

revisiting the

PAST

Reusing existing buildings on brownfield sites gives 'new' developments much-needed personality, argues Raymond Smith.

The Urban White Paper, launched last autumn argued that "re-using existing buildings is important not only for revitalising declining urban areas but also for sustainable development".

And, across the country, the varied nature of projects that have been undertaken or planned shows the potential for successful reuse.

At one extreme is Liverpool Vision's plan for the King's Waterfront area, based on its bid for World Heritage Site status. But, less dramatically, it is also keen to create a 'Cultural Quarter' in the once-prosperous 19th century buildings nearer to the city centre.

Similarly, Sheffield One, another of the three pilot Urban Regeneration Companies, believes that "the city needs to celebrate its heritage through the sensitive refurbishment and reuse of its impressive listed buildings".

The experience of Manchester shows that buildings can be reused for a variety of clients. Urban Splash has made a name for itself meeting the needs of the 'cool' younger generation.

Elsewhere in the city, Ician, a new partnership between AMEC Developments and Crosby Homes, is working in the Northern Quarter, with its reputation for laid-back bohemianism. It has just started work on the list-

ed Smithfield Fish Market building. This originally had a glass roof, so only the main facades are being preserved, within which a new structure will accommodate a dozen apartments – in other words, a gutted fish market.

This forms part of a mixed-use scheme which Ician believes "is on its way to being the UK's first urban renaissance development to follow the guidelines set out by the government's Urban White Paper".

The preservation of buildings of architectural or historical merit can provide a 'new' development with an established personality, as well as a vital competitive edge compared with sites that started with a blank sheet.

The Phoenix Trust, part of the Prince of Wales Foundation, aims "to repair and find new uses for major historic buildings which are in danger of falling into decay or facing demolition, for the benefit of the communities in which they stand".

Finding viable uses is the key to ensuring preservation. It is something the Trust has achieved at Stanley Mills in Perth. The core of this complex of water-powered cotton mills, which dates from 1787, has become a visitor centre. The remaining blocks, which were built of local sandstone around 1800, have been converted into flats, houses and maisonettes.

More challenging is the Penallta Colliery, north of Cardiff. This was built in 1906 and the Trust says it "was considered one of the most important and advanced collieries of the day". In conjunction with Groundwork Caerphilly, an environmental regeneration charity, the Trust proposes to create a mix of offices and apartments in the restored listed structures. The drama of the large engine hall will be maintained by forming an 'internal street' to access apartments, and so leave the exterior relatively unchanged.

Site values are, however, critical to successful reuse. They must be high enough to pay for the conversion. In marginal cases, the Urban White Paper's encouragement of conversion of redundant space over shops into flats for letting may help. The total cost of the tax incentives to the government, however, is not high, and is unlikely to make much difference.

Another problem is that high land values can create temptations for higher intensity development than is possible with reuse. For example, a Georgian terrace that missed being listed, but which architectural conservation group Save Britain's Heritage believes most London boroughs would cherish, is in the process of being demolished by Westminster Council.

But he thinks this is gradually changing. "In the past three or four years things have improved and some people have gone to great lengths to preserve this original detail."

Demolition contractors are unlikely to be short of work while brownfields are being developed.

Nevertheless, from the massive award-winning Magna Science Centre in an old Rotherham steel works, to a million-pound conversion of a Victorian water works to a single house on the Surrey Downs, there is plenty of scope for reusing existing buildings.

But how effective are conversions in general at preserving our cultural heritage?

Charles Brooking, an architectural historian from the University of Greenwich, says: "If one can find a new use, it is marvellous. The problem is that, because of draconian fire regulations and today's very different needs, the original character inside is often lost – a lot of the internal features go."

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The old Smithfield Fish Market in Manchester's Northern Quarter is being redeveloped by AMEC and Crosby Homes, while the Phoenix Trust has helped transform a dilapidated cotton mill in Perth, (inset) which dates from the 18th century.