

Heritage, Pride and Place

Exploring the contribution of World Heritage Site status to Liverpool's sense of place and future development

Appendix C: Stakeholder Interviews

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Introduction

Stakeholder interviews were conducted to explore and develop an understanding of perceptions concerning the impact of the World Heritage Site (WHS) on Liverpool. Furthermore, discussions were held to consider the potential of the WHS to contribute positively to the city's future trajectory.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted with key representatives from city policy organisations and organisations that promote and manage the city's visitor economy; a city centre property developer; and a newspaper reporter who has covered local politics since 2007. These interviews were complemented by informal discussions with heritage campaigners and professionals.

Stakeholders were asked to offer retrospective and prospective opinions and perspectives on the title's significance to Liverpool. However, defining the impact of the World Heritage title proved somewhat difficult for the majority of interviewees. The interviews demonstrate that this difficulty could be because of two intertwining developments taking place over the last decade: namely, major redevelopments in the city centre; and the overshadowing of the WHS by the build-up to, and subsequent culmination of, the European Capital of Culture in 2008.

The discussions presented here show just how much variation there is between views on the role of the WHS in relation to the city's future development. However, it should also be noted that, when not speaking from a strictly professional point of view, but rather as residents of the city or region, the majority of interviewees acknowledged the cultural value of the WHS title in terms of the pride that the accolade bestows on the city.

The stakeholder interview analysis presented in this Appendix is organised into three sections, which correspond with the three main findings emerging out of the interviews:

1. **Lack of knowledge** concerning the scope of the WHS, UNESCO's overarching role and how the WHS is promoted.
2. The economic and political association with the planned Peel Development – **Liverpool Waters**.
3. **'Show me the Figures'** – a widespread assertion that the extrinsic economic value of World Heritage needs to be justified.

With regards to Theme 2, many of the stakeholders were able to talk at length on what they perceived to be the pros and cons of the Liverpool Waters project. Yet, while these contributions enriched the interviews, there is insufficient space here to dedicate to a more detailed discussion of these opinions. More relevant to this report, instead, is the fact that stakeholders had much greater ease discussing these plans than the role of the WHS title in the future development of the city.

1. Lack of knowledge about the WHS and UNESCO's role

Beyond the representatives of bodies directly responsible for promoting and managing the World Heritage Site (WHS), there was little knowledge among stakeholders regarding the actual extent of the site and the criteria on which it was awarded, with the following exchange exemplifying the low level of 'WHS literacy' that was found to be common among the stakeholders interviewed:

Stakeholder 10: '... the word that's missing from the World Heritage Site for Liverpool is as a port. People forget that it's still a prolific seaport. ... and that's the essence of Liverpool's whole existence. If it hadn't of been a port, well, I don't think there'd be any Beatles ... You know, it's a seaport and its heritage is the sea and I think that's what's missing from it, is it...'

Interviewer: 'Well, ironically, that's the title, Liverpool Mercantile...'

Stakeholder 10: 'Oh, is it?'

Interviewer: '...Maritime City'

While many stakeholders considered the award to be a seal of approval for the city's architectural heritage, the site was often conflated with the waterfront alone, despite the fact that the UNESCO title tends to be excluded from marketing of the waterfront.

Stakeholder 2: 'I mean, it's interesting that the Waterfront Partnership has actually just commissioned its own website for the Waterfront, which is primarily the World Heritage Site effectively, because there was no Waterfront website'

The clear lack of knowledge amongst stakeholders not directly engaged with the WHS was also apparent when they were asked to provide concrete examples of how WHS status had impacted on their organisation or business sector, with all stakeholders generally struggling to make any connection. Among stakeholders directly involved in promoting and managing the city's visitor economy, meanwhile, there was a general acknowledgement that the promotion of the site has been very poor.

Stakeholder 3: '... I think the impact [of the WHS] has been modest. It's been particularly modest in and around Liverpool/.../But I think it's also been modest outside Liverpool. And the reason for that is quite simply that it's been very badly promoted. In fact, it's hardly been promoted at all. I would go so far as to say it's not been promoted. It's not been promoted to outsiders. It's not been explained to people that live here. It's a big lost opportunity. Most other cities, that are similar to Liverpool, as in modern post-industrial growth, would love to have World Heritage Site Status. Liverpool has World Heritage Site Status and appears to not understand it, and certainly doesn't use it. So, because of that, I think that the current debate about how valuable it is are almost utterly pointless because local people have no idea of the value, 'cause nobody's ever explained it to them.'

When probed behind the lack of promotion and public awareness of the WHS, stakeholders highlighted three possible causes: the prioritisation of the city's preparation for the European Capital of Culture in 2008; the public attention paid to flagship developments such as Liverpool One; and the impact of the Conference Centre and Echo Arena. There was a consensus of opinion

that the World Heritage title was neglected and/or side-lined, and that it was not actively incorporated into the regeneration narrative of the city.

Stakeholder 4: ‘Well, yeah, and I think, you know, the two things ran in parallel for a while there, ‘cause we – you know, WHS got going at the same time we were going for Capital of Culture and the pre-work for that, and I think we always saw that World Heritage Site was going to be something, you know, not for the Christmas like a dog, but for keeps, whereas 2008 was going to come and go’

Stakeholder 5: ‘It’s never been seen as an opportunity to market the city, so we’ve never really done that. We’ve always looked at it, in terms of what we can and what we can’t do with it, rather than what the potential is for it, if that makes sense?’

Interviewees with experience of working with city planners also suggested that there is a strong ‘conserve as found’ ethos (Smith 2006), which they believed has prevailed in the case of development in and around the WHS. The analysis of interviews suggests that the original bid and management plan, which was comprehensive in terms of planning, subsequently set the tone for the site’s management. This issue, along with the concerns of preservationists regarding the potential loss of the title, was believed by stakeholders to have restricted a wider vision for the WHS. Interviewees argued that planning issues over signage for businesses located on the waterfront have discouraged clients and undermined trade, which has subsequently affected footfall in the area. One interviewee, in particular, found the ‘conserve as found’ ethos contradictory in relation to development issues (Smith 2006):

Stakeholder 2: ‘If you look at the contemporary photographs of that area when the buildings that were all the – you know, formed the World Heritage Site were developed, Albert Dock and the Three Graces, (and I don’t know if you’ve ever looked at those things, it would be worth you just Googling them to just have a look), is that everywhere was plastered with adverts. The overhead railway ran within about ten feet of the three buildings, which were, you know, one of the key – the junction of James Street and Mann Island had a bridge across there with the entire thing with a Whyte & Mackay’s whiskey advert, etc. And it was dirty; it was messy; it was scruffy; it was real. And the bit I do have a bit of an issue about the sort of – is that the perception of World Heritage is about this Disney image of things/.../ I mean, they’ve managed to turn St George’s Hall around, but it’s interesting, isn’t it? It’s easier for St George’s Hall to be plastered with banners than Mann Island. They will allow stuff on St George’s Hall that they won’t allow at Mann Island’

The general perception amongst the stakeholders interviewed was that a lack of promotion to the public and an emphasis on planning in the WHS management plan, at the expense of a wider educational and social vision, have resulted in a loss of the full potential of the image and place-making benefits of the award.

Additionally, when interviewees considered the relevance of the WHS within Liverpool’s regeneration, they felt that the profile of the WHS was depreciated while other events in the city were prioritised. When combined with increasing concern over the potential loss of the title in the face of development (as reflected in the media analysis summary), many stakeholders perceived the title to be restrictive of development.

2. Economic and political association with Liverpool Waters

As summarised by the stakeholder below, the lack of public awareness over the significance of the title has led to the WHS being commonly associated with restrictions on development. This has resulted in a polarised debate, locally, between those who prioritise heritage and those who prioritise development, with some stakeholders feeling that ‘never the twain will meet’.

Stakeholder 6: ‘you have to ask yourself the question, “What does it mean to people locally, and is it used effectively enough to actually make people, you know, really proud of their World Heritage Status, and understand what it really means?” And I would suggest that it’s not really, at all. And that then gives you a real polarisation of issues, doesn’t it, really? Because you’ve got – on one hand you’ve got, hopefully, international people, sort of, going, “I must go to Liverpool. It’s got World Heritage Status. Got to go and see that. You know, there’s something about it.” And yet, locally, you’ve got people that are, sort of, going, “Oh, well, what’s that? That’s something to do with stopping development and progress, and more jobs, and development, etc.” Yes, it’s a contributing factor to making large scale development that little bit more difficult, but in actual fact, if everybody locally had bought into World Heritage Status, I don’t think that would stop any necessary development that needs to take place. I think what it just helps, is people to understand that balance, and give it some support’

There tended to be more support of the award from stakeholders who originated from outside of the city, and also developers, who recognised the commercial value of heritage. This was because they could acknowledge that the title promotes and authenticates the uniqueness of Liverpool’s cultural heritage and provides it with a competitive advantage over many other cities in the UK and abroad, particularly in terms of the visitor economy. However, not all stakeholders shared this opinion, suggesting instead that the title has become a disadvantage to the city due to the restrictions it imposes on development.

Stakeholder 7: ‘I understand the development side of World Heritage Site and so the kind of brand and the promotion as well, kind of thing. And, so I was around when the city first bid for the award of World Heritage Site, and over that time, over those, kind of, early years, I have to be honest and say, it was seen more as of a hindrance really than of a very, kind of, benefit to the city.... So when developers came along, when development opportunities presented themselves, then we had to grab that and we had to make sure that we could make sure that that development came forward. And while we saw the benefits of, you know, being associated with the Pyramids of Giza and the Great Wall of China, that kind of stuff at a practical day to day level those benefits didn’t really manifest themselves’

Throughout the interviews, stakeholders found it difficult to discuss the title separately from development; not once were wider issues, such as of the potential educational and social benefits of the title, raised in discussion. A stakeholder with a community-led heritage project described how her company’s initiatives use the city’s cultural heritage both for educational and commercial purposes. However, the World Heritage title was not appropriated in marketing their activities either.

These findings support those from the media and promotional analysis undertaken by this study, confirming that the debate surrounding the WHS locally and nationally has been dominated by its

relationship with development in the city centre and on the waterfront. Therefore, when discussing the title, even for those supportive of the title, it was difficult to avoid discussing it in juxtaposition to the dominant narrative of growth and jobs associated with the Liverpool Waters project:

Stakeholder 3: ‘the current [WHS] debate about how valuable it is are almost utterly pointless because local people have no idea of the value, ‘cause nobody’s ever explained it to them. And it’s very, very disingenuous of anybody to say, “Local people would rather have the jobs that Peel would create” because a) what kind of jobs are they?’ Are they sustained jobs? Is this something that’s going to be of long term benefit to the city, because I would argue the World Heritage Site is of long term benefit to the city, in that its biggest future potential for revenue is from tourism, and you don’t very readily throw away one of your major tourist assets, just for short term gain, when the long term gains are being ignored. And it seems to me that that’s the risk that we’re running at the minute.’

In the view of some stakeholders, the limited promotion of the site to the public¹ has created a political vacuum in which the most vehement and entrenched opinions have managed to dominate the debate surrounding the meaning of World Heritage in the city. The poor level of public awareness about the site (or the lack of ‘WHS literacy’) was reflected by many of the stakeholders interviewed, and has resulted in a debate on the title that lacks nuance.

An interviewee from the press felt that there would have been even less public awareness of the title without the Liverpool Waters development, thus suggesting that, if nothing else, such controversy has at least heightened attention on the WHS and what it means for Liverpool. Others noted that there was a stalemate in the debate over the World Heritage Site and Liverpool Waters, with no substantive dialogue to bridge the two which has resulted in an accentuation of opposed views between the benefits of protecting heritage or encouraging new development.

¹ See stakeholders’ comments on the city’s official World Heritage website in Appendix B.

3. 'Show me the Figures'

A weak public awareness of the title has resulted in it being increasingly juxtaposed with development in terms of the contribution it makes to the local economy. Without any educational, cultural or social activities tied to the title in the minds of the local population, it is instead primarily evaluated in terms of its economic value (or in other words, heritage as commodity).

Yet, as a commodity that is difficult to grasp, the tendency is now to measure the title in terms of what it is seen to hinder (for example, the projected growth and jobs associated with the proposed Liverpool Waters project). As such, when asked about the significance of the title for the enterprise and business sector, many of the stakeholders interviewed were unable to provide evidence and asked, 'can you show me the figures?':

Stakeholder 8: 'I'm not saying it's a difficult – it's a difficult one to grasp, from a business perspective, because the temptation is to think, not really. It hasn't really. I can't think of instances of end users who have been attracted, business users who have been attracted as a result of World Heritage status ... I think that the benefit is more an associated one to the business community. In other words, I suppose I'm merging it in with the general benefit that it has for Liverpool, as opposed to directly having an impact on our business... Liverpool One has had a bigger impact than the Capital of Culture overall, as has the Echo Arena, which has been a fantastic facility, and you can argue that having those sort of facilities has probably, arguably, a greater impact than having World Heritage Status. I'm at a bit of a disadvantage, unless somebody can put figures in front of you and say, "This is what's happened since 2004" ...'

Stakeholders found it difficult to discuss the WHS without mentioning the Liverpool Waters proposal and the benefits this project is intended to bring. Whilst not initially sought only as a tool to market the city and encourage new development, the heritage title is thus evaluated by the majority of stakeholders on purely commercial grounds, despite a clear appreciation of the cultural and aesthetic value of heritage, together with its commercial potential.

Stakeholder 9: 'I'll be quite honest with you, I've been up here 12 years, and the only people I've heard banging on about World Heritage are people in the Council and, you know, "Well, it's a World" – and I've never heard any – I've never heard a guest. I've never heard anybody/.../I think Liverpool is probably one of the most politically correct cities that I've ever – well, served. But I don't know why they're not fundamentally, economically – those three buildings should not stop the economic growth of this city. And, you know, whether – I mean, they're beautiful. I mean, I was fortunate enough to go inside the Cunard Building. I mean, I've got pictures on my phone, I was so impressed. It's stunning in there. And now they're talking about making it into a five star hotel'

Some stakeholders felt that the strength of a few key brands in Liverpool, and the abundance of architectural heritage in the UK may, as the following quote suggests, undermine the value of the title:

Stakeholder 10: '...what the attraction to Liverpool is. And there is now far more embrace of the Beatles at the moment than there ever has been. And you – I'm not a salesman. Oh, I am, inadvertently I am, but when you're selling you use your USP, and that is – everybody knows that. And every city in the United Kingdom has architecture. Every city in the United Kingdom has heritage. Every city, most cities in the United Kingdom have a football team. There's only

one city in the United Kingdom that actually has the Beatles, and so that has to be your attack ground. It has to be....The fact [is] it outperforms every major brand in this city...'

Furthermore, contradictions were felt to exist surrounding the commercial value of the title, as a complement to other significant brands in the city. Here, the notion of cultural heritage and the title as a commodity was further evidenced.

Stakeholder 10: 'The Capital of Culture year overshadowed the World Heritage Site Status, and personally, for me, I was saying to people, you know, "You've got to focus on this World Heritage Site Status, it's enormous," because I was – I didn't have confidence really in the Capital of Culture people. I changed my mind. Well, my mind was changed for me, really, when I could see the impact that the Capital of Culture Status was making to Liverpool. It was phenomenal, and I don't think World Heritage Status even comes a close second to it, which, in some respects, is a bit sad for the work that went into the bid to become a World Heritage Site. And so, I did change my mind on that and, to be honest, to be brutally honest, I think World Heritage Status is an amazing claim for Liverpool to be able to make. But I think there are more important factors at play in the visitor industry than that, which has developed Liverpool into a global destination. And it's just another great ingredient, but I don't think, personally, it's key to the future of Liverpool. And I know that at the moment there's this debate over whether or not it will be taken away because of the redevelopment plans, and that is a tough call. It really is a tough call. Cruise liners coming into Liverpool, if there was one thing that sells that it is World Heritage Status because they actually dock on it, in it, see it, you know, and...'

The above quote reflects the development and maturation of the tourism industry in Liverpool around key brands such as the Albert Dock, the Beatles, football and the European Capital of Culture. While these are likely to continue to be major draws, some stakeholders agreed that the title, if used in connection with the forthcoming cruise liner terminal, is an ingredient that may draw more high-spending cultural tourists to Liverpool (Rebanks 2009).

According to data from England's Northwest Research Service², only two million of the total 30 million visitors to Liverpool in 2011 stayed in the city overnight. Hence, the commercial potential of the title could lie in its ability to bolster the number of overnight stays in the city by international visitors, and the associative benefits this would have on lengthening the average 'dwell time' of tourists. Yet, in light of the possibility that the city may lose the title, many stakeholders interviewed, including those who were very supportive of the title, are starting to envisage a visitor economy without it.

Stakeholder 11: 'But from our point of view we always thought WHS was a long-term thing particularly in terms of the tourism and leisure industry for the city. And, you know, it came up at the same time that we were coalescing all of our ideas, and that's collectively all the agencies, and a lot of big organisations, that the economic sector we're going to go for if we're going to be a city that has to compete in a global market for whatever, tourism, retail were two big planks.... so, that's why we've remained positive, I think, and you know, it still is a fantastic opportunity and if we lost it, it wouldn't be the end of the world because the assets we have are still here...and you could still sell them, but it's better – it just seems better if they are WHS, if we maximise the use of that, you know?'

² England's Northwest Research Service (2012) *Digest of Tourism Statistics*.

While general public awareness of the scale of the WHS and the reasons behind its designation are low (see Appendix E), there are signs that the appreciation of the city’s architectural heritage among city officials and numerous stakeholders has grown. Yet this appreciation, which developed in great part due to the designation process that catalogued and presented the city’s architectural heritage, did not automatically translate into a sentiment among stakeholders that protecting the title is imperative, because, as they put it, ‘the assets we have are still here’. Ironically, then, the emphasis on planning within the title bid and management plan, which raised awareness on the city’s architectural assets, may unwittingly have led to a situation in which stakeholders can comfortably envisage a future without the title, as city leaders reprioritise economic strategy in an age of austerity. As a result, if lost, the resources invested in attaining the title would prove to be its only long-term cultural and economic value to the city.

Once World Heritage status has been awarded to a site, UNESCO typically sits back and allows the state party to implement the site’s management plan and disseminate its cultural significance, unless it perceives the heritage assets to be under serious threat. It is in the dissemination of the site’s cultural significance, both locally and beyond, that Liverpool has failed thus far. Here, the Beatles brand may provide a useful comparison and example.

Stakeholder 10: ‘You know, all that was there. Everything was in place. All that somebody needed to do was come along and create the infrastructure to... introduce the world to it, you know, and that was the key to it. And, to be honest, you know, it’s been a long, slow and sometimes very difficult process, but it’s worked. And I think the fact that Liverpool has – as a destination, has developed gradually has been a good thing, because there’s been nothing that’s been destructive, really, that has failed to the extent that something has been attempted and has been a complete washout, and you could – there’s all sorts of examples of that all over Britain of schemes that have been introduced that just haven’t worked. The first big negative, I suppose – there were two negatives that were watersheds: one was the death of John Lennon, which was atrocious, but the reverse side of the coin for the death of John Lennon, it made people, not just in Liverpool but everywhere, realise what the world had lost. And as a result, it’s something – that actually sparked the development of a Beatles tourism industry in Liverpool, because it led to an influx of people wanting to come to Liverpool because of the Beatles, and that now has grown into an enormous, enormous market, probably in excess of a million people a year’

The slow appropriation of the title and the lack of understanding of UNESCO’s objectives may therefore be reflective of how the tourism sector has developed generally in the city, although the development of the Beatles brand suggests that more resources must be devoted to developing a heritage infrastructure, if the UNESCO brand and the site are to become accessible and embedded in the city’s identity.

Conclusions

Since its inscription onto the World Heritage List in 2004, the lack of resources invested in the promotion of the Liverpool WHS has ultimately been detrimental to its status in the city. This is reflected in stakeholders' knowledge of the site, both in terms of its scope and its designation. As a result – excluding those responsible for the direct promotion of the visitor economy or development in the city – stakeholders have not appropriated the title in their business activities and struggle to provide any examples of how it has impacted on their organisation or business sectors.

The weak promotion of the site is now officially recognised by many stakeholders, and is seen as a consequence of numerous intersecting factors, mainly the initial emphasis on planning within the management plan and city officials' preoccupation with delivering a successful European Capital of Culture in 2008. However, this reasoning may disguise a shortfall in will and/or strategy concerning the use of the title – a point raised by numerous stakeholders. For instance, the title was not actively used in the delivery of the European Capital of Culture, a brand which visitors to the city are significantly more aware of.³

Without any clear social, educational or cultural programme attached to the WHS, the stakeholders strongly associate the title with the restrictions it places on development, which undermines the regeneration narrative the city is eager to promote. Constantly juxtaposed in the press to development since its inscription (see Appendix B), the title is increasingly critiqued for its economic contribution. Yet, as some stakeholders note, the lack of nuance in media coverage surrounding the WHS has contributed to the polarisation the debate surrounding heritage and development, and strengthened the economistic character of the discourse within that debate.

³ LEP (2012) *Significant Brands – Liverpool City Region* (unpublished document).