

Liverpool's Maritime Mercantile City

Reflections by Trevor Skempton

Introduction

Some of us remember the thriving historic port – huge structures, towering warehouses, cranes, chimneys, ships, plumes of smoke – a tumultuous maritime-industrial-commercial complex, both sides of the river, with many extraordinary buildings, albeit jet-black beneath coats of soot. Noise from the river and city was incessant, the city's spirit was inventive and irresistible. Following a long industrial decline, World Heritage Site status was secured, but this seemed to kick-off a sterile debate between preservation and development.

However, it wasn't that simple. The critical argument was between those who see 'heritage' as the creation of comfortable special zones – sanitized or gentrified 'theme parks' – and others who see heritage, character and 'spirit' as essential elements to be integrated into the future growth and development of our city. The watchwords for the latter aim should be quality and sustainability. However, we have learnt that these factors cannot be secured – or even helped – by simplistic zoning constraints on height, density or imagination.



*Nomination of Liverpool -
Maritime Mercantile City for Inscription
on the World Heritage List*

The Nomination document focussed on the 18th and 19th-Century development of the Maritime Mercantile City, but the cover depicted the 20th-Century Waterfront.

1. Different Perspectives

1.1. The main focus of the inscription document was on the 18th and 19th-Century history of rapid growth and industrialisation. The state of conservation of this Maritime Mercantile City is far better now, with fewer buildings at risk, than at the time of inscription onto the World Heritage List.

1.2. A secondary focus was on the 20th-Century waterfront [now branded as the 'three graces'], but the 20th-Century skyline, of two Cathedrals, was in the 'Buffer Zone'. Also, the World Heritage Site was restricted to just one side of the river.



There has been a remarkable programme of conservation in recent years, with just three examples shown above: White Star Building, St Georges Hall and Albert Dock.



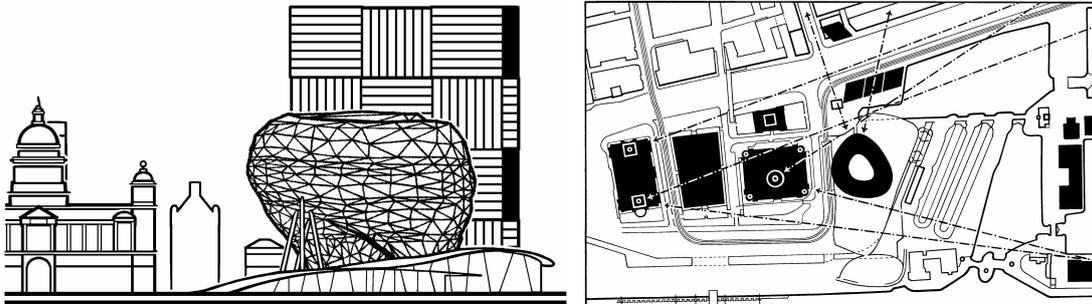
Towering waterfront structures, lost within living memory: New Brighton Tower, once the tallest structure in Britain, the Clarence Dock Power Station and Bibby's Warehouse, designed in the Chicago style by W. Aubrey Thomas, but now scheduled to be replaced by new four-storey development within the 'Ten Streets' Masterplan.

1.3. Liverpool can be categorised as 'home of the European Skyscraper' [a staging point on the skyscraper's journey between Chicago and Moscow], but lobbyists against tall buildings got the ear of UNESCO representatives during the ICOMOS visit to Liverpool in 2011. Building heights within the Buffer Zone became the dominating argument between ICOMOS and Liverpool.

1.4. ICOMOS were disturbed by speculative proposals for skyscrapers on the former Clarence Dock Power Station site – excluded from the World Heritage Site, but included within the Buffer Zone.

1.5. A related issue is ‘authentic living memory’ and the loss of waterfront landmarks over the past 100 years – from New Brighton Tower [then tallest structure in Britain] to cranes at Cammell Laird, industrial Tate and Lyle, the Overhead Railway and many giant silos, warehouses and chimneys. In conversations with ICOMOS representatives, I was astonished to be told that Liverpool ‘should be’ a horizontal city – like St Petersburg or Bordeaux.

1.6. Nevertheless, the principal of new development within the World Heritage Site was surely accepted, with Will Alsop’s design for a ‘Fourth Grace’ the centre-piece of Liverpool’s bid to be the European Capital of Culture 2008 [Alsop’s multi-functional ‘Cloud’ was replaced by separate buildings for the Museum of Liverpool and offices and flats on Mann Island].



Detailed negotiations over Will Alsop’s ‘Fourth Grace’ failed at the last minute, and a new competition was ordered for a standalone Museum of Liverpool, won by 3XN. Sight-lines, based on Alsop’s design, were used to justify building on the river-edge.

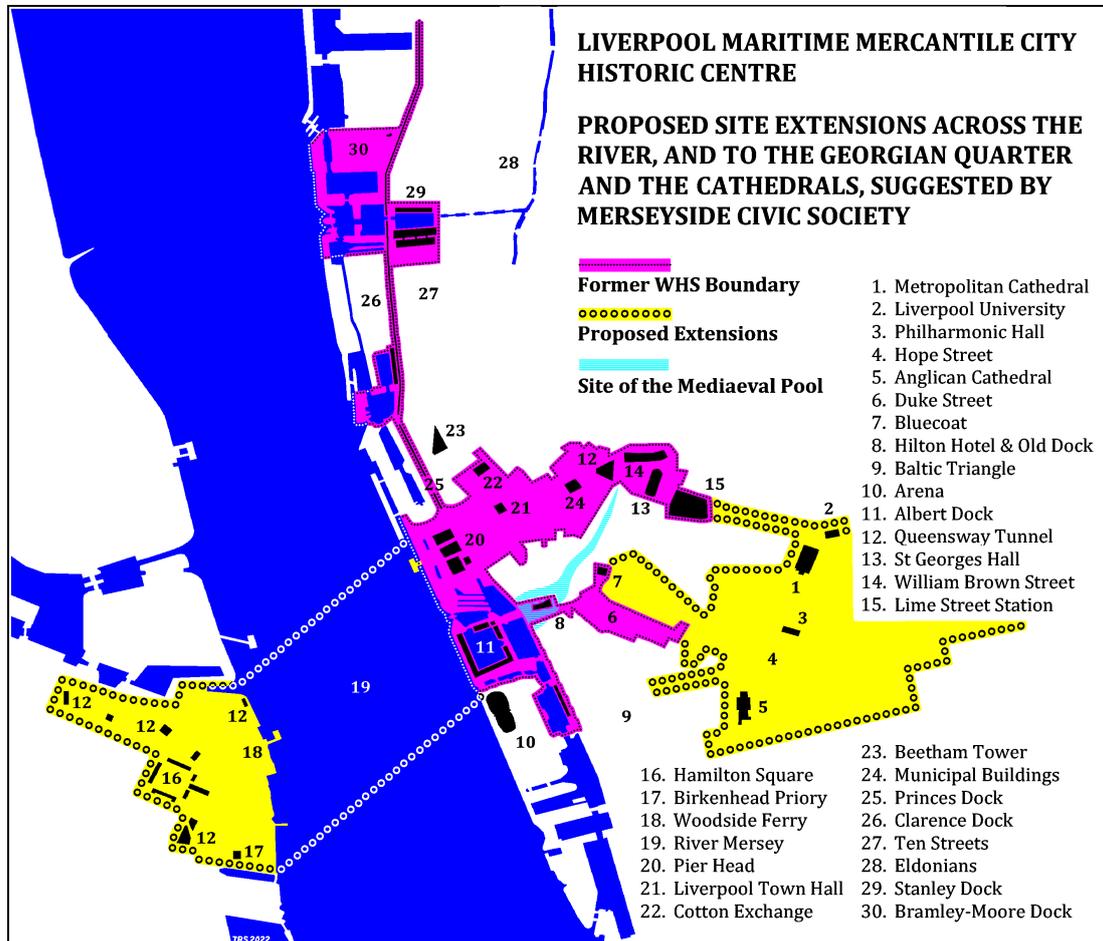
2. MCS Conditional Support

2.1. Merseyside Civic Society supported the World Heritage Site; it supports the principle of combining conservation with new development and growth. It has campaigned for rigorous ‘peer review’ of all projects, and an open debate about what is meant by ‘world-class’.

2.2. Personally, I have a passion for conservation, with a parallel enthusiasm for modern architecture and urban design – searching for synergy, combining the two for the benefit of both. I was nominated to represent the MCS Council on the World Heritage Site Steering Group, from 2008.

2.3. MCS argued its position carefully, publishing White Papers in 2012 [Urban Design and Design Review] and 2018 [Our Policy on Liverpool’s World Heritage Site]. It found itself in support of the position on World Heritage being taken by Liverpool City Council, despite campaigning against a scheme within the Buffer Zone [Lime Street redevelopment and demolition of The Futurist cinema].

2.4. MCS recognised the limitations of the inscription site, only one side of the cross-river infrastructure being represented. The latest MCS proposals exclude the Buffer Zone, but add areas of Birkenhead, and Liverpool's Georgian Quarter [including areas related to the historic Liverpool and Manchester Railway].



Map showing the former World Heritage Site. The Buffer Zone has been removed, and the added yellow areas show suggested extensions to the designated area of the 'Maritime Mercantile City', including aspects of the Edge Hill railway heritage.

3. 'Managed Decline' and 'Levelling Down'

3.1. The phrase 'managed decline' has haunted Liverpool, since it was formulated by Geoffrey Howe, a member of Margaret Thatcher's Cabinet in 1981. Michael Heseltine took a different view, of course, and led several vital local initiatives. Nevertheless, the phrase has come to symbolise the hollowing-out of the inner-city and the suburbanisation that has enveloped it.

3.2. A more recent catchphrase from Central Government, 'levelling-up', seems to be an equally haunting phrase when applied to Liverpool – at least in its opposite physical form of 'levelling-down!' A series of planning decisions have either rejected tall buildings or reduced their height [i.e. made them more squat in proportion and appearance]. Here are just three examples:

3.3. Example 1: The giant grain silo on Brunswick Dock, sometimes called the 'Dockers' Cathedral', was demolished in 1986 and replaced by low-rise housing. In 2006, a Public Inquiry found in favour of a dramatic 51-storey proposal by developer Maro, overlooking the dock and marina. However, Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State in the then-Labour Government, overruled the Planning Inspector and said she was "not persuaded" that the location was suitable. Yet, a similar 'sail-like' design [also by architect Ian Simpson] appeared later on the South Bank of the Thames in Central London.



'Dockers' Cathedral' Brunswick Dock grain silo. Sketch of demolition by Ken Martin.

3.4. Example 2: One Park West. This landmark building [by architect Cesar Pelli], part of the Liverpool One Masterplan and within the WHS Buffer Zone, was reduced in height by three storeys, after a last-minute intervention by English Heritage. Similar unpredictable restrictions have affected other projects, with an adverse effect on confidence and development.



One Park West. All buildings within the Liverpool One development were subject to a rigorous iterative design review process. The final image, with the three storeys removed at the last minute at the insistence of English Heritage, is bottom right.

3.5. Example 3: The new Everton Stadium, under construction at Bramley-Moore Dock [by architect Dan Meis], is meticulous in preserving most of the dock's historic fabric and ensuring potential reversibility. This allows the process of building within the former dock to be made explicit – as in historic examples within the World Heritage Site – the Old Dock [Liverpool One] and St George's

Dock [Liver Building]. However, despite general optimism, a feeling persists of the stadium 'keeping low' and trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Hard-won compromises may mean it falls short of the hoped-for era-defining landmark.



The new stadium for Everton Football Club [52,000 seats, with potential expansion to 62,000] is under construction at Bramley-Moore Dock. Architect Dan Meis has taken great care to reflect the industrial dockland materials, to conserve important structures and historic fabric, and to open up new public areas of the waterfront. The decision to approve the building of the stadium, within the derelict docklands, has been characterised as 'the final nail in the coffin of the World Heritage Site.'

4. Learning from Liverpool

4.1. The emphasis must be placed on the authentic spirit of a city, in which the history, and living memory, is clearly expressed and linked to the future.

4.2. The approach should be to seek synergy [conservation and development enhancing each other] rather than compromise [the line of least resistance].

4.3. There should be no 'Buffer Zone' and no blanket regulation of matters such as height and density. A rigorous process of 'peer review' should guide the work of architects and others, considering proposals on their own merits.

4.4. In my opinion, the notion of the 'Maritime Mercantile City' is worthwhile and should be retained within a new enhanced cross-river 'National Conservation Area', under the stewardship of the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region.

Trevor Skempton, Reflections, WHS UK Conference, 23rd June 2022