“Fashion changes quickly, Commerce less quickly, Infrastructure slower than that, then Governance, then Culture, and slowest is Nature. The fast parts learn, propose, and absorb shocks; the slow parts remember, integrate, and constrain. The fast parts get all the attention. The slow parts have all the power.”


“A bicycle shed is a building, Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.”

Nikolaus Pevsner

In 2005, The Prince’s Foundation was asked to undertake an Enquiry by Design leading to a new long range plan for the city centre of Lincoln, a two-thousand year old city in the English midlands.

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Following the successful completion of that effort, we have remained involved to help guide urban extensions in Lincoln, and are this summer holding a summer school in architecture and building crafts on the grounds of the Lincoln Cathedral.

Lincoln is an ancient city, with ancient strengths and virtues. Its core reason for being has resided in its location at the crossing of the river at Brayford Pool, and its place athwart the great Roman route north – the Fosse Way – and Ermine Street. It further draws its character, and that of its citizens, from the relationship between the river and the hill. Over the centuries, this relationship between Lincoln and its place in nature has helped to shape a series of remarkably enduring parts of the city, which in turn create enduring relationships with the generations inhabiting and visiting Lincoln.

The Roman fort on the hill and the marketplace became the castle and the cathedral on the hill and the high street below, giving shape both to a remarkably stable street network and to a relationship between culture, government and commerce which can be traced through almost two thousand years of Lincoln’s history. And the river and the Brayford Pool, which brought people to the place originally, continued to define the shape of the city’s street pattern for almost as long, until the intervention of the Victorian railway and the post-war high speed road networks severed the city centre from the neighbourhoods which depend upon it and upon which it depends.

Indeed, when participants in The Prince’s Foundation’s workshops at Lincoln were asked to identify the essential qualities of the city, these enduring relationships emerged as foremost: the relationship between the city and the Cathedral; the walkability of the city centre; the friendliness of the city and its inhabitants, the scale of the place, and the fact that Lincoln is an old city which still functions and adapts well to change. Most of these points may be seen as flowing directly from the ancient structure of the City of Lincoln.

The charts to the left depict the evolution of Lincoln, from Roman times, to medieval times and then into the modern era, with a legacy of continuity until Victorian times.

The notion that cities are composed, like ecosystems, of basic types, which change slowly, but are flexible and adaptable, is being applied in the Foundation’s work in town planning for historic town centres, including Lincoln. In his book How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They Are Built, American author Stewart Brand introduced the concept of pace layering, meaning that different parts of a building – or a city – change at different rates. When applied to civilisation, pace layering implies that certain deep structures, like the relationship between a city and nature, or the culture of a city, ought to change slowly, while other activities, like entertainment or retail, shift more quickly, and
need to be accommodated in a flexible manner within these more permanent layers of the city. I have used Brand’s basic notion as a template for a legacy based plan for Lincoln, and evolved it to the diagram below.

Rates of Change in Cities and Towns

We are beginning to understand that part of the problem in our cities is that we have been fundamentally altering basic underlying structures – the relation between the city and nature, movement patterns, the role of neighbourhoods in the city structure, the size of blocks – to accommodate short-term trends like retail packaging. A better understanding of the basic types that compose the city is needed in order to define ways to accommodate urban “fashions” like big box retail in a flexible, and adaptable way.

When one looks at the recent history of planning, we are finding that contemporary planning interventions tend to alter the basic layers of the city for the sake of more transitory functions, such as retail trends or commercial needs. This is insane when one considers that retail exemplifies Schumpeter’s idea of the creative destruction of capitalism, with merchandising trends succeeding one another at increasingly rapid rates. This trend of turning the layering upside down can fundamentally harm the basic functioning of the city by denying the reasons that it came to be in the first place. At the same time, far from being composed of basic adaptable types, recent development tends to be single purpose, functional, placeless and specific — and hence
short lived.

When we looked at Lincoln during our workshops, we found that this was certainly the case, as the city centre had been altered dramatically in the past century and half. First came the introduction of the railway at grade, severing the city centre from neighbourhoods to the South. Second came the imposition of grade separated road systems creating further barriers, especially to the east and west. Recent developments of both government buildings and shopping centres have altered the basic structure of streets and pedestrian movement, walling off the river, hampering movement across the city and destroyed continuity with a rich building tradition.

As all of these interventions reach the end of their useful life, the opportunity emerges to create an enduring framework for shaping the town centre that restores the ability to adapt flexibly to change while respecting the legacy of this ancient city. Such a legacy-driven framework can form the terms of a new partnership for managing change in Lincoln over time: between the resident of the City and its government, its cultural and social institutions and its landowners and commercial enterprises.

At its core, the town centre strategy for Lincoln, which emerged from intensive research and engagement with stakeholders, seeks to restore the balance in the City between nature, culture, government, movement and commerce. It consists in a series of interventions in the movement network and at key places in the city centre. When accomplished over a multi-year time frame, these interventions restore the basic circulatory system that gives life to the city and access to service, amenity and opportunity for its inhabitants, and set out a stable framework of building and road types that will enable the City of Lincoln to adapt and remain a principal urban centre for the Eastern Midlands into the foreseeable future.

Most importantly, the framework plan replaces the governing notion of planning intervention in the modern era--difference, and a conscious break with the past--with a new theme--continuity, with the built and natural legacy of the great cathedral city of Lincoln. This continuity can be expressed through each of Brand’s themes:

**Nature:** the city centre master plan restores the ancient relationship between the city and the river by opening up access from the High Street to the Brayford Pool and the river, and by improving the quality of the public realm along the waterfront. The relationship between the city on the river and the castle and cathedral on the top of the hill is reinforced both by making the pedestrian routes more legible, and by strengthening the vitality of the urban quarters in between.
**Culture:** the city centre plan seeks to enliven and connect the Cultural Quarter with the rest of the city, and to connect these attractions to the amenities in the Cathedral and the Castle. A legible route up the side of Steep Hill enables this loop. Rather than seeking to define the cultural quarter through new landmark buildings, the plan celebrates the Lincoln Castle, where resides one of the surviving copies of the Magna Carta, the Cathedral; Steep Hill, with one of Britain’s oldest extant houses, and the many bits of Roman legacy found throughout the “secret places” of ancient Lincoln.

**Governance:** The master plan seeks to create an enduring partnership for the custodianship of the Lincoln city centre, bringing together the City Council, the County Council and business and community interests in a project intended to ensure the health of the city centre for thirty years. Opportunity for private investment is unlocked by public “pump-priming”, and private contributions fund key infrastructure.

**Infrastructure:** The damage done by transport interventions in the past 150 years to Lincoln’s urban fabric had limited east-west connections across the city, severed the city north from south at the railway, and eliminated alternative north-south connections on either side of the city centre. The master plan repairs these rents in the urban fabric, and in the process reconnects the city’s neighbourhoods to the beating heart of the city by restoring the integrity of the block structure in the centre.

**Commerce:** The functional approach to city planning has rendered most urban core areas mono-cultural, devoted to shopping and perhaps office use, and little else. The introduction of a university to Lincoln has created another zone, and the cultural quarter has been viewed as a zone as well. The plan seeks to activate all of these single use districts through the introduction of mixed-use strategies to create more diversified day time as well as night time economies. For example, a project south of the railway station introduces higher density residential and office uses into the city centre. People have always lived in the city centre, and it has always been a marketplace, a civic place and a sacred place, and the plan builds on this legacy.

**Fashion:** Retail centres brought to the core of the city have successfully maintained Lincoln as a substantial centre for shopping far in excess of its residential population, but this has also truncated the High Street, and tended to strangle circulation through the city centre. As these relatively recent centres age, there will be an opportunity to restructure retail so it can better compete by improving pedestrian and vehicular flow, and by better relating the various retail elements to one another. Retail can thus become a flexible part of a robust city structure.

A city that has endured for almost two thousand years ought to be planned so that it can continue to endure, and even to thrive. If a robust partnership can hold and champion this plan over that time, the result will be a city that can once again learn from its past, and apply those lessons to enable it to thrive and sustain into the future. The notions of legacy and continuity are central to the notion of sustainability, which is really about preserving choices for future generations. If we do so, whether with cities, or by building sensitively in the context of historic buildings, we are preserving value, and also enhancing value in new development. The idea of continuity runs contrary to current preservation dogma which stresses difference, and distinction -- “the honestly modern” -- but aligns closely with both common sense and thousands of years of building tradition.