

HERO Speech July 2009

Lord Mayor,
Colleagues,

Let me add my welcome to that of the LM.

(As you may be aware, my role on the council is two fold: Deputy Leader and Executive Member responsible for Finance and Europe. Within that role, has been much European work, including responsibility for structural funds, Interreg, Urbact, and as a UK member for the CoR, where I am also President of the ALDE group and have just been appointed as Rapporteur for the 6th Cohesion report.)

I hope you have had an opportunity to look around this building, as it is one of the finest neo-classical buildings in Europe - if not the world. Yet, only 20 years ago, there was a proposal by the then city administration to demolish it and build a multi-story car park in its place.

Impossible to believe? Yes, but true!

Nor was this the only building of historic importance at risk.

The Albert Dock, which has the largest single collection of listed buildings outside London, was one of the other historic sites also threatened.

Can you imagine being a European Capital of Culture that had demolished buildings of such quality?

But it wasn't just the active policies that brought buildings to the brink, it was the passive too.

All around this city we had buildings that had been neglected and allowed to decay.

There were so many buildings in fact, that managing them back into viable use, was, and is a real challenge. I will speak about one – the Palm House - a little later.

It was only when the city's political administration changed some 11 years ago, that not only the extent of the problem became clear: sell offs, land banking, disrepair; but also came the determination to save and bring back into use the jewels of our heritage.

This week we commemorate some fascinating events in our history:

220 years ago on 14th July 1789, the Bastille was stormed;

44 years ago on 15th July 1965, the Mariner probe sent back the first close up pictures of the Martian landscape;

And 52 years ago, on 12th July 1957 Elvis Presley's 'All Shook Up' reached Number 1 in the hit parade.

Now, you could be forgiven for asking what on earth these anniversaries have to do with HERO?

On the one hand, I might say – well, nothing actually, they are just interesting facts! But, the time span they occupy is significant in the city's history.

It spans:

the growth of the port and construction of the many listed buildings on the waterfront and in the city centre:

the Town Hall, St George's Hall, the Liver Buildings, Cunard Buildings, Port of Liverpool Building, the Universities – to name but a few;

it covers the period when Liverpool as a musical city burst upon the world; when at the same time, many of our older buildings were demolished: the Cavern, the Overhead Railway; demolitions we would not contemplate today;

It encompasses a time of devastation, during the blitz, when much of our historic city was destroyed: some 100,000 buildings damaged or demolished by bombing;

It recalls the time of the great liners and shipping companies, when some 9m Europeans left for new lives on new continents, creating the city's links with Europe and the US;

It celebrates the role of science in our city and the importance of the universities.

It tells too of a time when Liverpool looked outward to the world, reaching to every corner of the globe, rather than in on itself, as it did in the later decades of the 20th century.

Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, Liverpool is again turning its face to the world.

We work actively with many partners in Europe; have growing relationships with the US and China and have real opportunities to influence the European Union and its view of heritage and culture as drivers of the economy; valuable for their own sake, yes, but with the potential to create jobs, businesses and educational opportunities for all.

The Hero project will add a significant dimension to that idea. It will look at the preservation and utilisation of heritage buildings and their management. In so doing, it will record how new life has been brought to buildings once at risk.

In our own city, you will have seen how, for example this building, St George's Hall has been restored to take its rightful place at the centre of civic life; how the Liverpool Institute has become LIPA, a centre of learning for popular culture, theatre and music; and how the historic waterfront has been enhanced and reborn, by sensitive new build and preservation of the old.

And yet, perhaps the most important heritage project that was completed, was the Palm House, a wonderful Victorian glass house that had been left to decay and disrepair.

Fought for by the people of the city, she was rescued in the year 1999, when we agreed – almost as one of our first acts as an administration – to invest some of our money, supported by EU structural funds and other grants to bring her back to her former glory. She is now a shining jewel in one of our heritage parks.

Her importance was not simply in her own restoration, but in demonstrating that heritage had a valued place in our city, that the council could not only bring such projects to fruition, but could ensure that the restored building had a useful, productive and viable life after restoration.

It is that viability that is essential if we are to manage our older, heritage buildings successfully.

And just as the Palm House was invaluable as a demonstration of what could be done, so HERO is to the future of funding and management of projects today.

By working together we can ensure that this project shows how sustainability can be made to work in an urban context. But more than that, by seeing heritage as something that is also economically valuable, that can promote the Lisbon agenda with all that means, there is a real chance to change policy, so that appropriate funding can be made available.

Colleagues, Liverpool is very proud of its European connections and international links.

We have, over the last ten years or so, developed many strong relationships with European cities and institutions and with all of you here today.

We have learned a great deal from the partnerships we have made and look forward to sharing and learning with you and from you, during this week's conference.

We hope you enjoy your stay here.

Thank you for your attention.

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