a carefully crafted strategy can transform the waterfront. Amsterdam developed a strategy called Anchors on the IJ, which uses (semi-)public buildings to attract people to the waterfront, such as a new music hall, library on the southern bank as well as EYE film museum across the water. In Hamburg's Hafencity the iconic Elbe Philharmonic Hall, a glass structure resembling an iceberg atop of a red brick warehouse, attracted global attention.
- 3.34 The question is how we wish to address development in the former World Heritage Site and the waterfront more broadly. What kind of qualities do we envisage for our waterfront(s) and what mechanisms do we need to secure this? Do we need a stronger vision for the waterfront? Do we need to be more demanding in terms of design quality, through stricter peer review or the use of competitions? Do we want a clear rule set, including a tall buildings policy, that may result in architecture that succumbs to rules or do we need iconic buildings that shape the heritage of the future?

## 4. Conclusion

- 4.1 Since the adoption of UNESCO World Heritage Status, MCS has been a key part of the discussion around World Heritage as part of the formal Steering body, convened via the City Council. Though this group is no more, we remain part of the conversation. We endeavour to represent the views of our membership and to act in the best interests of our wider civic society. To that end, your contributions to this discussion, and this paper are key ways in which those views can be broadened and become truly representative of our members.
- 4.2 We remain engaged in frequent discussion with Liverpool City Council, Wirral Council and the City Region through regular meetings and planning updates, and will take this paper forward to help shape the debate around future management of our World Heritage. Contributions will be considered and integrated into the paper for formal presentation to Liverpool City Council and heritage partners in early 2022

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