

REGENERATION IN GRAINGER TOWN NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

Abstract

Grainger Town is the City's historic core, a testament to Richard Grainger, who, in the 19th century, created a town based on three elegant streets of 'Tyneside Classical' architecture.

By 1992, many had abandoned the area, leaving it in a state of serious decline. A bold regeneration strategy was developed in 1997 to re-establish Grainger Town as a dynamic and competitive location.

Grainger Town Project (1997-2003) was a £120m heritage regeneration programme, which successfully applied a conservation planning approach designed to complement the historical character of the area. It strengthened Grainger Town as a mixed-use historic urban quarter and created a high quality environment.

A depressing quarter with an uncertain future has been transformed into a thriving central area.

The Challenge

Grainger Town is the historic heart of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne. Covering approximately 36 hectares, it comprises a complex mix of offices, retail, residential, leisure and cultural uses. Its name is a testament to Richard Grainger who between 1835 and 1842 created a new town based on three long, elegant streets, amongst them Grey Street, recently voted the UK's favourite street.

The area also includes medieval streets and churches, a 13th century Dominican Friary, remnants of the old Town Wall and some fine Victorian buildings. Virtually all of Grainger Town is within Newcastle's Central Conservation Area, 40% of the 640 buildings having special architectural or historic interest, and 12% listed with grade I status.

However, although once Newcastle's prime office location and main shopping area, population declined throughout the 20th century, whilst development of the Eldon Square Shopping Centre and redevelopment of the Quayside led to the migration of many of the larger shops and offices to more modern premises. By the early 1990s Grainger Town was in serious decline and exhibiting all the classic symptoms of urban decay:

- nearly 1 million sq ft (100,000 sq m) of commercial floor space lay vacant;

- major structural problems were prevalent with 47% of listed buildings classed “at risk” compared with 7% nationally;
- a weak property market;
- traffic congestion and limited parking provision;
- a very poor environment and low standards of public realm;
- a lack of developer, investor and occupier confidence.

Developing a strategy

The Project was based on a substantial piece of historical research, The Grainger Town Study, which was commissioned from The Conservation Practice by English Heritage and Newcastle City Council in 1992. The study aimed to examine the problems and causes of underuse and fabric decay and to identify a new economic role for the area, which was compatible with the conservation of its historic fabric. The emphasis was on maximising the protection and regeneration of the historic environment, building on its inherent quality.

Subsequently, in 1996 consultants EDAW were commissioned to produce a coherent regeneration strategy for Grainger Town that was used to prepare a bid for Government funding. The Grainger Town Project, led by the Grainger Town Partnership, was established in 1997 to progress this strategy, and attracted £40m of public funding from English Partnerships (One NorthEast), the SRB Challenge Fund, English Heritage, Newcastle City Council and Tyneside TEC (Tyne and Wear Learning and Skills Council). A target was set to attract an additional £80m of investment from the private sector.

It was recognised that Grainger Town represented a complex urban system and that its revival must be tackled in a holistic way which respected its fine grain. Programmes were therefore developed around the seven inter-related regeneration themes of business development and enterprise, commercial development, access to opportunity, housing, quality of environment, arts, culture and tourism, and management, marketing and promotion.

The overall challenge was to develop the area for modern day usage whilst ensuring that its special character was retained and enhanced.

A central aim was to improve and enhance the area’s physical environment, primarily by restoring and conserving the architectural heritage whilst complementing this with essential improvements to the public realm. 121 buildings were brought back into use during

the Project's lifetime for a range of commercial, retail and residential uses.

Early Wins developed confidence

Milestone projects included the restoration and transformation of the French Renaissance style Union Rooms into a Wetherspoon's pub and the refurbishment of the former Binns department store creating "the Bond Street of Newcastle". The removal of inappropriate canopies and introduction of high quality shopfronts more in keeping with the buildings above also helped enormously in enhancing the vertical landscape.

At an early stage, the City Council's successful use of Compulsory Purchase powers enabled work to begin on the extensive rehabilitation of 2-12 Grey Street, a well-known and prominent decaying building at the foot of Grainger's finest streets, semi-derelict for almost 20 years. Again, a Public Inquiry held in February 2003 confirmed the CPO for a major mixed use development on East St James Boulevard in June 2003, enabling the full scheme to go ahead.

An ethos of quality was created early on in the Project through a number of demonstration projects, including public realm works, the restoration of landmark buildings, location marketing and the publication of "Investing in Quality" and "Living in Quality" handbooks. This resulted in increased confidence in the area, which in turn attracted more inward investment.

In the early stages of the Project, developers were reluctant to invest in residential property in the area, given the low rental and property values prevalent at the time. Housing Associations acted as trail blazers for the process of converting listed buildings, often severely dilapidated or with technical problems such as difficult access, within budget. In the third year of the Project, Housing Associations took the lead in converting empty floors above the shops for residential use.

In the fourth year, the 'Living Over the Shop' scheme, the largest in the UK, developed, making use of valuable floor space on upper floors. Several housing schemes for rent started and Grainger Town's role as a residential quarter was revived. The scheme successfully rescued prominent listed buildings that were previously 'at risk', with the result that large areas were rescued and given a new lease of life.

Overall the Project created over 300 new flats and apartments. With the forthcoming completion of ongoing schemes, the number of residential units created by the Project will rise to almost 400.

Environmental Improvements – investment in quality

In 1998, the Partnership appointed Gillespies Consultancy to carry out a study to identify opportunities to improve streets and spaces in Grainger Town. The study considered an urban design framework for street furniture and opportunities for public art and lighting schemes.

As a result, the Project funded major improvements to the public realm, incorporating pedestrianisation, laying of Caithness stone paving with granite kerbs and the introduction of new bespoke street furniture. The focus was on achieving a high-quality, durable environment. The improvements have been well regarded and have helped to increase business confidence in the area, as well as enhancing the spaces bringing life and vibrancy to the area.

The Project also installed CCTV cameras, which together with the subscription of new Grainger Town retailers to the City Link radio scheme, contributed to the City Centre Crime Prevention Panel earning the British Retail Consortium's Safer Shopping Award.

A grant scheme for shop-front improvements was set up, which resulted in the removal of 1960s shop canopies and the introduction of high quality shopfronts more in keeping with the buildings above and has reinforced architectural integrity and consistency.

A range of artwork and lighting schemes was designed and installed. Engraved glass, granite and stainless steel benches light up throughout the area at night, and acrylic images of Earl Grey's head, recessed into the plinth of Grey's Monument, are illuminated in various colours.

Creative lighting was installed beneath the colonnades of the City's Theatre Royal creating the impression of a theatre curtain and highlighting one of the main cultural venues of the area. Feature lighting was installed to emphasise key buildings on Grey Street and the area's churches.

Art pieces include bronze statues, a bronze 3D map adjacent to the Central railway station and a memorial plaque commemorated to Richard Grainger. In May 2002, a statue to Cardinal Basil Hume, set in an area of open space, was unveiled adjacent to the City's

Catholic Cathedral. A ceremonial arch for the Chinese community has been commissioned for the City's China Town area.

As part of the Project's Forward Strategy, a maintenance charter was agreed by One North East, Newcastle City Council and the Grainger Town Board, setting out levels of maintenance post-completion of the Project for all investment in the public realm, including paving, artwork and lighting schemes.

Partnership success – involving the community

Unique to Grainger Town has been the investment placed in the Project's support framework, with considerable effort made to engage as wide a range of partners as possible, thereby increasing ownership of the regeneration process.

The Grainger Town Partnership was a company limited by guarantee. Its Board of 20 directors comprised six City councillors, six representatives nominated by the various public agencies, six from the private sector and two Grainger Town residents. Their skills and expertise were successfully shared to maximise development opportunities and to ensure quality by design. Six Expert Panels were set up, widening further the expertise and experience base. A Residents Forum and a Business Forum met on a monthly basis to give their views prior to Board meetings. In total over 90 stakeholders were engaged through the various panels and fora.

The innovative step of arranging for members of the various panels and the business and residents fora to visit best practice regeneration schemes in other UK and European cities, not only added value to the regeneration process by increasing the community's ability to participate, and by raising aspirations of just what could be achieved, but also strengthened links between the Project Team and the business and residential communities, helping to ensure that improvements are sustained. Additionally, educational packs, covering all key stages of the national curriculum, have been produced, to inform children of the architectural and historical significance of Grainger Town and encourage them to take pride in their city.

An Urban Design Panel was established, linking Board Directors and the Project Team with leading professionals and academics in the city to broaden the skills base and share the responsibility for setting and maintaining quality standards. The Panel assessed all major development schemes, including public realm and shop-front

improvements, prior to Board consideration. This approach helped to set and achieve high quality standards.

The role of the Project Team

The Project Team played an important role in urging developers to consider the long term value of investing in quality, and to settle the 'conservation versus development' argument once and for all. Members of the team worked hard to persuade developers that retaining quality buildings made good financial sense, and produced a publication entitled 'Investing in Quality' to reinforce the message. It provided advice and assistance on all aspects of the regeneration of Grainger Town, including how to deal with the problems and complexities of historic buildings and by acting as an intermediary between developers and funding agencies.

The team administered the Shop-front Improvement Grant Scheme and advised and supported financially hundreds of businesses through the Grainger Town Business Support Fund, encouraging businesses not only to locate into the area, but also to develop and expand. It also worked closely with Project North East, a pioneering enterprise agency, to convert 6-storey Victorian buildings, previously in very poor condition, into space for small businesses, with impressive results. Altogether, 286 businesses were created together with 1400 jobs.

Grant aid was distributed through the Arts and Culture Programme to fund events throughout Grainger Town, and to support the area's many cultural venues. The Partnership supported a wide range of innovative and highly successful events, including a fashion show to promote local retailers by providing a preview of the season's collections, and to support the local Sunshine Fund charity. The latter, hailed as Newcastle's fashion event of the year, was jointly organised by the Grainger Town Project and the City Centre Manager, and was sponsored by local businesses. The success of the event gave Grainger Town retailers a real lift.

The Project's annual 'Streets Alive Festival' of street theatre and various musical and theatrical events at different venues enhanced the attractiveness and prosperity of Grainger Town, resulting in an improved ambience.

Record of Success

The Project's successes have increasingly been noticed in regeneration circles, with Grainger Town featuring prominently in English Heritage's "Power of Place" publication. In 2003, it was

awarded a top European prize for Cultural Heritage, the RTPI Silver Jubilee Cup and Best Completed Project by the Association of Town Centre Management.

Grainger Town has demonstrated how a historic environment can play a vital role in the life of a City. The project was set within a wider context than just the details of buildings; it included the economic and social well-being of the area, giving the area a clear identity. The magnificent architectural heritage received the care and attention it deserved, underpinned and sustained by a transformation in the way the area is used.