

A solution to Derry's economic woes?

In this article, Mary Kerrigan, Education Officer with the Walled City Partnership in Derry, says the city is not making enough of the potential of its built heritage.

ANYONE living and working in the walled city knows just how quiet it is most of the time.

The news that Derry is the UK's unemployment black spot shouldn't be a surprise.

But the news is shocking, especially just three months after the success of UK City of Culture 2013.

It seems regeneration through the cultural arts hasn't quite provided the recipe for sustained economic recovery expected. It seems completely hopeless but maybe there's a more sustainable solution.

The absence of any real focus on built heritage within the UK City of Culture 2013 bid was perplexing for anyone interested in that sort of thing. The programme focused on people, not buildings. But buildings serve people's needs. The world around us reflects the culture of everyone, past and present - what's important and what's not.

How this city looks and feels is an expression of our culture. Unfortunately this wasn't seen as valid culture at all.

So what? Well, when money for the dancing, singing and big events is gone, built and natural heritage is the real lasting cultural legacy.

Research by international destination consultants, Colliers International, for English Heritage, found collections of old buildings, streets, squares and gardens, can generate ten times greater economic return than a single landmark heritage building. Wow!

What makes a place special enough to achieve that? Bath, Chester and Kilkenny spring to mind. Is Derry in that league? Could it be?

The 1609 Regional Plan for Ulster created twenty three new towns. You'll know an Ulster Plantation town if its central space is called 'The Diamond' - even though it's not 'diamond' shaped!

This collection of urban heritage is unique in the UK and Ireland. Of the twenty three, the walled city is the jewel in the crown. Why's that? Is it all about the city walls? No.

Derry's walled city is the very first piece of true urban planning on the island of Ireland. It's the only one of the twenty three whose streets are laid out on a formal grid - something dating from Roman military planning.



Shipquay Street is one of the most historic streets in Derry but has many empty business premises.

The roots of this approach are visible in the ruins of Pompeii. This is a very big deal.

Derry's grid pattern established the street lines. Over the next three centuries or so, joined up buildings of all kinds, filled in the building lines, making the townscape we see today. The end result is Derry's most special and important cultural heritage asset. Of Ulster, but also European and classical, the walled city, enclosed by its walls is unique in the UK, Ireland - and the world. Now that is truly special.

The transformed Guildhall attracted 200,000 visitors in six months.

If the whole walled city (not just the walls) got the marketing prominence its significance deserves, then this could translate into two million visitors in the same six months. Wouldn't that make a difference to the footfall in the walled city? Wouldn't that go a long way towards sustaining local businesses?

At least 26 walled city ground floor properties are empty - and 112 in inner city streets.

Property owners' low confidence that their investments will turn into viable commercial businesses, is the greatest

obstacle to saving this unique heritage.

This is jeopardising completion of Northern Ireland's most successful Walled City Townscape Heritage Initiative at the walled city.

The potential for job growth through heritage in Derry is huge. Scotland's heritage environment generates 12 jobs per 1000 people. In Northern Ireland it is 3 per 1000. Department of Finance and Personnel statistics for the NI construction industry (2005-2013) reveal new build going steadily downhill, while repair and maintenance holds its own.

Yet Derry has a severe skills deficit in traditional building and heritage management skills. These are sustainable, satisfying, exportable skills. With 14% of Derry's 18-24 year olds unemployed and 100 buildings at risk in our three conservation areas alone, the solution is staring us in the face.

Walled City Partnership firmly believes that unlocking the walled city's terminal economic decline and ensuring a lasting cultural legacy is reliant on:

1 - Urgent removal of barriers to direct



Derry could have the tourist potential of a city such as Chester.

pedestrian flow from the Peace Bridge into the Walled City caused by the Foyle Embankment's 'kit of parts' and fast moving cars. This is seen by internationally renowned 'Space Syntax' movement analysts as the single action necessary to reverse

the walled city's economic decline.

2 - A serious commitment by all agencies and citizens to prioritising the rescue, repair and re-use of Derry's entire collection of old buildings at risk, large and small (including the old train station).

3 - Development of a high calibre traditional building and heritage management skills base.

4 - Ensuring future city developments do not undermine the unique walled city cultural heritage asset.