

A reprieve for Lancaster

As the proposed redevelopment of the city comes under welcome scrutiny, Ptolemy Dean offers his own ideas for regeneration



A city of rich and visible history: centuries of development around two ancient thoroughfares make up Lancaster's unique character

THE news that English Heritage is to 'call in' the proposed redevelopment of a swathe of central Lancaster to Public Enquiry is very welcome indeed. This is apparently the first such 'call-in' in the North-West since 2001, a reflection of the widespread opposition that the scheme has provoked (see *COUNTRY LIFE*, November 5, 2008). Should the developers have their way, a historic quarter of the city will be flattened for a large shopping precinct. Such an approach follows the unreformed 1960s formula for comprehensive redevelopment that is as outmoded as it is insensitive.

If this disastrous proposal can be stopped, then there is a golden opportunity for something better to come in its place. That alternative must have at its heart the rejuvenation of what is there is now. Rather than wiping the slate clean and starting again, we must try to understand how this particular section of city developed in the first place. There might then be some chance of appreciating its strengths and reviving it for the future.

Reusing old buildings must make obvious economic and environmental sense, as well as hopefully preserving Lancaster's unique sense of history and identity. Rather than merely finding another commercial developer, the city should engage an architect with experience in dealing with old buildings to review the site and develop a new vision that enhances what is already there. Perhaps an architectural competition would stimulate discussion and ideas? Once the overall vision is in place, then the development can follow.

As in any piece of old town, there are two main ingredients: the basic pattern of the streets and the sequence of buildings along them. As towns develop and evolve over a very long period of time, the factors that shape a place provide its fundamental character and unique 'DNA'. No two historic towns are alike, and, once lost, they can rarely successfully be remade. This is why what is there now needs to be treated with such care.

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Lancaster makes a rewarding study. A plan of 1610 shows the present development site bounded by two ancient thoroughfares that came together to form the attractive angled corner that survives to this day. In the early 19th century, Lancaster was extended to the south with wide new streets in the Georgian New Town tradition of cities such as Bath, Edinburgh, Exeter and Liverpool. The new streets formed an irregularly sized open 'square' in front of the old angled corner.

Aware that this place was quite special, the Victorian city fathers placed an ornamental water fountain and street light in the centre of it, which still survive. The addition of a canal beyond the square prompted an increasingly industrial development of warehouses and factories along narrow secondary streets between the old routes. It is this contrast of

the industrial alleyways with the generosity of the Georgian streets beyond that gives this part of Lancaster such character.

The buildings reflect this evolution entirely. Some early-17th-century houses survive with Georgian and Victorian frontages on the two ancient routes. Old houses have become shops, and there are large warehouses and an old brewery in between. The visual result of this slow growth is a rich and dense townscape of haphazard streets, picturesque building groups and unexpected views. There are also some gaping holes and gaps where buildings have been lost or poor modern buildings inserted. Heart surgery is certainly required, but not a total bypass. Enough remains of this special place to piece it back together.

The buildings and street pattern are irreplaceable. Once they're repaired and revived, the character they impart will continue to make Lancaster unique. It won't simply be another shopping town. Shops, homes and workplaces can be fitted into the mix, together with cultural buildings that serve the status of what is also a county and university town.

The town is united by a common use of the local sandstone, richly cut and detailed on the grander buildings and raw and rough on the old factories. With careful repair of the buildings, on an individual basis, this part of the city will revive, much as it always has historically, and become once more a living town where people will want to live. It is this richness and historic diversity that the dead, reinforced-concrete hand of comprehensive development can never hope to achieve. 🐦