

Cities – the engines of economic growth

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Kate Henderson reports on the IFHP International Annual International Conference 2008, 'Cultural Regeneration: The Return of the City', hosted by the Town & Country Planning Association (TCPA) and the Liverpool City Council and held in Liverpool at the beginning of June.

Experts from around the world met in Liverpool at the beginning of June to discuss how to regenerate cities, with a particular focus on culture, housing and design. The occasion for the meeting was the International Federation for Housing and Planning (IFHP) Conference, hosted by the TCPA and Liverpool City Council.



King's Dock Area, Liverpool

Opening the conference, Iain Wright MP, Under Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, praised Liverpool for its successful re-invention, which has built upon centuries of civic pride and a plethora of historic buildings (around 2,500 of which are listed). He urged conference delegates to 'marvel at the beautiful architecture' during their study tours of the city, and, describing cities as 'the engines of economic growth', he went on to note that the cultural and heritage-led regeneration of Liverpool has been successful in revitalising local communities, has raised the aspirations of the city, and has enhanced business and entrepreneurial activity.

The conference provided the housing and development world with a unique opportunity to view the achievements and capabilities of Liverpool, as it celebrates its 801st year and the accolade of being the 2008 European Capital of Culture.

City Council Leader Warren Bradley observed that co-hosting the IFHP Annual Conference was 'fantastic for the city. It is yet another event that puts Liverpool on the world stage. Liverpool is a very vibrant and exciting place with many good examples of best practice in both the planning and housing fields.'

The Rt Rev. James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool, gave an insightful and thought-provoking presentation about the language used by people who regenerate cities. He stressed the need to adopt the organic language of communities rather than using inorganic phrases such as 'levers and targets', which are often alien to many people. The Bishop argued that 'cities are struggling with 'urban diabetes'... the wealth of the city, the great prosperity at its heart, is not travelling to the outer regions, leading to great deprivation on the city's outskirts.' He also cautioned that 'excluded people left on the city margins must not be further segregated by gated wealthy communities'.

Cities drive national and regional economies and city centres drive cities was a key theme of Professor Michael Parkinson's talk. Professor Parkinson, Director of the European Institute for Urban Affairs at Liverpool John Moores University, highlighted the unprecedented prosperity that the UK's cities had enjoyed in the past decade, but warned of more challenging times ahead, especially in the North. He called for both 'optimism and realism'.

Looking at the North-South divide (also a theme of Professor Sir Peter Hall's keynote address), Professor Parkinson said that cities in the North and West are still more deprived than those in the South and East. Examining the relationship between skills and economic prosperity, he proposed that investment in intellectual infrastructure is fundamental to enabling the North to catch up with the South.

The second half of Professor Parkinson's presentation focused on Liverpool city centre and how its regeneration – cultural, physical, economic and political – is key to attracting and retaining qualified, highly skilled people. Liverpool Vision – a public-private partnership between Liverpool City Council, the Northwest Regional Development Agency, English Partnerships and the private sector – has led the regeneration of the city centre. Professor Parkinson believes that the secret to its success has been 'a robust national economy... and public funding'. A new challenge is now on the horizon for

Liverpool – for the city to sustain the progress it has already made, move from renaissance to competitiveness, and to spread regeneration beyond the city centre.

Another interesting view submitted to the conference by Des McConaghy on “The Framework and Frontiers of Expenditure Based Planning” set out a well constructed argument that in every programme area, a system was needed where expenditure plans could be related to other priority planning tasks across a region and, finally, become validated by Parliament as an input into national public expenditure surveys and annual Treasury budgets. It made a case for planners to be much closer in their work to resource planning as well as to land use planning.

Looking back to Liverpool 40 years ago, TCPA Chief Executive Gideon Amos compared the context and challenges of the city in 1968 to today’s issues – both obstacles and opportunities. In the late 1960s Liverpool’s public buildings bore dirty smudges remnant of an industrial era, and the city suffered from an abundance of redundant infrastructure – the Albert Dock, for example, quickly became too small for the large ships of the time. The city also suffered from planning for significant population and jobs growth which failed to materialise, and only now is the population starting to rise. Under a new, bold vision for Liverpool, a better environment is being created for the city centre: the architectural heritage is being conserved, the docks – with the successful regeneration of the Albert Dock – are being connected to the retail centre, and bold new buildings are making a return. Referring to a 1960s study, Gideon Amos said: ‘At this time people didn’t want to live in high-rise high-density flats. We see the same theme today as in the 1960s: people want to live in homes with gardens.’

Placing Liverpool back in the wider context of the UK, Professor Sir Peter Hall’s presentation asked ‘The return of whose city?’. Painting a complicated geographical picture, Sir Peter described three divides: the North-South divide, stemming from the 1930s; the ‘core cities’ such as Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle versus the rest of the North since the 1990s; and a new divide that has emerged since 2000, between the ‘core city’ centres and their respective isolated inner city estates. He highlighted the extreme deprivation still experienced on the edge of many cities, where much of the population is residualised by long-term socio-economic change. He explained that no-one wants to live in places where there is no economy. He also stressed the need for much better transport links. In concluding his presentation, Professor Hall summarised the key theme of the regeneration conference as a whole – however difficult, each place needs a bespoke solution.

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