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[Opinion] 376

[Quote as header] “We all work with and in the same built environment. So why does it often feel like we are talking about fundamentally different things?”

[Byline] Carolyn Gibbeson is assistant professor in real estate at Northumbria University

[Body]

Planning and real estate are forward-looking disciplines, concerned with finding new uses for sites and buildings. Students of both are professionally trained to embrace this forward thinking through assessing planning policies, exploring what communities need and identifying demand for a particular type of use or building.

However, identifying the historic significance of our built environment is largely the domain of heritage professionals. As a result of their professional training, each discipline naturally gains a selectivity or bias which can lead to conflict between stakeholders.

Yet we all work with and in the same built environment. So why does it often feel like we are talking about fundamentally different things?

Perhaps in some ways we are. Typically, developers focus on economic value and demand; planners on policy, design and law; and heritage professionals on significance and the potential ‘harm’ any redevelopment poses.

Conflict arises as each party highlights their area of focus while trying to reach consensus on what should happen with a site. Add the often publicly controversial nature of heritage development and an abundance of meanings and values will surround a single site.

Development or redevelopment occurs at the point where these values and meanings collide and are negotiated. But they may change over time and at different speeds, too, depending on who is looking. Broadly, the community may remember a former use or seek to protect a particular part of the historic nature of a site; planners know what a site is designated for; and a developer identifies the use that will generate the most demand and value.

An awareness of this lack of homogeneity is key to finding a more constructive way through proposed heritage redevelopments. An understanding of stakeholders and their motives and of sites and their histories will help to identify the investment that each group holds in that site. This would also enable a wider history of a site to be investigated, rather than a narrow view of a particular part of its history.

If parties engage in the past, present and future, a more critical discussion of the site should be possible. In turn this would allow wider conversations about what happens to our historic built environment, involving each group of stakeholders without compromising the ability to make decisions.