

Leeds: skyscraper city

Leeds is the unrivalled economic powerhouse of its region, and the increasingly relevant city region. This success is strongly linked to a multi-billion pound regeneration programme led by the Council's strategic aims to 'go up a league', 'narrow the gap' between the most disadvantaged people and communities, and develop Leeds' role as the 'regional capital' (Leeds Initiative, 2004). In the first of two articles, the main aspects of this regeneration story are outlined. The controversies and implications will be discussed in a second article in the next issue of the Review.



Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodgkinson, University of Leeds

The regeneration picture

Today's regeneration process in Leeds began in the mid-1980s when the Labour-run administration of Leeds City Council embarked upon a proactive attempt to kick start growth in the central area.

The first plan to regenerate the waterfront was produced in 1985, followed by the establishment in 1988 of the Leeds Development Corporation, a regeneration 'quango' whose aim was to pull Leeds out of its economic doldrums by pump priming the speculative growth of office and retail floorspace. Lasting until 1995, it spent £72 million on 540 hectares in South Central Leeds and the Kirkstall Valley.

Jon Trickett, strong arm council leader between 1989 and 1996, played a key role in guiding the Council's efforts, hosting the first 24 Hour City Conference in 1993 which articulated a vision for the city based on ideas of European-ness (especially through allusions to being the 'Barcelona of the north'), 24 hour café society and city centre living (Haughton and Williams, 1996).

The 1990s saw the establishment of the city's local strategic partnership, the Leeds Initiative, which embraced a 'moderate' (read business-friendly) political approach to capture new investments and give Leeds a fresh new look to the outside world. Renaissance Leeds and Marketing Leeds (the latter chaired by local development tycoon, Jan

Fletcher) continue to consolidate this partnership approach to regeneration.

Regeneration received another boost with the election of the Labour Government in 1997 and its commitment to urban renewal through the growth of core cities and the creation of sustainable communities. Over the past 10 years, some £3.2 billion of major construction schemes have been completed in Leeds

covering mixed-use, office, retail, leisure, residential, manufacturing and distribution. This has been complemented by increased investment in housing and neighbourhood renewal from central government pots.

This regeneration story shows no signs of abating. At the end of 2006, schemes worth £1.4 billion were under construction and a further £5.8 billion proposed — a total of £10.4 billion since 1997 (Leeds City Council, 2007: 1). These figures exclude apartments outside the city centre, major transport schemes completed in the last 10 years and those in the pipeline, and the rebuilding and remodelling of primary and secondary schools across the Leeds district.

City centre property boom

Investment and development in the city centre of Leeds dwarfs all the other areas, comprising at least two-thirds of total expenditure. This reflects the economic importance and power of the city centre to Leeds, laid out clearly in the Council's strategic aim to make it "*the hub of the city region*" (Leeds City



Figure 1. Bridgewater Place, Leeds

Council, 2005: 16). Regeneration is concentrated in mega-development projects that frequently revolve around tall buildings — skyscrapers — and is being driven by booming investment opportunities in high-value residential, office and retail property.

While the number of commercial investment properties has remained relatively stable, their capital value has increased phenomenally, indicated by the rise from £17 billion in 1981 to over £102 billion by 2002 alone (Investment Property Databank, 2003).

The City Centre Management Team established in 1994 has been a key player in pushing the corporate-led development of the city centre, with architectural steer provided by the Civic Architect's office (headed by John Thorp) and its 'quarters' and 'petals' approach. Although the boundaries between these quarters are fluid, this blueprint has consolidated and promoted certain activity in defined areas (business and finance in the west central area, education in the north, city living in the south, retail in the core, arts in the east).

The move to become a 'skyscraper city' is being strategically coordinated via the principle of a north-south tall buildings access that links the historic line of tall buildings (Parkinson Tower, K2, West Riding House, City House and now Bridgewater Place). Bridgewater Place (Figure 1) is now the tallest building in the region.

There are currently 13 such schemes either being completed or in the pipeline headed by the twin Lumière Towers that will eventually include Europe's tallest residential building (Figure 2). Another regeneration drive is coming from the university sector with Leeds Metropolitan University playing a strong role in developing empty sites north of the city centre.

Figure 2 shows the geographic spread of these projects. What is visible is the high concentration around the 'western leaf' between the river and rail routes. Development in this area is exclusively private-sector led, with the City Council playing a hands-off role. This is double cause for concern considering the area represents some of the last remaining central development sites and current schemes are based almost exclusively on high value city living apartments and office accommodation for large firms.

Many of these skyscrapers find themselves within or adjacent to a number of huge centrally located development sites which are creating whole new quarters in the city. These include TCS and Hammerson's Eastgate and Harewood Quarter, the Whitehall-Wellington corridor which includes the already converted old Royal Mail building, Whitehall Quay and the

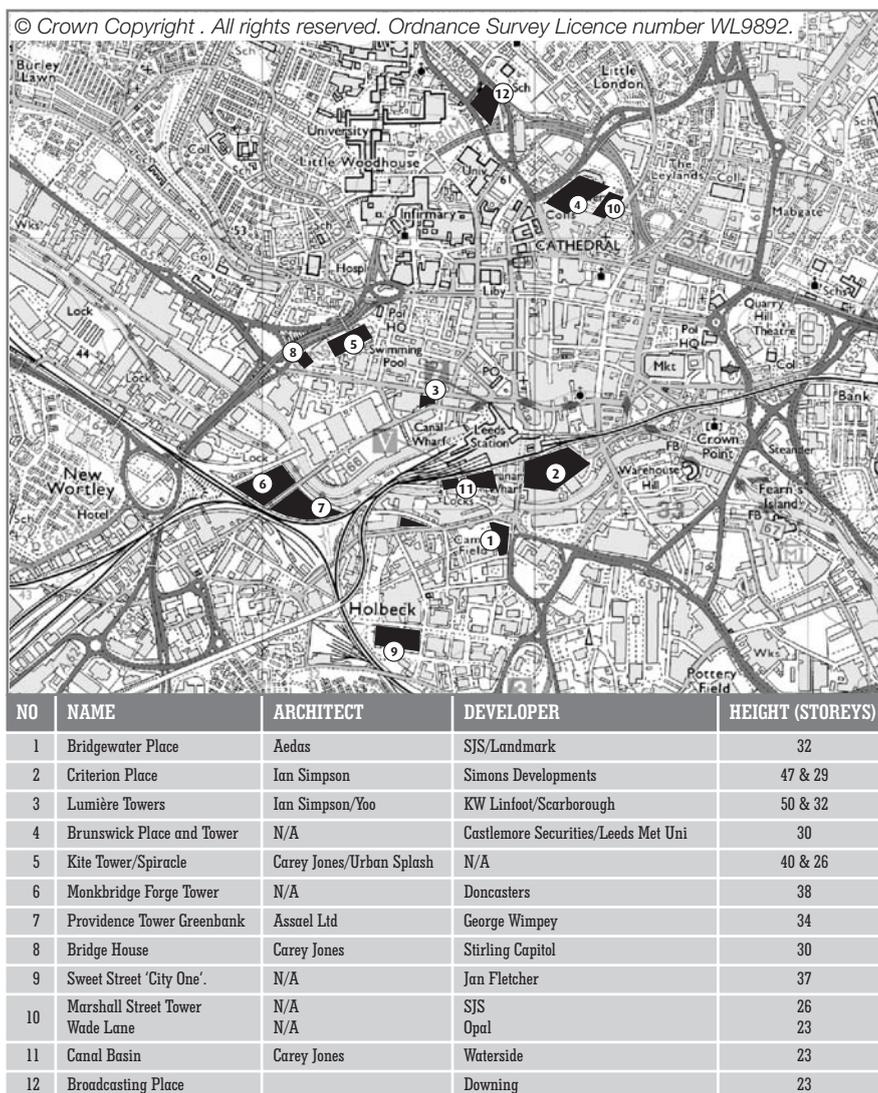


Figure 2. Map of tall buildings in central Leeds, 2007

planned Greenbank all by KW Linfoot, the huge Wellington Place scheme by Hermes and MEPC, Whitehall Quay by TCS, the Gateway site by Scotfield, Clarence Docks by Crosby Group, the City Islands by Manchester's Mayfair Group, and the huge raft of development sites throughout Holbeck Urban Village.

In terms of developers, a significant proportion of mega-developments has been led by what is called the 'Big 5' — KW Linfoot, Town Centre Securities, Landmark Development, SJS and Oakgate — who, along with the emerging Scarborough Developments, are all locally based firms. Additionally it is worth noting that Leeds based Carey Jones Architects has been responsible for the design of a significant number of schemes in the city, defining the Leeds look.

Their pre-eminence is now under threat, however, from the switch to iconic architects such as Manchester's Ian Simpson, who has been enlisted to design Criterion Place and Lumière.

A novel addition (and rather a worrying one considering their monofunctionality

and poor design) involves northern based developers specialising in mega-student accommodation (such as Downing, Liverpool, Opal Group, Manchester, as well as Unite, Bristol). They have now entered the city to develop huge 1,000+ student accommodation complexes in the north of the centre and along the Kirkstall/Burley corridors.

Other important regeneration schemes

In addition to the city centre, a range of regeneration activities are currently taking place in different geographical zones across the city (Figure 3). The two largest residential-based projects are *EASEL* covering East and South East Leeds, and the *West Leeds Gateway* that includes Armley and the Leeds-Liverpool Canal. Together these areas comprise the city's worst concentration of deprivation and have high levels of poverty, benefit-dependency, unemployment. Crime and heart disease

go hand in hand with low educational achievement and life expectancy levels.

Housing redevelopment and improving transport connectivity are seen as key to regeneration; the aim is to provide a broader range of housing that retains the existing population, attracts more service sector professionals and encourages people back to the area within the context of the city centre development. Hundreds of council homes have been demolished with plans for thousands more to go to make way for mainly private housing.

The third mega-regeneration is the *Aire Valley*, covering an area of 1,000 hectares that extends from the edge of the city centre eastwards to the M1 motorway. The decline of manufacturing and heavy industry has decimated surrounding communities but has opened up at least 400 hectares of potential development land in greenfield and brownfield locations that could generate an additional 30,000 new jobs to complement the existing 400 businesses and 15,000 employees across a wide variety of sectors. Essential to this is a major new transport infrastructure grid that includes the £32 million East Leeds Link Road that will link up all of the major development sites, the M1 and the Leeds Inner Ring Road.

Encompassing most of these distinct geographies is the private sector-led *Leeds City Growth Area* which combines both the city centre and the inner urban wards in a market-based plan to boost economic output and productivity across four growth economic clusters — creative and digital industries, manufacturing, construction, financial and professional services (Leeds City Growth Steering Group, 2006).

In addition to these major spatial initiatives are important smaller schemes that aim to revitalise three working class areas of the city through housing-led regeneration and neighbourhood re-modelling:

- the ongoing £113 million *Swarcliffe* housing renewal and refurbishment programme on the north east outskirts of Leeds (Figure 3);
- the proposed £95 million *Little London* comprehensive regeneration on the northern inner edge of the city centre; and
- the ongoing multi-million pound regeneration activities in *Beeston Hill and Holbeck* to the immediate south of the city centre, including a proposed £90 million PFI housing scheme and the construction of *Holbeck Urban Village*, a new business and residential settlement focused on creative and digital media being built in the heart of the city's former mills and foundries.

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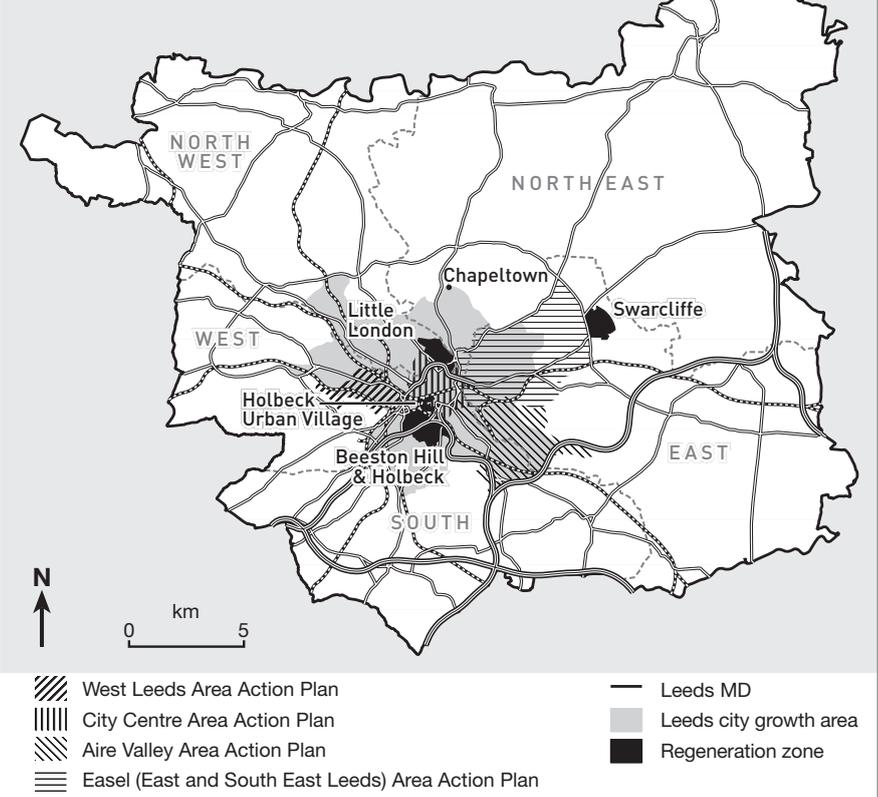


Figure 3. Regeneration zones in Leeds

What unites all of these initiatives is a regeneration mix in which refurbishment and remodelling of existing social housing is combined with mass council housing demolition and sell offs to make way for new private housing. Other notable schemes underway include the *Chapeltown Road Development Plan* and the £10 million *Town and District Centre Regeneration Programme*.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, Leeds has experienced a phenomenal transformation in the past two decades, a process that is continuing today in the form of the mega-developments and regeneration projects of this emerging 'skyscraper city'.

However, the Council's confident rhetoric about the economic prizes (of employment growth, wealth creation, community sustainability and falling poverty) of its regeneration programme contrasts strongly with a number of controversies that may jeopardize success.

Issues of local democracy (who is driving the process?), environmental impact (are these developments future proofed with low environmental impacts?), social inclusion (are they creating affordable, sustainable communities?) and economic viability (is there demand?) will be explored in more detail in the second article.

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