



EUROPEAN
association
Historic Towns & Regions

**SUIT INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM
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“Investing in Heritage”

Presentation by Brian Smith, Secretary General

1. Background

I have followed the development of the SUIT project with interest and I am delighted to be invited to speak at this international colloquium as the project nears its completion.

The SUIT project aims to assist municipalities in the sustainable management of their cultural heritage and historic environments and it is therefore crucial that the conclusions of this important body of research is widely disseminated to the “user” community, namely historic towns across Europe. The European Association of Historic Towns and Regions is in a unique position to assist in this and to contribute to the final stages of the project through participation in the Symposium.

For those of you who are new to the European Association of Historic Towns and Regions, a very brief history. The Council of Europe created EAHTR in October 1999 as part of its campaign “Europe – a Common Heritage”. 12 historic towns associations have joined so far as well as individual historic towns amounting in total to some 904 cities and municipalities.

The aim of EAHTR is to promote the interests of Europe’s historic towns and regions. Its objectives include the promotion of international co-operation between heritage organisations and between historic towns. Our mission is to share experience and good practice wherever possible and to promote vitality, viability and the sustainability of Europe’s historic towns and cities.

2. Introduction

I have chosen as the theme for my contribution to this plenary session the importance of “Investing in Heritage” as a key element in regenerating historic

urban areas. The structure of my presentation will explore why heritage led regeneration is important with brief references to case studies in Gothenburg, Sweden, Verona, Italy and Grainger Town, Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK. I will draw out key lessons or characteristics of successful heritage led regeneration reflecting the views and conclusions of practitioners in the field and conclude with the relevance of this work to the SUIT Project.

3. Why Heritage Led Regeneration?

European historic towns are the context within which much of the world's cultural heritage is experienced and enjoyed. They tell a story of the social, economic and physical evolution of Europe and are home of some of the finest examples of architectural expression in the world.

Sustainable management of our historic towns must rely upon the protection of historic urban areas – and that protection requires heritage to be valued and its potential exploited.

EAHTR believes that there is now a growing body of evidence that conservation and sustainable management of the historic environment can lead to both the social and economic regeneration of historic centres. We have formed a small group of key cities from our membership to examine in detail the underlying processes, which have contributed to successful heritage led regeneration. This group of cities is called "INHERIT" and was formed as a consequence of a conference organised last year in Newcastle, UK. By the City Council and EAHTR

The aim of INHERIT is to produce tangible and useful outputs that will give guidance and reflect and meet the needs of end users and decision-makers within municipalities on how to achieve successful regeneration through investing in heritage. The initial cities working together are Gothenburg, Verona, Grainger Town and Belfast – very diverse cities but with a common commitment to using cultural heritage as the primary economic and social regenerator of the city.

Gothenburg, Sweden

It is not so long ago, in the 1960's, where the sight of irreplaceable cultural heritage being demolished was commonplace across European cities and Gothenburg was no exception. Faced with the challenge of responding to a fundamental structural change in its economy with the collapse of the ship building industry however, Gothenburg turned to a local authority led strategy of investing in its cultural heritage as a main plank of its regeneration.

Through a grants led incentive scheme to encourage private investment the city council has achieved a major transformation of the centre with 50%

reduction in city centre traffic and a significant increase in residential accommodation. The local distinctiveness of key city districts such as Haga and Vasa have formed the basis of vibrant new quarters bringing social and economic benefit to the city as a whole.

Verona, Italy

In the case of Verona, a world heritage city, the current challenge is how to maintain those aspects of its cultural heritage, which have no direct economic return. As an important fortified city, it is developing new mechanisms to tackle the future use of its military architecture within the context of a regeneration strategy that protects and reuses buildings across the whole of the city centre and beyond.

For example, a new department UVAM is being created to stimulate an integrated view of the “whole system” building on past successes of managing its cultural heritage in relation to its interpretation, employment prospects and management opportunities.

Grainger Town, Newcastle - UK

Grainger Town is the old centre of Newcastle upon Tyne in the north east of England. The key issues facing the City Council were the migration of commercial and residential users from the heart of the city.

The solution here was to create a public private partnership working within regeneration themes that covered quality of environment, business development and enterprise, housing, access to opportunity, arts culture and tourism and lastly management, marketing and promotion.

The overall objective was to create a dynamic European regional capital. The achievements of this initiative can now be seen on the ground where 1900 jobs have been created, 200 new business start ups, almost 400 additional private dwellings as well as 136 housing association properties brought into the city centre. The public sector investment involved amounted to some £40 million but produced as a consequence a further £80 million investment from the private sector.

4. Investing in Heritage – main themes and lessons

These and other case studies in Turin and Santiago de Compostela were examined and evaluated by a wide range of delegates at the conference in Newcastle last year. The themes and conclusions were grouped into 4 broad areas.

Importance of Context

The first overarching principal was that context was central to successful regeneration. By this was meant that for cities and towns to be successful in regenerating their town through investing in heritage, there had first to be a sense of pride in that town or city and an understanding of its distinctiveness. Not just in terms of architecture but also recognising the importance of the historic street pattern to the character of the town or city. Context was also felt to be very important in designing new buildings within historic areas where it was crucial that architects and designers understood and took account of the context within which they were designing.

Socio – economic Benefits

The second overarching lesson about successful heritage regeneration related to the importance of social and economic considerations. The importance of ensuring a social mix of people in the centre of our historic cities was underlined. The economic benefits of investing in heritage were also clear from the many examples presented to the conference, not just in terms of tourism, which of course is important, but also the skilled employment that is nurtured and developed as a consequence of investing in the heritage. Many delegates stressed the importance of recognising that investment had to be profitable and that this was possible, thereby attracting private investment and securing regeneration.

Working in Partnership

The theme of partnership was considered central to successful heritage regeneration, not just in terms of community involvement but also including all stakeholders in decisions. Different approaches of how to work together were examined with a common experience that building consensus was crucial; that sharing experiences were essential and that an integrated approach to managing partnerships brought real benefits.

Essential Qualities

Lastly, delegates underlined the importance of the less tangible qualities that contributed to success. These included “understanding”; from the designer understanding the context of a new building, to the municipality understanding the needs of the private sector through to the need for understanding between partners. Developing shared values was seen as crucial – not just copying other people’s experiences but developing these to fit with particular local circumstances.

Lastly, 3 further qualities could be seen in all the successful projects that were presented. These were the central need for commitment from all parties to be

sustained over time; for towns and cities to aspire to the highest standards and for everyone involved to be prepared to take risks and embrace innovation.

5. Conclusions

The work of EAHTR aims to reflect the priorities and needs of the “user community” within historic cities, i.e. the practitioners and decision makers. We believe that investing in heritage is central to regenerating Europe’s historic cities and is key to achieving cultural diversity, civic pride and identity, social well being as well as economic prosperity.

As I have said the themes that have emerged in terms of the characteristics found in successful heritage led regeneration include the importance of “context” in making decisions about the historic environment; the understanding and acceptance of the socio-economic benefits and impact; the crucial importance of working in partnership and of involving the community and lastly, the essential qualities of shared values and commitment sustained over time.

There is I believe, a clear correlation in these conclusions drawn by practitioners in the field and the research findings of SUIT in terms of: -

- Promoting private action through public strategy and public private partnerships
- The significance of conservation of cultural heritage in social and economic terms
- The importance of public leadership in securing co-ordinated results and sustainable solutions.

I look forward to contributing at this Symposium, on behalf of EAHTR, to the final conclusions of the SUIT project in order to try to ensure that its environmental assessment methodology and guidance meet the needs of and is widely disseminated to Europe’s historic cities. I believe the SUIT project is potentially very important to the future of Europe’s historic cities and will underline and support the crucial importance for generations to come of investing now in our cultural heritage.

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