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## The (incremental) renaissance of the historic city of Durham

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**The UK historic city of Durham is considered by policy-makers to be the 'jewel in the crown' in terms of economic potential for a county that has struggled to find a niche role following the collapse of coalmining. Perceived through the eyes of a local practitioner, this paper takes a look at how a networked ensemble of actors are responding to the economic recession and planning for the upturn. The paper examines the role of place quality improvements administered through the delivery of a city masterplan to stitch together the historic city fabric with a contemporary urban aesthetic. Through the case of the (incremental) renaissance of Durham city, it is suggested that a sensitive multilayered development approach underpinned by deliberative democracy is required that responds to the needs of everyday users and local inhabitants.**

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Historic cities have a crucial role to play in the social, cultural and economic development of post-industrial landscapes (Doratli *et al.*, 2004; English Heritage, 2005; Gilderbloom *et al.*, 2009; Ren, 2008; Tiesdell *et al.*, 1996; Wilson, 2004). The preservation and restoration of historical space can produce a 'heritage dividend' (English Heritage, 1999) in cultural and economic regeneration. The term 'heritagisation' has been coined to refer to the recommodification of such assets. In this paper attention is drawn to the historic city of Durham, situated in the North East of England (see Figure 1), which is considered by a networked ensemble of policy actors to be the 'jewel in the crown' in terms of economic potential for a county that has struggled to find a niche role following the collapse of coalmining (Durham County Council, 2009). (Note: The term 'a networked ensemble of actors' is here applied to describe the fluid coming-together of different individuals and organisations to champion a shared cause.)

A commonly held view by local and regional policy-makers is that Durham city possesses significant untapped potential as a world class visitor destination, cultural centre and space of consumption. Such ambition is reflected in Durham's recently launched draft cultural strategy supporting its bid to become UK Capital of Culture in 2013 (DCC, 2009c). Perceived through the eyes of a local practitioner, this paper takes a look at how a networked ensemble of actors in Durham are responding to the economic recession and planning for the upturn. The paper

examines the role of place quality improvements administered to stitch together the historic city fabric with a contemporary urban aesthetic, making the case that place-shaping should respond to the needs of everyday users and local inhabitants. This is done by first briefly venturing into Durham county's and city's rich historical legacy, as a means to situate it spatially and economically. The role and motivations of Durham city Vision are then examined– the networked ensemble of actors spearheading its renaissance ambitions – with a particular focus on place quality as an instrument for regeneration. The paper closes with an analysis of the city's response to the recession and some reflections on practice. An alternative to attention grabbing 'big project' place-shaping is highlighted, as the author contends that a sensitive multilayered development approach may be more fruitful in the longer term.

### 2. DURHAM COUNTY AND CITY HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Owing, in part, to the past dominance of traditional extractive industries, County Durham has struggled to manage the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial, knowledge-driven economy. (Coal has an illustrious association with the North East dating back to ancient times, but became more widespread in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Coal dominated the region's industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the world's first railways emerged using horse-drawn wagons to carry coal from the local mines to Newcastle, aptly named 'Newcastle Roads'.) Indeed, manufacturing remains a dominant employer of the county's workforce (see Table 1), but even so, the decline of coal mining during much of the twentieth century severely undermined the economic vibrancy of the county.

Although the visible scars of the county's industrial past are largely gone, the legacy of social and employment problems remain (County Durham Economic Partnership, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). In 2005, gross value added (GVA) – the UK government's estimation of gross domestic product (GDP), used as a proxy measure of the state of the whole economy – was 65% of the national average. Such gloomy characteristics have become even more desperate as the impacts of the global economic recession are deeply felt in County Durham. For example, in recent years the county has generally recorded a lower job seekers allowance (JSA) unemployment rate than the North East region as a whole, but with the onset of the current recession this picture appears to be changing rapidly (Pugalis



et al., 2009). County Durham JSA annual increase exceeded 100% for 7 consecutive months, beginning in February 2009 (at 102%) and peaking at May 2009 (at 119.6%) (see Table 2).

The economic history of the county has generated a spatially fragmented and isolated geography of small dispersed settlements: with a population of around 500 000, County Durham is made up of more than 40 settlements of 3000 or more residents (see Figure 2). The county has around 34% of its population living in areas classified as town and fringe, which is more than triple

the national average. Many communities are locked into a cycle of multigenerational unemployment, deprivation and state dependency: 65.8% of residents live in the highest 30% of lower super output areas (LSOAs) ranked nationally on the basis of employment deprivation. Problems are particularly acute in the county's former coalfield communities (pit villages) and exacerbated by poor housing stock, worklessness and limited accessibility to employment opportunities (DCC, 2009b). In this sense, Durham is still playing 'catch up', managing its economic, social and environmental legacy while simultaneously looking forward,

Sectors	Durham (2008)	
	number	%
Agriculture and fishing	3600	1.5
Energy and water	4700	2.0
Manufacturing	41 000	17.4
Construction	18 200	7.7
Distribution, hotels and restaurants	39 100	16.5
Transport and communications	15 700	6.7
Banking, finance and insurance	24 900	10.5
Public admin. education and health	74 800	31.6
Other services	13 300	5.6
Total in employment	167 800	71.0

Source: Annual Population Survey, April 2007-March 2008, 95% confidence interval of percent figure (+/-)

Table 1. Employment by sector in County Durham

Date	County Durham (level)	County Durham (annual increase)	County Durham (% annual increase)
Oct 2008	9 148	2903	46.5
Nov 2008	10 198	3916	62.3
Dec 2008	11 549	5099	79.1
Jan 2009	13 093	6154	88.7
Feb 2009	14 445	7295	102.0
Mar 2009	14 781	7703	108.8
Apr 2009	15 204	8110	114.3
May 2009	15 265	8314	119.6
Jun 2009	14 900	7860	111.7
Jul 2009	14 805	7453	101.4
Aug 2009	14 674	6647	82.8
Sep 2009	14 421	5914	69.5

Source: Nomis

Table 2. County Durham residents claiming JSA

identifying new opportunities that will restructure the economy, generate employment and new wealth across the county.

Nevertheless, the county of Durham is home to a historic city; locally and regionally considered to possess untapped potential as a world-class visitor destination, international centre of education (Durham University is the leading university in the North of England and is consistently ranked in the world's top 20 research institutes based on the impact of its scientific research) and as a regional retail centre and business location. Internationally renowned and home to the cathedral and castle UNESCO World Heritage Site (see Figure 3), Durham city has the

potential to play a much stronger and more influential role in the North of England's economic renaissance.

### 3. DURHAM CITY VISION: THE ROLE OF PLACE QUALITY

1000 years of evolution have created the Durham we see today; always changing but always the same. It is a city firmly anchored in both time and place, and it is eternal

(Source: Durham City Partnership, 2007: 11)

Connected to the East Coast Main Line with a direct route to London and the A1 motorway, Durham city has excellent transport links and is also home to one of the country's leading

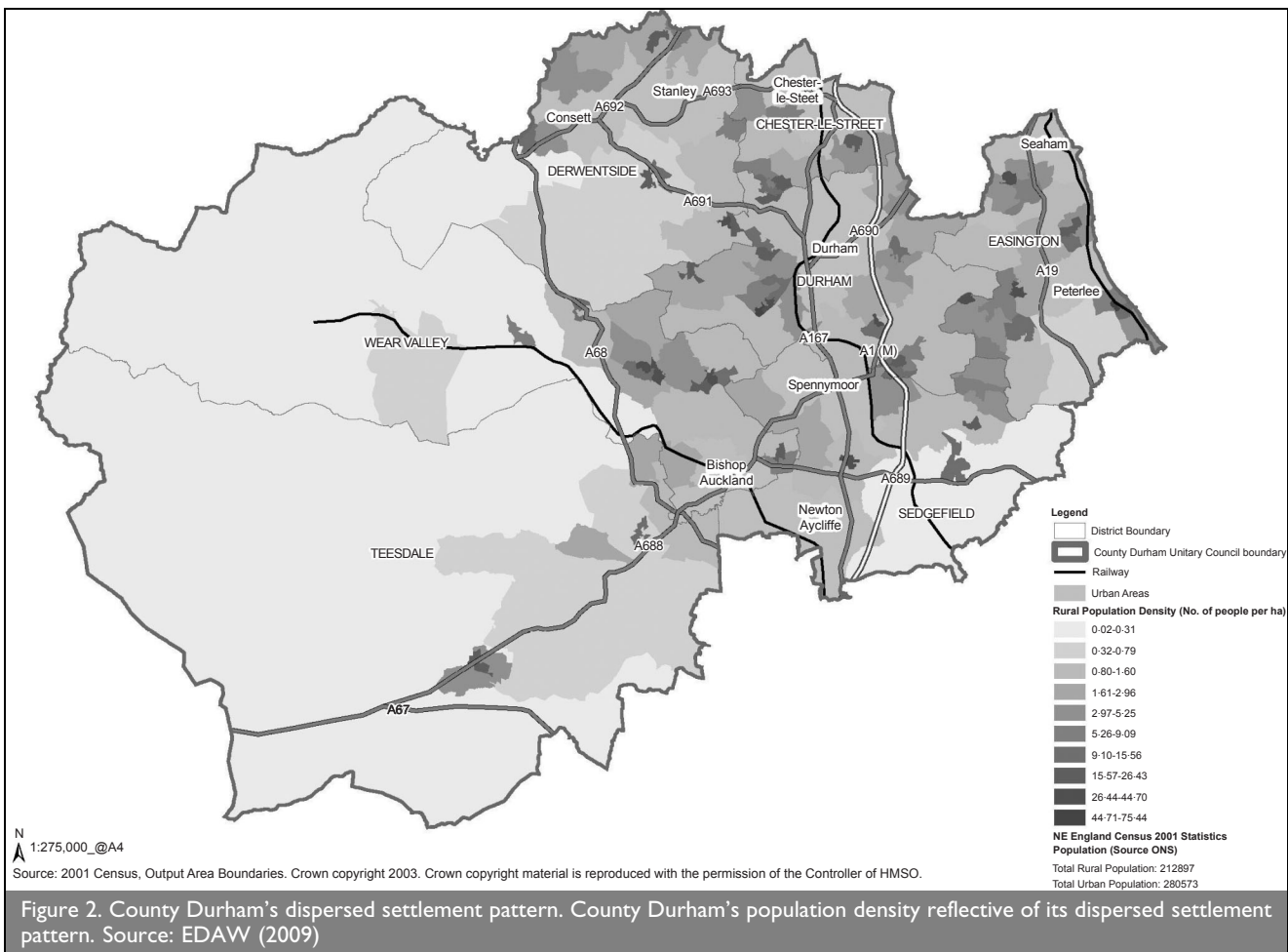




Figure 3. Durham Castle and Cathedral. Durham Castle and Cathedral UNESCO World Heritage Site from the banks of the River Wear.

universities, attracting some of the brightest students from the UK and other countries. The city serves the surrounding rural hinterland, including a county-wide population of almost 500 000 inhabitants, and thus has a large net inflow of commuters. Much of its building stock dates back to the medieval period and a high proportion of buildings are 'listed' (see, for example, Figure 4). Its overall environment and atmosphere are qualities valued by both visitors to the city and its residents (Donaldson, 2004). Yet, despite these obvious merits, there has been a perception that the city's 'offer', in terms of housing, leisure, retail and cultural facilities, together with the quality of its public spaces is not meeting its full potential. Collectively, these have arguably led to reduced employment opportunities and poor economic performance.

The compact nature of the city centre – surrounded by a green belt and further constrained by the implementation of a major road network in the early 1970s – makes expansion difficult (see Figure 5). Subsequently, over recent decades the city centre offer has 'stagnated':

As the towns and cities around changed significantly, Durham remained the same and the problems of an old, established city centre confronting the requirements of a city centre in the late twentieth century were compounded year on year – access and car



Figure 4. Mixed historic architectural fabric

parking, the requirements of modern retailers, changing expectations of visitors, the needs and demands of students, the implications of a growing evening economy and a lack of cultural venues.

(Source: Durham City Partnership, 2007: 7)

In the late 1990s, an ensemble of public and private sector actors commissioned David Lock Associates to produce 'A development framework for the heart of Durham' (David Lock Associates, 1998). The framework explored the development potential of a range of sites, resulting in the completion of the Gala Theatre, Millennium Place and Clayport library complex which opened in 2002 (Pugalis, 2009a). Even so, opportunities for redevelopment within the city remained limited and the city's outward expansion curtailed by planning policy and transport infrastructure. A variety of actors perceived retail facilities to be inadequate and there was a low percentage of multiple occupiers, which tend to 'anchor' sites and attract additional consumers (Experian, 2006). Leisure facilities were also considered to be underrepresented, particularly bars and clubs to cater for the substantial student population (circa 15 000). Around this time, local and regional actors debated the concept of a networked partnership entity to deliver the vision for Durham.

'Durham city vision: 2020' is one of the North East's key transformational projects (One NorthEast, 2006, 2007); developed through the Durham City Partnership set up in 2003 (The partnership consists of Durham County Council, One NorthEast Regional Development Agency, Durham University, the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral and the business community through the North East Chamber of Commerce.) A masterplan for the city launched in March 2007 (Durham City Partnership, 2007). The 2020 vision aims to reinvigorate the county's economy through place quality enhancements and recasting the city centre. Analysing the city's 'place assets', the masterplan considers how people use spaces and what people value. It puts forward a combination of capital and revenue strategies for different themes and functions within the city centre.

Masterplans have an extensive lineage but their popularity has spread over the last decade or so (Bell, 2005; CABE, 2008; Holmes and Beebejaun, 2007), to a point that they are almost *de rigueur* in contemporary place-shaping practice. Yet, perhaps because of their universal application, a variety of masterplan styles exist, some of which are summarised in Figure 6. In the case of Durham's masterplan, even though it is championed by a networked ensemble of public and private actors, it is primarily a public-led guiding document. A notable example of a visionary plan is that produced for Chicago in 1909, inspired by its principal creator Daniel Burnham who proclaimed: 'Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Think big' (cited in Moore, 1921). Will Alsop's Middlehaven regeneration plans for Middlesbrough and his masterplan for Barnsley are more contemporary examples of Burnham's 'think big' philosophy. In terms of binding plans, a well known example is the implementation of plans to

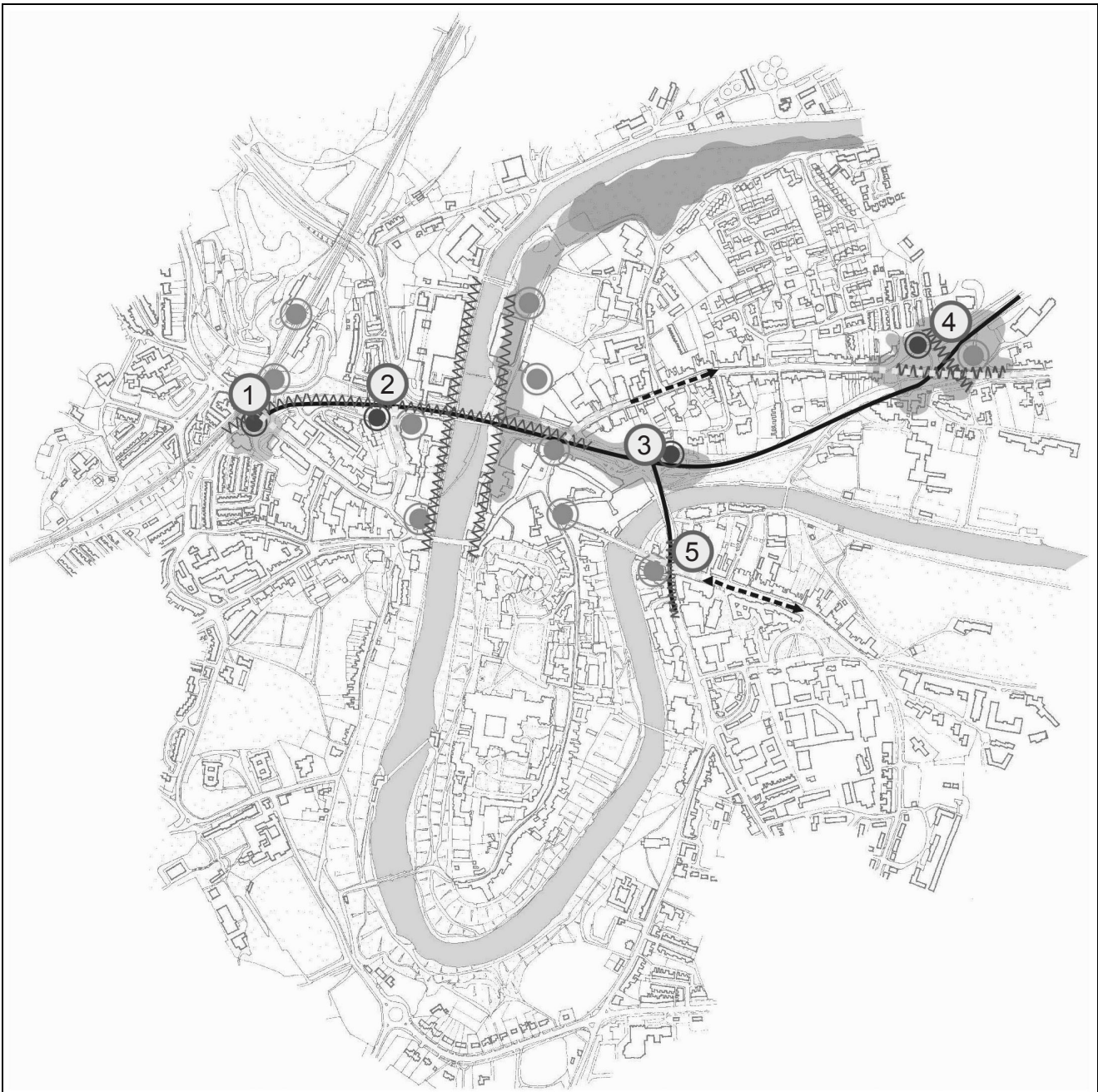


Figure 5. Compact city centre. The compact nature of Durham city centre is compounded by ill-defined gateways, fragmentation and severance (© David Locke Associates)

regenerate the Gorbals area of Glasgow (Tiesdell and MacFarlane, 2007).

The masterplan is composed of a series of 'strategies', including iconic development, modern jewels, illumination and shopping, which are spatialised through the designation of seven city 'quarters' (see Figure 7) (Marcuse, 1989). Self-prescribed as 'a comprehensive strategy for the city', the masterplan has been developed so 'that local decisions can be made in a strategic way' (Durham City Partnership, 2007: 6). A summary of the main priorities comprising the 2020 vision is given in Table 3. Collectively, these projects at an estimated total cost of £200m intend to deliver the following outputs

- (a) 4267 net additional new jobs
- (b) an increase in office floor-space from 207 000 m<sup>2</sup> in 2005 to 300 000

- (c) an increase in retail floor-space from 184 000 m<sup>2</sup> in 2005 to 192 900 m<sup>2</sup>

- (d) 419 new residential units
- (e) £67m private sector leverage

The masterplan puts down on paper the general view that Durham does not need more iconic 'big projects', warning that even though such projects can be politically 'seductive', a failure to deliver could paralyse the city's revitalisation ambitions (Durham City Partnership, 2007). Instead of championing 'big projects' the masterplan is grounded in four development principles

- (a) Realisable development ambitions – anchored in market realism with a commitment to world-class design quality befitting its historic setting.
- (b) 'Jewel' development opportunities – smaller-scale interventions that establish a reputation in the city for

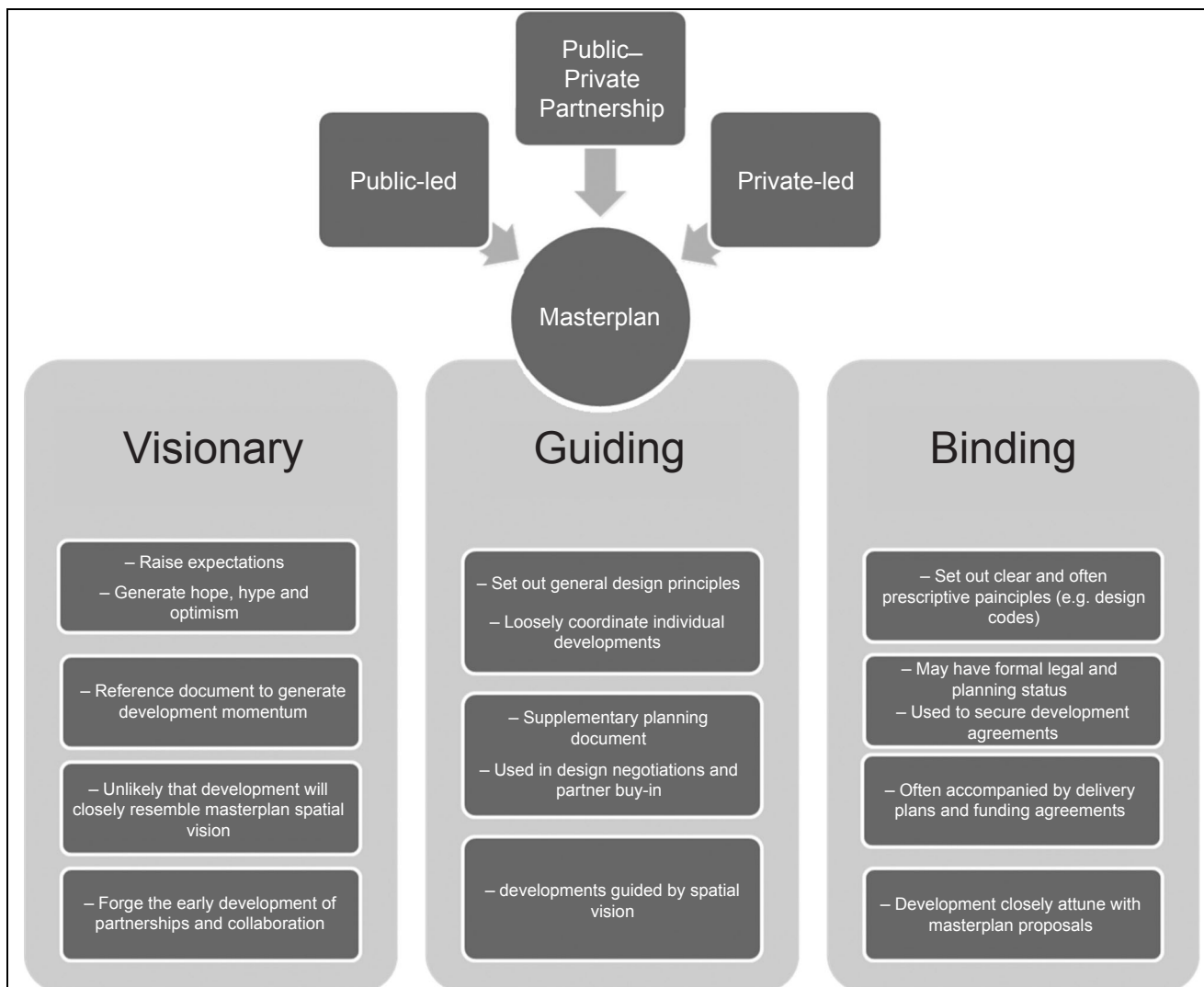


Figure 6. Masterplan styles. Depending on the development context and partner relations will dictate which style of masterplanning is most appropriate. Source: author

well-crafted but small-scale new buildings that are sympathetic to their setting and yet set themselves apart through uniqueness of form and use.

- (c) Reinforce the cultural role of the market place – re-establish it as the heart of the city of the everyday user and social life of Durham.
- (d) Improve the management and marketing of ‘assets’ – engage local people and businesses; opening up fresh opportunities for collaboration, creativity and enterprise.

Guided by these four development principles, place quality improvements (to date) have been sensitively administered to stitch together the historic city fabric with a contemporary urban aesthetic. The implementation of key strategies has helped the city capitalise on existing assets, while some other key projects are entering the latter stages of the development process. For a summary of the current position of key projects see Table 4. Where possible, delivering the masterplan has been aligned with other capital projects, including accessibility and transport improvements.

#### 4. RESPONDING TO THE RECESSION AND REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

Not too dissimilar to other cities in Britain and internationally, the city of Durham is facing sizeable challenges as it responds to

the global economic recession and plans for the upturn (Pugalis, 2009b). Unlike the rest of the county, Durham city has one of the highest concentrations of financial and business services in the North East, which is being adversely affected by the credit crisis (DCC, 2009a). However, so far, the economic blow to the financial and service sectors has been cushioned by the boost in tourism courtesy of ‘staycations’, as people choose to visit more local destinations, and those employed by public institutions (which accounts for about one-third of the local workforce). (Note: Tourism currently contributes around £1.6m to the county economy per day; sustaining 12 000 jobs. While this is less than other ‘heritage cities’, such as York and Lincoln, there remains significant potential for growth in Durham city and its surrounding satellite attractions.) Yet, with public sector spending anticipated to retrench over the next few years, it would be premature to talk of an economic upturn materialising in 2010.

The masterplan 2020 vision for the historic city of Durham ‘reflects a premise that Durham has not yet reached its true potential and the Vision is therefore a guide for the future’ (Durham City Partnership, 2007: 6). In terms of preservation and restoration, there exists an uneasy relationship between economic and cultural values. While often overlaying and intersecting one another, these values can sometimes clash

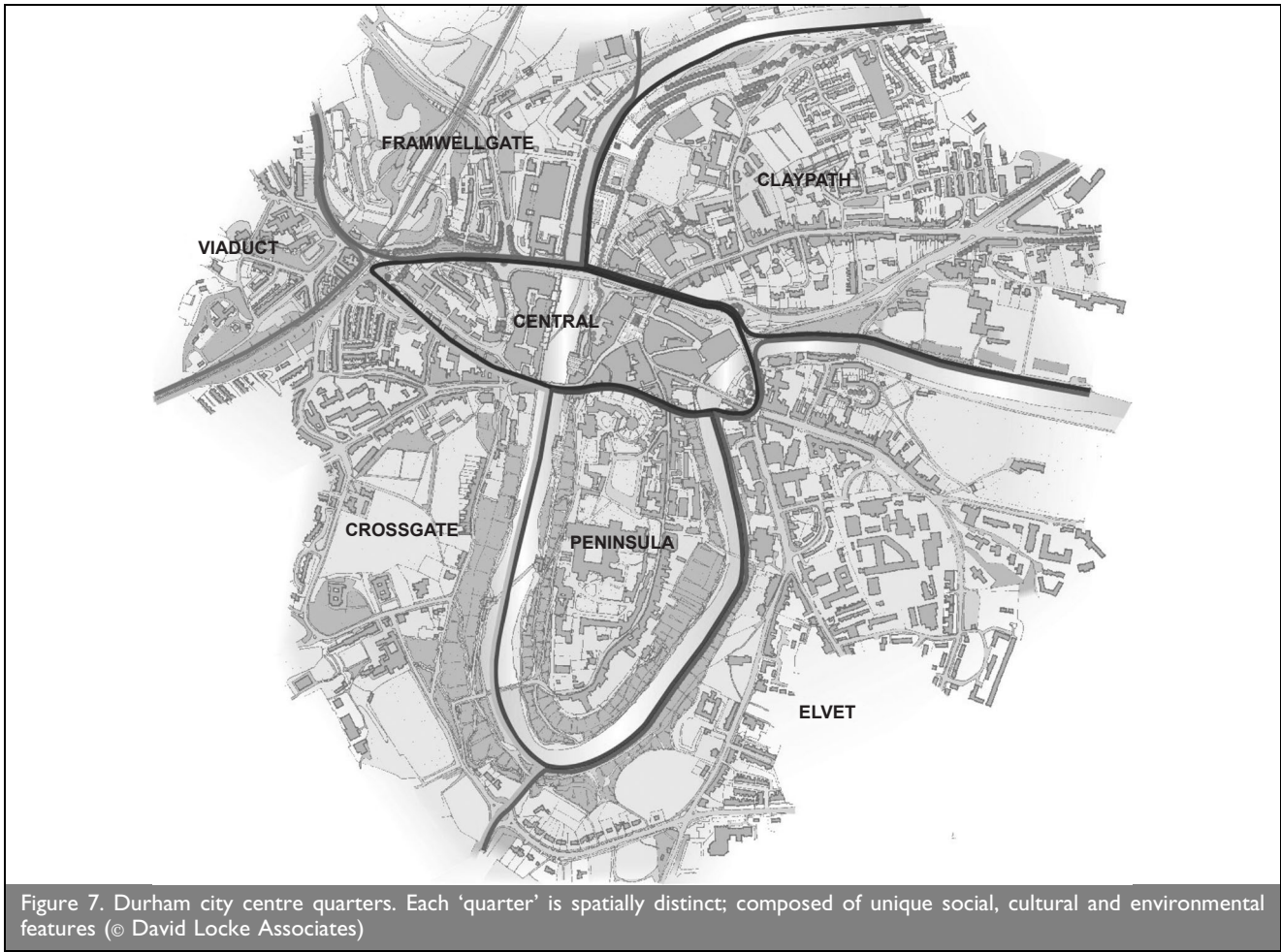


Figure 7. Durham city centre quarters. Each 'quarter' is spatially distinct; composed of unique social, cultural and environmental features (© David Locke Associates)

head-on to the extent that promoting economic values can rebuff cultural values and vice versa. While setting a broad strategic direction, space is left open for changing political imperatives, community aspirations and different economic climates. The latter has been particularly important, as the post-credit crunch development climate is markedly different to the

economic landscape when the masterplan was published in March 2007. Keeping space open, the networked ensemble of actors involved in Durham's place quality-led economic resurgence have recognised the clash of values between historic built-environment preservation and the capitalist production of space.

Project name	Description
<i>The heart of the city: market place and vennels</i>	Physical streetscape improvements, including lighting and signage, and 'soft' marketing, events and business development initiatives. It seeks to enable the market place to become the most important commercial asset in the city, setting the tone for the whole city centre. Physical interventions and change in the highways layout intend to reconfigure and reprioritise space for pedestrians and enable its use as a marketplace, an events space and a meeting place (see Figure 8).
<i>Capitalising on existing assets</i>	Make the most of icons and assets it already has, including the castle, the cathedral, and to a lesser extent, the university, the Gala Theatre/Millennium Place, and the integrity of the historic city core.
<i>Redevelopment of the former ice rink site, Freemans Place</i>	Mixed-use development opportunity, unique to the city centre. Potential for a contemporary urban infill scheme.
<i>World Heritage Visitor Centre, Owengate</i>	Providing a focus for the World Heritage site, with the aim of attracting more visitors and increasing local spend.
<i>Necklace Park</i>	An innovative proposal intended to draw together a series of existing spaces and places along the 12 mile chain of the River Wear, stretching from Finchale Priory to Sunderland Bridge.
<i>Durham Riverbanks Gardens</i>	Linked to the World Heritage site and Necklace Park, a restoration project to provide a garden attraction and enhancement of overall visitor experience
<i>Light and dark and signage strategies</i>	Ambitious strategies intended to put the city centre at the forefront of urban lighting and signage in the UK and Europe.

A strong emphasis on place quality runs through each of the projects contributing to the 2020 vision priorities. Source: author

Table 3. 2020 vision priorities



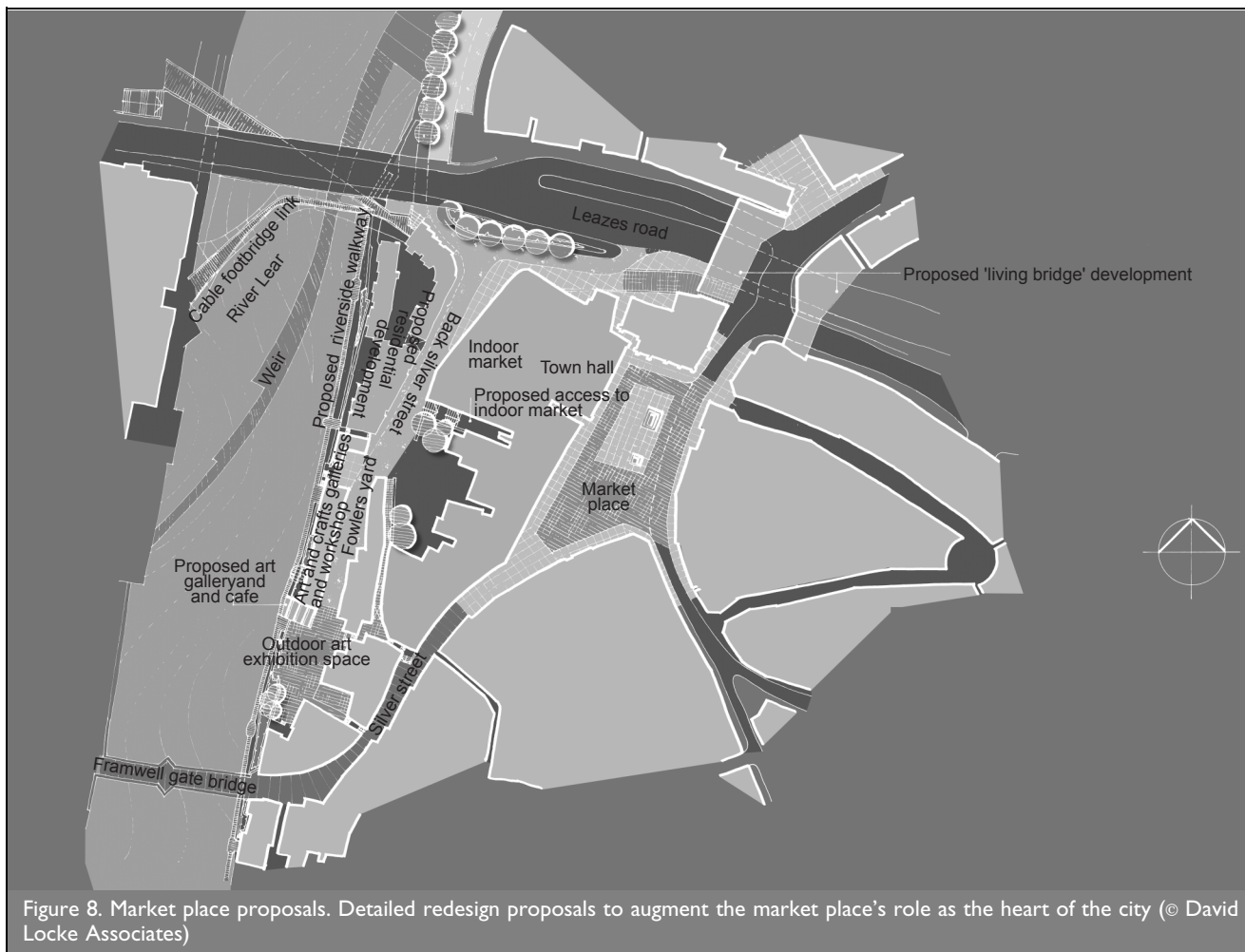


Figure 8. Market place proposals. Detailed redesign proposals to augment the market place's role as the heart of the city (© David Locke Associates)

The charm and spatial uniqueness of Durham owes a lot to its built-heritage, urban morphology and medieval street network. It is therefore imperative that a clash of values – by way of public debate and community participation – is actively encouraged. The author suggests that such deliberative democracy can put in place the necessary safety-valve to prevent the chrematistic pursuit of short-term profit over longer-term socio-environmental value. Indeed, if Durham's place assets are perceived to provide 'competitive advantage', then insensitive development strategies would be akin to killing the golden goose. In some of Durham's urban 'quarters', there is a danger that historical elements are being selectively recycled which could amount to the production of an internationally standardised abstract transnational space (Ren, 2008), devoid of local spatial character. Conversely, other researchers warn of the dangers posed by an overemphasis on nostalgic preservation

tendencies, where a preoccupation with the past ignores the potential of the present (see, for example, Gallacher, 2005). No 'right' decision can be made about what gets preserved and why, which supports the need for deliberative democracy, whereby such practice may prevent the politico-economic imperatives of a few, subverting the rights of the many. It is possible for a space to testify to the past and simultaneously project images of the future.

An early recognition that Durham city does not require a proliferation of 'big projects' is perhaps a development philosophy that other city governance ensembles may want to consider, especially as planning for the upturn is likely to take place in a climate of austerity. Not wishing to portray the ongoing renaissance of Durham as a resounding 'success story', it does offer practitioners and academics an interesting case of

Project title	Status
<i>The heart of the city: market place and vennels</i>	Ongoing
<i>Capitalising on existing assets</i>	Elements complete, overall work ongoing
<i>Redevelopment of the former ice rink site, Freemans Place</i>	Site acquired and design brief completed
<i>World Heritage Visitor Centre, Owengate</i>	Advice to the parties
<i>Necklace Park</i>	Ongoing
<i>Durham Riverbanks Gardens</i>	Ongoing
<i>Light and dark and signage strategies</i>	Completed

Projects continue to progress 'on the ground'. Source: author

Table 4. Development status of key projects

how to approach the regeneration of a historic space through prioritised place quality enhancements. The revitalisation of collective spatio-historic assets, such as the city of Durham, is an incremental process. Consequently, a multilayered approach to place-shaping may prove more fruitful – politically, culturally, economically and environmentally – than big projects predisposed to deliver quick wins.

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