

## Chapter 12

### Architectural regeneration practice in different contexts

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

While architecture is often judged by its physical outcomes, the field of architectural regeneration is more widely defined by the processes that underpin these tangible outcomes – the professional and social relationships, economic drivers and cultural and political frameworks that shape, and are in turn shaped by architectural regeneration. This chapter draws on interviews with five regeneration practitioners who offer insights into the diverse fields of engagement and the roles that regeneration practitioners can play. The interviewees were chosen for the depth of their expertise, the variety of forms of practice, and for the diverse approaches of engagement with the field. These range from architectural regeneration in post-conflict reconstruction via high profile listed building interventions to small, community-focused adaptive reuse projects and architectural regeneration practice in local government in the UK. Whilst not fully representative of the broad field, their stories delineate some of the key corner posts that define the field for architects who work in regeneration, and reflect on a range of alternative ways of working for those seeking a specialist niche in their architectural practice.

## **‘THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS’: HERITAGE REGENERATION IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Sam Woodbridge is a London-based architect with experience leading and consulting on regeneration and development projects in different international contexts. Since 2011 he has worked as a sole practitioner providing architectural services to private clients and non-governmental organisations through his company, Founded.

When Sam Woodbridge arrived in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2009 to take up his post as design and construction manager for the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, among his first tasks was to clear the roads of rubble and debris<sup>1</sup>. Architectural regeneration projects, in contrast to new-build projects, often do not start out with a fixed brief, but instead develop their scope and focus from their context and stakeholder priorities. In Kabul’s post-war environment of the late 2000s, the local community did not initially see much value in restoring a series of old buildings, raising the question of what value a foreign foundation with heritage interests at its heart could bring to such a context. The local community did, however, see how difficult it was to navigate rubble and debris-clogged streets, so this is where Turquoise Mountain started its work. Sam Woodbridge’s account of his 19 months in charge of the restoration and regeneration of The Great Serai in central Kabul illustrates how a difficult post-conflict context with an initially averse local community was transformed into a successful regeneration project by drawing on a range of skills and experiences outside the traditional formation of an architect. Woodbridge’s story highlights a series of regeneration practice principles and personal traits that enabled a young architect at the beginning of his career to meaningfully contribute to a successful regeneration project at the interface of building conservation and socio-economic development. The project was awarded a UNESCO Heritage Award of Distinction in 2013.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.1 HERE]

### **Accessing work in heritage conservation and international development**

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<sup>1</sup> A note on authorship: While the project discussed here focuses on Woodbridge’s experience of leading work on The Great Serai, it should be noted that the conservation approach for Turquoise Mountain’s urban regeneration programme was a collective decision taken by the project partners prior to implementation. Any inference in the text of sole authorship over decisions taken by others or the group is unintentional.

Woodbridge identifies the demands of a highly specialised field within architecture, and the question of scale, as the key challenges in accessing regeneration work for a sole practitioner. For individuals undertaking an already long professional formation as architects, it may prove difficult to obtain additional qualifications in areas relevant to regeneration, such as building conservation or community participation. In Woodbridge's case, his previous experience in a conservation practice which focused on (at the time less common) sustainability aims, together with his interest in Islamic architecture and experience of working in neighbouring Pakistan helped him win the Kabul job.

Yet Woodbridge feels that gaining experience with practices who work with existing contexts and buildings doesn't fully equip an architect to meet the demands of regeneration practice, which entails a range of often 'unseen' tasks that extend beyond the realms of new-build projects. Woodbridge's experience suggests that those employing practitioners for such unconventional projects can recognise the broader skill set an architect, especially one with international experiences, can bring to a project. Asked how he would best describe himself to prospective employers, Woodbridge says: 'I keep it simple and call myself an architect – because I want the best of all worlds'; yet his story of regeneration practice in an international development context illustrates a number of ways in which architects expand their field of work.

### **Garnering local support: negotiating the interface between regeneration and development**

Turquoise Mountain had two clear aims for the project: to save Kabul's arts and crafts heritage by regenerating The Great Serai as 'The Turquoise Mountain Institute for Afghan Arts and Architecture', and to tie this to the regeneration of the city's central area. Faced with the task of convincing the local population who had stayed in the area throughout the conflict that the project had their best interests at heart, the clearing of debris helped the community see some value in the foundation's presence. This led to Turquoise Mountain being lent a single building to complete before additional buildings were given over to the project. The project aims, scope and gradual collaborative evolution could not have happened through a top-down planning process. Woodbridge emphasises that such iterative working with communities and proving the Foundation's positive intentions were the only way to build trust and expand the project. The work on the ground often required the team to be simultaneously working on details for one building, surveying another, and clearing the site for yet another. As project manager, Woodbridge was also responsible for organising power on site, employing contractors and sub-contractors and drafting contracts.

In dealing with the challenges of developing different project areas at different stages, and solving a range of practical, contractual, technical and social challenges that might not arise in more straightforward building contexts, or might be taken care of by different specialists of the professional team, Woodbridge had two unique advantages on his side. The first was time. Woodbridge was able to spend a long time getting to know the building he was in charge of, and learning to relate its architectural features to the community's past and present (Figure 12.2). The second was an explicit instruction from Turquoise Mountain to solve each challenge in the most labour intensive way possible (Figure 12.3). Low labour costs made this possible, but the fundamental driver was the need to produce trickle down effects into the community by creating employment and maintaining or developing skills. Woodbridge comments that this was of course an easy win, but emphasises the conceptual leap required from the regeneration professional coming from a non-development construction context where minimisation of labour costs and time are driving factors on many projects.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.2 AND FIGURE 12.3 HERE]

### **Project funding, community gains and collaborative working**

At the start of the project, despite the support of some high-profile funders like the Prince's Foundation, Turquoise Mountain struggled to raise money. Woodbridge credits the project's labour-intensive strategy for the increasing funding success. When funders visited the site, they could see hundreds of craftsmen busily at work, and it didn't take much imagination to appreciate the ripple out effects of this. It was visible for all to see where the money was going, both through the buildings and the community's wellbeing, such as the craftsmen's children being in education. This highlights the power, as well as the struggles, inherent in bottom-up regeneration practices in a development context. While the aims of regenerating the built heritage and the focus on an institute of art and architecture may have been justified from heritage and architectural viewpoints, demonstrating the project's socio-economic benefits was vital for the project's success in Kabul's post-war context.

Woodbridge was part of a foreign team of architects and engineers who were situated within a team of Afghan engineers and a very large team of local craftsmen. Woodbridge emphasises that the project team was mostly filled by local experts; the foreign architects and engineers were only brought in to fill any gaps in local knowledge, and a local engineer oversaw the project. Woodbridge remembers the combination of intellectual and physical experience as second to none. The Great Serai remains the 'job of all jobs' in terms of professional fulfilment, which he credits to very satisfying and democratic collaboration

including daily conversations with the craftsmen. He explicitly contrasts this with more compartmentalised work practices in non-development contexts.

### **Shaping mentalities towards a shared sense of ownership**

The area around The Great Serai had been earmarked for demolition since the 1970s and this would have been the fate of the area had Turquoise Mountain not become involved. Local residents who had stayed throughout the war appreciated Turquoise Mountain's efforts to help them stay on in their neighbourhood. A turning point in community relations came when the foundation demonstrated that these buildings were not only historically important, but also thermally better performing, and probably more comfortable to live in than new tower blocks that were enjoying an image of middle class living in Kabul.

As residents saw the environment around them becoming more habitable, they were encouraged to do work on their own buildings. Many of the hundreds of craftsmen employed on the project were local residents who used their skills to repair their own properties. Turquoise Mountain offered assistance with residents' own work whilst being mindful of striking the right balance of providing support without creating dependencies. Woodbridge remembers the palpable change of mentality that occurred as people started to repair their own houses. Although this had a gentrifying effect, Woodbridge recounts that local residents saw this as a positive outcome as they could sell their repaired properties. For the heritage building stock, it demonstrated an ongoing use rather than simply an act of preservation. The success of the project is particularly impressive given the difficult context of building in a post-war environment. The project encouraged people to stay in the area and re-build fragmented community networks that had been disrupted by displacement during the war. The project's success therefore extends far beyond the repair of buildings, and ultimately rests on its ability to use the construction process as a catalyst for social development. The reestablishment of property ownership and a broader communal ownership of the area may be among the most stabilising factors in this process, and may go some way towards mitigating the threats of gentrification.

### **Decision-making between conservation, repair and replacement**

Initially, the team collectively sought to develop a cohesive approach to striking a balance between conservation, replacement and replication. Due to the extensive damage to the buildings, considerable parts were missing or had already been replaced. In addition, extensive adaptation over many years before the war resulted in a large variety of styles and details, resulting in a fragmented story of the buildings' history. It quickly became apparent that a uniform approach was not feasible, so Woodbridge decided to judge each case on its

own merit, and to be guided by two principles. The first was to discover the underlying story of a building component or construction technique, and allow this to be told. Local people and craftsmen were often able to provide parts of this story, and Woodbridge sought academic input to fill any gaps. Secondly, he aimed to replace things like-for-like. Often, the team was faced with a large variety of patterns, with no way of telling which had been the original. In these instances, they reverted to pragmatic decision-making, guided by the needs of the proposed new use of that space. There were instances of controversy, such as a decision not to replace a series of very badly damaged screens. This was considered overly radical by Afghan authorities, but Woodbridge argued that not only were there no records of the original screen but a glass pane was also more appropriate for this display case for jewellery. In other cases, Woodbridge advocated for replicating the original, for example for the sake of uniformity of a façade. Other areas became collages of old and new, again appropriate because this approach told the story of how that collage had assembled over the years. Less tangible traces of change underwent the same case-by-case assessment; resulting in bullet holes and other war damage being kept visible in some areas, and being plastered over in others.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.4 HERE]

If this 'mixed-bag' approach appears to risk a less-than-unified outcome, Woodbridge credits the deliberate nature of the approach for the cohesive final product. While the in-depth, case-by-case decision-making process was labour and time intensive, the wide variety of styles and components made this an unavoidable luxury. Well-understood parts of the heritage were less difficult to defend. A uniform affection by all team members for some parts of the building, such as the decorative patterned timber, was helpful in negotiating the process. More controversial decisions, such as those surrounding the screens, sparked intense debate, which proved useful for raising public awareness of building preservation and widening participation in decision making around the project.

This shows that an outside organisation can bring value to such contexts, as it is common for people not to think about such issues until they are topicalised. It also highlights the need for the regeneration practitioner to actively seek out and invite in, rather than avoid or shut down, objections, scepticism and natural tensions that are bound to arise when outsiders are involved in shaping local development, as these often highlight issues that outsiders are unaware of. In addition, he stresses the importance of certain personality traits that help develop and maintain good working relationships. Woodbridge approaches projects slowly,

focuses on understanding, watching and listening to build his own understanding, which then allows him to start adding value and building others' confidence in him in small steps.

In a nod to the gendered nature of construction work, Woodbridge emphasises that this process of early and ongoing engagement with 'the guys' – as construction sites around the world are still predominantly populated by men – is vital to a well-functioning project team. Equally crucial for later project stages is the ability to build relationships to find the right building contractors to carry out the work to high standards. This often involves creating incentives, for example via training for the local workforce. As Woodbridge's account has shown, there are manifold opportunities and challenges for a practitioner working in an international development context; many of these revolve around the way the regeneration practitioner works collaboratively with local partners.

## **CREATIVE REUSE IN ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE**

Geoff Rich is an architect and managing partner at FCBStudios, leading the practice's regeneration and creative reuse projects. He is an AABC-accredited conservation architect and Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts.

A fundamental difference between new-build and adaptive reuse projects is their starting point. Geoff Rich of Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios (FCBS) frames the opportunities and challenges that arise from working with existing buildings in his understanding of where the philosophical emphasis of a project lies: is it on new design (what he refers to as 'Architecture with a capital A'), or on the old building (what he refers to as 'Conservation with a capital C')? He argues that this philosophical stance needs to be made explicit as it considerably affects project outcomes.

In over 20 years of practice, Rich's standpoint has developed through a drive to unify, balance, and equitably join Conservation and Architecture approaches in the same design team. He notes that both hold high aspirations but tend to be polarised into opposing mind-sets and perspectives that different practitioners bring to the same challenge. Rich argues that such polarisation can compromise outcomes technically, aesthetically and philosophically, and leads to clients paying two sets of fees for overlapping work. He acknowledges the difficulties of bringing together architects with the 'Conservation' and 'Architecture' approaches in the same design team, but argues that when there is commitment to integration, it leads to better outcomes with the high aspirations of each approach being upheld.

The complexity of existing sites requires practitioners to start from a deep understanding of context, both from a practical and philosophical point of view. History and meaning of existing sites can be constraining in identifying viable reuse options, but equally present useful constraints within which to develop successful outcomes, as FCBS' Middleport Pottery project demonstrates.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.5]

The project aim was to bring the oldest surviving, fragile and neglected Victorian pottery in the UK up to date. The project brief identified the need for the pottery to modernise its production line, providing space for 50 new employees, and open up the site to visitors. This was achieved without losing the special quality of the site; Rich recounts that there was a layer of perceived 'dust' on the site that was considered sacred. A not insignificant project budget of £9 million was nevertheless insufficient for a comprehensive repair approach. FCBS adopted a very frugal strategy, only spending money where absolutely necessary, and recycling things wherever possible. The pottery's specific constraints of its business operation highlight the opportunities that can arise from such an approach.

The proposed works could not compromise the effective running of the commercial pottery business throughout the regeneration process. The focus for the site, owned by the Prince's Regeneration Trust, was on making primarily practical decisions as part of the business culture, rather than treating it solely as a conservation endeavour. Tapping into this approach facilitated the relationship between the client and the professional team, and was a helpful constraint in developing the repair approach.

To formalise this approach, FCBS, the Prince's Regeneration Trust and the Pottery owners agreed at the outset that the project should focus on 'mending the factory'. FCBS designed a 10-page illustrated booklet that set out the reasons for doing so; what contractors should buy into in terms of the philosophy of the approach; what they were expected to do; and, crucially, what they should leave alone. This ensured that no party did more than they were contracted to. The booklet became a common reference between the project funder (The Prince's Regeneration Trust), the beneficiary (the Pottery), and those doing the work (the contractors). Rich describes how everyone felt very comfortable with the document, as it presented a framework for negotiating the necessary compromises required within the overarching philosophy all had bought into.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.6 HERE]



## **Lessons from engaging with local communities**

Architectural regeneration projects, due to their nature of engaging with existing communities and buildings, often have a large number of stakeholders and interested parties involved.

Middleport Pottery exemplifies a project where the communication between the design team, client and funders was closely bounded by defined stakeholders from the outset.

At Bath Abbey, a project with a high profile public function, FCBS were required to deal extensively with a large range and number of interested parties and active stakeholders. The £20 million project involved a major reordering of the interior of the church for the first time since 1860, a major repair of the historic floors as well as works outside of the church to create new underground spaces. Being the largest historic building in the middle of a World Heritage city, Bath Abbey hosts a weekly congregation of a thousand people, and some 30 organisations regularly perform in the space. Although FCBS dealt with the client team comprised of the Abbey's rector and managing director of staff, additional key stakeholders were heavily involved in decision-making. A Parish Church Council represented the views of the church users, alongside a host of other stakeholders and interest groups, for example concerning the archaeology or the historic fabric, all of which needed to be kept informed throughout the process. In short, there was somebody interested in every imaginable aspect of the project.

The bar being set very high to justify interventions in such a high profile listed building made complex stakeholder engagement easier. People recognised that although they might disagree with certain decisions, these had been considered and justified thoroughly through a conscientious planning process. Rich has found that this makes it possible to explain the different and possibly contradictory demands that a design team need to juggle to come up with a balanced design solution, builds confidence in the design team, and enables intelligent and reasoned discussions with those involved.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.7 HERE]

Rich perceives differences in public reactions towards new-build projects and adaptive reuse of existing buildings. With historic buildings, it is often recognised that change is necessary to protect, enhance or sustain something that people value. As a result, there is often less of an emotive reaction, unless of course people perceive a proposed change as damaging or disfiguring to somewhere they love. By contrast, new build projects, and especially those with a commercial developer, can often lack the mitigating factors of existing buildings, and public reactions can become very animated.

The Middleport Pottery was interesting in its wide democratic reach: it represented all the different user groups in society. People who work there gained much confidence from the project as it helped make their jobs sustainable. The (in some cases third or fourth generation) workers at the pottery were buoyed by the growing interest in their work through the public exposure of the pottery. The regeneration programme in the neighbouring streets was triggered by the project because the council realised that increasing visitor numbers were interested in the treatment of its historic buildings. As the community benefits trickled down, an unexpected positive impact on funding was seen. Several significant contributions to the project were made, some in excess of £1 million, which had been unthinkable five years earlier. Equally impressive was the employment of the long-term unemployed, whose experience of living in the area enabled their work as history guides in the Pottery. The project now acts as a community centre and has galvanised a sense of civic pride of what the pottery stands for, and what it might do in the future, suggesting remarkable potential for continuing and future community impact.

### **The architect as brief writer**

In architectural regeneration, the architect is often involved at the very early stages of a project, for example to help formulate a brief and vision for a site. At FCBS the practice's involvement in developing the brief, scope and focus of a project varies depending on the position of the client. FCBS' projects range from self-initiated works such as the Feild Barns in the Yorkshire Dales or work on redundant churches with the Church of England to projects that come with clients that have strong capabilities and bring energy to their ideas, but have no funds to realise them. In such cases, FCBS may initially become involved in fundraising, and if projects proceed, these cases provide good opportunities for deep involvement in the profile of a project. High profile public buildings may require several rounds of involvement before a commission is secured. For Bath Abbey, the practice went through a succession of informal stages of project engagement, formal shortlisting, fundraising efforts and finally several stages of formal competition submissions before being awarded the project.

### **Improving environmental performance in existing building: Redefining achievable and desirable**

Reflecting on the challenges that arise at the intersection of two primary pieces of legislation (that which protects the heritage status of listed buildings, and that which determines environmental performance and improvements), Rich has observed a shift in sustainability thinking, which has resulted in a growing cultural interest in 'trying to get more out of less'. In combination with evolving understandings of what desirable lifestyles are, this leads to new

insights into how the built environment in general, and existing buildings in particular, can contribute to sustainability aims.

Clients often make it known that they take it for granted that a practice like FCBS will exceed the building regulations and will provide excellent environmental solutions within the scope of the wider brief. This confidence, surely in part inspired by FCBS' reputation, is equally attributable to intelligent clients, Rich believes. Commercial clients in particular realise that every building project requires them to make choices about sustainability. They know that enhancing wellbeing in buildings by focusing on factors such as daylight, acoustics, having control over the working environment or space to concentrate leads to higher productivity in the building users. Commercially, achieving an environment that contributes to wellbeing in this way is worth much more than completing a series of exercises and balances around energy performance. Rich agrees that many of the tick-box approaches applied to existing buildings are not appropriate because they depend either on having significant choice over the design solution, which is inherently limited in existing buildings; or on being able to predict environmental performance in computer models, which are expensive and difficult to replicate for existing buildings.

He argues that it should be much easier to explain and quantify changes and improvements to existing buildings because building owners hold reliable data, such as electricity bills, and it is much easier to monitor environmental conditions in existing buildings and spaces. Rich regrets that despite these favourable conditions, many practices do not approach designing for change with sufficient commitment. He attributes this to two trends that adversely affect ambitions and levels of tolerance towards environmental performance in existing buildings. First, Rich notes that compared to new buildings, there is generally a higher tolerance of under-performance in existing buildings, because people appreciate that adaptive reuse projects retain existing fabric and protect its embodied energy, scoring obvious points in resource savings. People are also more tolerant of under-performance in existing buildings if they like the space. Easily perceptible issues such as moisture transfer or acoustics can make for pleasant experiences in historic buildings, and mitigate perceptions of failures in other areas of environmental performance.

Secondly, when considering the scope, aims and focus of environmental improvements to existing buildings, Rich sees the field plagued by misunderstandings about what is achievable or desirable. This often leads to environmental and conservation agendas unnecessarily set against each other. He notes that in the UK regeneration practitioners agonise about changes to old buildings to the point where they lose sight of the fact that

there are very good legislative standards about environmental improvements in existing buildings. Rich emphasises that ensuring to meet, or ideally exceed, these standards, and ensuring that interventions to existing buildings are built in the way they are designed, is paramount for achieving a holistic understanding of how a building contributes to a positive environmental experience.

### **The future of financing architectural regeneration**

Reflecting on the changes to funding architectural regeneration projects since FCBS started out in the 1970s, Rich notes that the practice's client body has changed over the years (although not necessarily only in relation to existing buildings), and many more of the practice's clients are now contractors. Rich notes that the architectural regeneration market (usually) follows the new-build market in terms of responding to technology, and ideas for funding and commissioning, leaving him to wonder if adaptive reuse projects will also become increasingly contractor-led in the future. This hunch is complicated by the fact that Rich has seen more specialist conservation contractors go bankrupt since 2010 than during the preceding 20 years.

## **REGENERATION PRACTICE IN A LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITY**

Tobias Gövert has 20 years of experience working in the development industry in London. Currently interim Head of Strategic Housing at Lewisham Council, he previously worked as Head of Regeneration and Design at Harrow Council and Design Manager at the Greater London Authority, as well as working for a number of private practices including Ian Ritchie Architects. He is a member of Hackney's and Havering's Design Review Panels.

Regeneration practitioners in municipal settings balance competing development needs according to government-set regeneration priorities, which, in the UK's context of ongoing funding cuts to local government, brings considerable challenges. Tobias Gövert, former head of regeneration at the London Borough of Harrow, discusses the opportunities that arise from such constraints, such as developing creative delivery models to address the competing aims of generating funds, achieving design quality and working to tight delivery deadlines. The UK government's report 'Regeneration to enable growth: What government is doing to enable community-led regeneration' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011) sets out focal areas for municipal regeneration practice. Gövert's work revolved around the intersection of place and business development in a wider context of housing provision and area regeneration. The combination of these aims had led to regeneration being seen as a positive area for investment, mostly because of its potential for

providing long-term income streams for under-funded councils. Harrow Council started to explicitly focus on regeneration in the 2010s, and Gövert was tasked with building a dedicated regeneration team to lead the borough's regeneration efforts. In the first years of operation, his team of eight regeneration officers focused as much on marketing, publicising and politically anchoring their strategy as on delivering it.

### **Balancing competing needs across the scales of area regeneration**

Regeneration projects are developed and negotiated within the different legislative realms of wider municipal frameworks. Harrow is defined as an 'opportunity area' in the London Plan, which acts as the reference document for the borough's 10-year strategy and area action plan. Challenges arise in translating the London Plan to Harrow's specific needs. For example, Harrow's action plan does not support the densities prescribed by the London Plan, but clearly describes where growth within the borough should focus. To defend such deviance, Harrow's regeneration strategy needs to holistically evaluate architectural and urban development needs with economic and social benefits, justifying, for example, the increased skyline heights of many of the proposed developments against tangible and intangible community benefits.

The development of such a complex strategy involves not only a series of municipal and public groups, such as the borough-wide residents' regeneration panel, but also a large range of external stakeholders, including public transport and police representatives. In addition, relatively short political tenures can threaten the continuity of longer-term regeneration aims in local government. Gövert's team implemented a six-weekly regeneration board with the council's leader and CEO, as well as all political representatives, to maintain involvement of all parties and keep them informed of progress. Early demonstration of how benefits are spreading, and keeping the political opposition on board, constitute key strategies to future-proof the works in the face of potential changes in local government.

Other challenges arise from competing priorities within the borough. One of Harrow Council's priorities is regeneration, while another is financial performance. Like many senior professionals in such contexts, Gövert operated in a larger team structure, and his operation was both bounded by, and touched on, other teams' remits. Gövert spent a large amount of his time coordinating regeneration delivery strategies and aligning them with the appropriate funding models, which need to justify net gains and income streams against any borrowing. Harrow Council's dual needs for more social and market-rate housing and business accommodation, and the legislative funding constraints in delivering the former are another

example of the competing needs regeneration practitioners working in municipalities have to negotiate. The 'permitted development' rule, which allows the conversion of office space into residential units without planning approval, risks unsettling the delicate balance of these competing needs. Gövert estimated that in 2015, the borough contained some 100 office properties that had the potential to be converted into housing units under this scheme, but that doing so would constitute a loss of much-needed office space. This complex task is further complicated by the need to provide space for social and physical mobility, as sustainable communities need fresh ideas as well as local input. Harrow Council's dual focus on providing housing and employment opportunities for existing residents and on developing a vibrant and resilient professional community by attracting residents and businesses from outside the borough highlights that local area regeneration needs must also be evaluated in the context the larger urban conurbation.

### **Addressing housing challenges within multiple constraints**

Similarly competing needs define Harrow's housing challenges. The UK has a long standing problem of a lack of social housing, with a severe shortfall in numbers being built compared to the demand. The outsourcing of this provision to the private sector has further compounded the problem in many areas. Harrow in 2015 did not have proportionally larger numbers of homeless residents than other London boroughs (Trust for London 2017), but large numbers were living in emergency and temporary housing, with many more waiting to be housed as the borough has fewer social housing units than other boroughs. Gövert emphasised that his team's efforts to increase the number of housing units for the borough's most vulnerable were further compounded by regulatory limitations on borrowing money for the construction of social housing and by lack of space within the borough. This had led to the creation of pop-up homes and buying land outside of London; both less than ideal solutions to the challenge of creating cohesive communities within the borough. The confluence of such desperate conditions is of course mirrored in many other London boroughs and cities across the UK.

Within this heavily constrained context, Gövert sees the build-to-rent model, whereby councils build their own housing units to let to residents, as promising to address the significant challenges of financing, management, and risk of social stigmatisation inherent in developments that integrate affordable and private provision on the same site. In the build-to-rent model, units built to the same specification are managed and let by the same company by adjusting rental value to incomes. Tenants are charged 100%, 80% or 60% of market rate; with the latter classed as affordable. This helps to achieve a critical mass of housing, and allows mobility between different types of housing, such as for example to size

up once a family grows. An additional advantage of the council providing its own build-to-rent properties arises from being able to give longer rent guarantees, e.g. five-year tenancy agreements, as opposed to the less secure private tenancy agreements of 6-12 months. Gövert notes that clearly the challenge revolves around carefully curating a high number of social housing without it dominating the overall development. It is essential to adjust the model carefully from the planning to the letting stages, to avoid, for example, residents on the lower percentage rents being unable to afford high service charges.

Harrow Council had in 2015 identified some ten sites that were to house a programme of 600+ units under this type of development. The developments were directly targeted at improving the borough's income streams, which had been factored into the council's financial strategy. As a result, there was considerable time pressure to deliver these units, as failing to do so would widen existing gaps in the council's already constrained budget. The question arises whether these units, built to tight deadlines and to maximise financial gains, can simultaneously manage to attract and retain the borough's socio-economically diverse population.

### **Making space for conservation in local authority regeneration**

The conflicting priorities a municipal regeneration practitioner needs to navigate also emerges in negotiating options of conservation versus new-build. Reflecting on the challenges of implementing a conservation-focused approach in local government, Gövert commented that like many local authorities, sadly Harrow's planning department was severely under-resourced with only a single heritage officer, who was struggling to counter a large number of developers' attempts to demolish existing buildings that embody diverse tangible and intangible values. Gövert's position was strengthened by his function of assessing both urban design and architectural design quality on applications to the council, affording him vetoing power in relation to existing buildings and reinforcing his team's ability to protect and conserve where appropriate.

The existing civic centre that previously housed the council's own offices provides a good example of a conservation-focused approach leading to successful adaptive reuse. When Gövert took up his post, the assumption was that the civic centre would be demolished. Under Gövert's tenure, feasibility studies on reusing the block for different functions were carried out. Reuse as residential units, for example, provided considerable planning advantages: this time, the regeneration team would benefit from the controversial permitted development rule that allowed reuse for residential purposes. Other options included the preservation of generations of collective memory associated with the public building by

maintaining it in public use, for example by housing a school. The team investigated the benefits of inviting in artist communities at affordable rates who could bring a range of intangible benefits to an area; an advantage usually made unaffordable by pressures to let space at the highest commercial rates.

### **Opportunities and priorities for creative regeneration practice in municipal settings**

In the context of manifold and diverse constraints, Gövert is positive about the opportunities afforded to a council building up its own regeneration unit. With government cuts to social housing rents, and with subsidies disappearing, boroughs are in need of new models to meet their complex development needs and augment their finances. Developing such models is among the most interesting challenges for a regeneration practitioner, but requires certain conditions to be met to ensure their success. Gövert believes that the most important thing a council can do for its regeneration ambitions is to build design quality control elements into these processes. These can take the form of a well-informed design review function, as well as a greater emphasis within the regeneration team on design quality, both of which Gövert has promoted in his role<sup>2</sup>. Gövert estimates his team of eight to be among the most substantially architect-staffed regeneration teams in London at the time, and notes that the regeneration profession has sufficient architects and urban designers, but that municipal regeneration teams need to find ways of attracting them. Relatively short political tenures complicating the implementation of long-term regeneration visions, ongoing funding cuts and competing demands are some of the challenges facing local authority regeneration teams, but as Gövert's account has demonstrated, they also provide ample space for developing creative models and holistic solutions to complex social, economic and architectural challenges.

## **REGENERATION PRACTICE AS CITIZENSHIP: NEGOTIATING SOCIAL HISTORIES IN TIMES OF TRANSITION AND CRISIS**

Dr Sofia Aleixo and Dr Victor Mestre are the founding directors of Lisbon-based practice VMSA architects. Sofia Aleixo divides her time as an architectural practitioner with roles as an architectural educator at the University of Evora and researcher at Lisbon's Nova university.

In VMSA's over 20 years of regeneration practice in Portugal and beyond, a deep attention to people and their social histories has formed the main thread of the practice's work. This

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.harrow.gov.uk/news/article/538/experts\\_flock\\_to\\_new\\_better\\_design\\_for\\_harrow\\_initiative](http://www.harrow.gov.uk/news/article/538/experts_flock_to_new_better_design_for_harrow_initiative)



stance, which Sofia Aleixo and Victor Mestre emphasise has nothing to do with nostalgia, but is driven by an imperative to show respect for the past in whatever form it took. This encompasses a political standpoint to regeneration practice as well as a conservationist approach to the communities that occupy sites, and extends to implications for architectural design.

VMSA focus their task as regeneration practitioners on understanding, capturing and giving expression to how people, their stories and memories contribute to shaping a place, thus conceiving of the starting place for regeneration practice at the intersection between the past and the future. They position their approach in direct opposition to a very different regeneration trend within Portugal, where projects are driven by economic considerations and an outward focus on displaying heritage for short-term tourist consumption. VMSA see this as not necessarily counter to, but certainly secondary to their approach of prioritising local communities' histories and values.

If regeneration practice 'starts and finishes with the people', this opens up the possibility of public disagreement with both the processes and outcomes of regeneration practice. Mestre stresses communities' rights to disagree with, or dislike aspects of regeneration processes at any stage, including the finished project. This right defines the architect's role as communicator, not 'dictator' of outcomes that others have to live with. Whilst this may seem a rather obvious view in our times of emphasis on community involvement, VMSA clarify that in Portugal there is still a strong tension between those who hold local knowledge and those who acquire it academically, opening up chasms between communities and the professionals tasked with shaping their places. Starting conversations and building up relationships to enable truly democratic engagement in regeneration processes is therefore a considerable challenge, especially as community participation is not formally embedded in architectural services provision. VMSA provide this service voluntarily where feasible.

### **Client relationships as advocacy for dialogue and participation**

Mestre notes that working in regeneration with a people focus requires a client of a certain mindset. The practice see the process by which they are sought out by potential clients, and by which they select which clients to work with as representative of their wider view of society. VMSA advocate for what they refer to as a dialectic approach, in which dialogue with and involvement of communities plays a central role. Aleixo stresses that the practice communicate their focus on long-term regeneration outcomes and consequences to clients from the outset. Potential clients display different levels of receptiveness and willingness to engage in the inevitably more complex process of considering longer-term social

consequences. VMSA emphasise how a failure to connect a project's aim to its social context will lead to those affected to feel side-lined or to oppose the project. Mestre stresses that this process-led approach first and foremost provides people with a democratic opportunity to engage with issues of local relevance, and, when it is allowed to take place, can afford communities the possibility of being involved in shaping local history.

VMSA see such close working with communities as imperative not only to ensure that a project is locally relevant, but also as a means of preventing their status as architects from shifting into the realm of the political. Mestre contrasts long-term community engagement with the more performative moments of architectural practice, such as attending opening ceremonies and cutting ribbons. Interaction with political systems and representatives is of course unavoidable for regeneration practitioners, but VMSA stress that it is important not to approach communities and stakeholders via political channels as this may create distrust and prevent local voices from being fully heard. Politicians trying to sell pre-conceived ideas and solutions to local communities, and differences in education and associated lack of confidence to make their voices heard, can lead to marginalisation of communities in consultation processes.

Contrary to the UK business model for architects, which emphasises the need to front-charge fees to reflect the value of architectural ideas, VMSA charge no fees until an agreement of understanding is reached with a potential client. VMSA will provide potential clients with a sketch proposal that communicates their values and priorities for a project before making a decision about whether to continue the project. There is some variance depending on whether the client is a private or an institutional one. With institutional clients, they reserve the right to step out much later in the process. This has not happened often, but VMSA consider this prerogative a necessary insurance in instances when their reputation is at risk of being abused, for example to facilitate the planning processes of a project without the client agreeing to community engagement.

VMSA reflect on what this selective and principle-driven way of working means for their ability to survive as a practice in times of economic downturn, and note that the choice can be a stark one. As the economic crisis of the late 2000s took hold in Portugal, their practice could choose to engage in regeneration as favoured by politicians, or reject this type of work and struggle to survive professionally. Mestre notes that they made this decision by reflecting on how they define themselves as architects and people, asking if one is an architect first and foremost? He argues that one is, and always remains, a citizen first, and

decisions of architectural engagement must be driven by, and governed under, the rules of good citizenship.

### **Shaping policy to protect cultural heritage in times of socio-political transition**

In Portugal, the 2008 economic crisis increased conservation and regeneration work, though VMSA cautions that this is a 'false' understanding of regeneration linked more to the purchasing power of wealthy elites than an engagement with heritage values. This has increasingly favoured approaches of superficial retention of the appearance of a building, with interior spaces completely removed and re-modelled to accommodate the modern conveniences and desires of wealthy owners. Living in central areas of the country's many old towns is becoming ever more popular, and VMSA presupposes that residents able to afford these conversions derive pride from living in an existing building. While there is of course some historical continuity in privileged populations inhabiting desirable inner city locations, Mestre bemoans the lack of interest in fully inhabiting such places and becoming integrated into their communities, which deprives these conversions of their true sense of value. Aside from the impact on communities, Mestre adds that when a country undergoes processes of social transition and economic crisis, the role and meaning of its cultural heritage must be carefully considered in negotiating these transitions. Mestre cautions that Portugal's current regeneration policies lack an explicit appreciation of the role of historical buildings in the country's transformation. The resulting view of heritage as tourism generator risks an irreversible breaking down of social connections to history that are instrumental in regenerating this heritage for longer-term social benefit. Aleixo stresses that the harm done to the buildings themselves through insensitive adaptation will be difficult to reverse. In practical terms, this approach to heritage regeneration often results in 'hiding' local people when displaying the country's monuments. This pointedly frames the question underlying all regeneration processes: what drives them, and who are the process and outcomes for? Local people, outsiders, or both? VMSA stress that in their regeneration practice, displacing living populations is never acceptable.

Mestre notes that Portugal's travelling communities provide a living counterexample to the short-term and tourist-focused understanding of cultural heritage regeneration in Portugal. Mestre has since 1979 periodically spent time with Roma communities who occupy no-man's lands around neglected historic monuments in Southern Portugal (Mestre, 2015). Mestre comments that these Roma communities in Portugal represent what any regeneration project might wish for: cultural heritage surrounded by and incorporated into people's lives; without needing to be sustained by, nor irreversibly altered for, the short-term benefits of tourism.

[INSERT FIGURE 12.8 HERE]

VMSA have successfully addressed the challenges surrounding a long-established group of users in a convent which housed a group of monks, which the developers argued should be relocated to allow the conversion of the convent. VMSA believe that if a building is home to any community, this warrants its protection, and changing the building's use to exclude its existing community leads to artifice. In the event, the convent was converted for continued use by the monks, as well as by the wider community.

### **Architectural intervention in existing contexts**

Reflecting on how VMSA's philosophical approach carries through from the urban and neighbourhood scales to the scale of architectural intervention, Aleixo makes no distinction between working on new build or existing projects. She argues that a building should never be seen as the location of an architectural challenge, but as the centre of a context. Context, or place, then suggests that this is never 'new'; any place is already a setting to people, economic activity, social relations, political processes, historical events. Regardless of whether a project is situated in the context of an existing or a new building, the approach should be the same: starting by understanding what already is. If the focus of a project revolves around a challenge, the architect's task is to stay with that challenge, and specifically concentrate on broadening the understanding of how the challenge came to be, as opposed to simply providing a solution to it. Aleixo stresses that this process-focused way of working requires a certain flexibility of the project programme itself, to allow this to adapt to the existing place, and to the increasing understanding of the problem setting as the project evolves. This again emphasises the need to work with clients who are supportive of this approach as it may have implications for completion times, among other things.

A project to rehabilitate a fifteenth century church in Santa Cruz on the island of Madeira illustrates the positive social and architectural impacts when this process works well. The client's objective had been to restore the ancient buildings to preserve their architectural heritage. VMSA's efforts focused on identifying a function to keep the centrally located building in active use by linking the project brief to the town's initiative for retirement homes. They argued that locating the retirement home centrally would allow families to visit relatives daily during their extended lunch hour, while a more remote location would reduce visiting to weekends. Combining the restoration of the ancient church with a landscape project of a nearby public park has turned the project into a success, with children and family visiting elderly relatives to share lunch in the park.

The project's most fervent opposition came from the Bishop's desire to house his congregation in the ancient religious building. VMSA again argued that people and their use requirements should lead the decision-making: occupying space full time should take priority over comparatively short times of church service that would leave the building unused for most of the week. The final outcome where the congregation uses a nearby underground amphitheatre and auditorium successfully balances the competing community needs. This example highlights again how intangible outcomes, rather than the architectural intervention, constitute successful architectural regeneration.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Tracing the manifold forms of engagement in architectural regeneration, the chapter has provided insights into architectural regeneration through different practitioners' perspectives. It has touched on the challenges of designing in existing contexts from architectural and stylistic concerns via ethical issues, to professional practice and political engagement.

The accounts of this chapter suggest that the field of architectural regeneration offers opportunities for widening an architect's realm of practice, be that through intense community engagement, influencing sustainability debates or forging opportunities from tight political and economic constraints. The field offers more flexible working arrangements than 'traditional' architectural practice if a practitioner is able to remain agile in their handling of complex and shifting local priorities and contexts.

All the practitioners interviewed touched on the additional time that is needed to carry out the unseen yet essential tasks that successful regeneration practice relies on. This time is largely unrecognised in architectural service provision, so there is scope for systemic change to better enable practitioners to carry out this type of work. Doing so would improve the accessibility of regeneration practice to a wider field of people. If to be a successful regeneration practitioner requires extensive unpaid investment, the field as a whole risks excluding those whose economic circumstances exclude them from doing unpaid work.

A range of ethical dilemmas were touched upon which showed that a heightened sensitivity to local conditions, and to people's histories and values are of utmost importance in successful regeneration practice. Certain individual personality traits are important, as are contractual conditions that allow flexibility in building programmes to accommodate evolving briefs. We also saw that regeneration work will often bring practitioners in contact with issues

of socio-economic inequality in the communities in which they work. Sensitive examination and navigation of such contexts are not only imperative aspects of regeneration practice, but can be the very source of innovation and successful solutions, as both the accounts from Afghanistan and London demonstrated.

It is clear that regeneration practice, through its close engagement with ongoing local trends, can act as a sensitive indicator of wider industry trends, as noted by Rich. The inherently political nature of architectural regeneration shone through all of the accounts of this chapter. In particular, we saw that at the national scale, robust policies to protect intangible and tangible cultural heritage in times of socio-political transition are vital; and the regeneration practitioner can play an important role in demonstrating the long-term benefits of putting such policies in place, as Mestre and Aleixo suggested.

This collective of accounts thus serves as a call for aspiring and current regeneration practitioners to advocate for further system change in the architectural profession to incorporate the many unseen and unpaid areas of work of architectural regeneration into the standard architectural services provision and open up the field to a wider range of practitioners.

By emphasising the importance of existing local communities in shaping regeneration briefs and engaging in regeneration processes from beginning to end; and actively seeking out and exploring apparent conflict, adversity and competing interests, regeneration practitioners can draw on a set of tools that convert challenges into opportunities and enrich the understanding of local context to make for better outcomes. This requires ambition to see beyond current legislation, for example by aiming to gain understanding of complex socio-environmental interactions for each project context rather than being satisfied with tick-box exercises to comply with environmental legislation. Finally, the many ethical challenges we encounter bring the political implications of decision making in regeneration practice (such as whether it is ever acceptable to displace existing populations, for example) to the forefront.

By being aware that architectural interventions in existing contexts are best viewed as opportunities to broaden the understanding of how a context came to be, rather than simply a challenge to provide a solution to a design problem serves as a useful guiding principle to negotiate these challenges successfully.

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## Captions

Figure 12.1 The badly damaged Great Serai in central Kabul had been marked for demolition (left, 2007). The successfully completed regeneration project contributed to local area socio-economic development as well as meeting its brief of safeguarding arts and heritage in post-war Kabul (right, 2011). (Photographs by Turquoise Mountain (left) and Sam Woodbridge (right))

Figure 12.2 Detailed survey drawings formed the basis for getting to know the building over time. (Drawing by Turquoise Mountain, 2007)

Figure 12.3 Labour intensive building work taking place. (Photograph by Sam Woodbridge, 2009)

Figure 12.4 Like-for-like repair of a timber screen (left). Display of intangible traces in the form of found plaster moulds and artefacts (top right). Juxtaposition of new and existing plasterwork (bottom right). (Photographs by Sam Woodbridge, 2011)

Figure 12.5 Middleport Factory café before (2010) and after (2014). (Photographs by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios)

Figure 12.6 An excerpt from FCBS booklet 'Mending the Factory' illustrates the project philosophy: protecting the past and investing in the future. The booklet served as a starting point for design decisions and helped the team decide which place on the chart this fell on. The philosophy was reflected in the conservation management plan and worked through into all drawings, details and specifications. (Image by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, 2012).

Figure 12.7 A visualisation of the different spaces provided for the wide range of stakeholders involved in the Abbey's reordering. (Image by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, 2018).

Figure 12.8 Roma communities occupying monumental sites in Campo Maior, Portugal (Photograph by Elina Santana, 2016)