

# Adaptive reuse of the industrial built heritage in the Merchant City, Glasgow

## The conservation-based planning approach

**Xiaohan Lu**

Mackintosh School of Architecture

### Abstract

This research explores the morphological changes within Glasgow's urban landscape since the 1980s, with a particular emphasis on the integration of the city's industrial legacy into the framework of modern urban planning. The analysis intertwines adaptation theories, urban physical regeneration, and planning history. The morphological conservation approach has been influenced by a series of historical factors, processes, and decisions: the transformation from comprehensive redevelopment to urban rehabilitation; the revitalization of the inner city through engagement with the private sector; the re-evaluation of industrial built heritage since the 1980s; the shift in city images after deindustrialization, which transformed the core of heavy industries into a services centre; and, within the neoliberal planning framework, the shift from urban managerialism to urban entrepreneurialism. To illustrate these consequences related to building heritage conservation in Glasgow, this paper draws on evidence from the adaptation of existing Victorian industrial buildings. The associated conservation approach has been subject to criticism for legislative rigidity and material inauthenticity in the built heritage. Consequently, this paper also examines the development of preservation policies and the interpretation and application of authenticity in built heritage in response to morphological shifts.

### Keywords

planning history, city planning, built heritage, adaptation theory

### How to cite

Xiaohan Lu, "Adaptive reuse of the industrial built heritage in the Merchant City, Glasgow: The conservation-based planning approach". In Ian Morley and Hendrik Tieben (eds.), *International Planning History Society Proceedings*, 20<sup>th</sup> IPHS Conference, "The (High Density) Metropolis and Region in Planning History," Hong Kong, 2 - 5 July, 2024, TU Delft Open, 2024.

DOI: 10.7480/iphs.2024.1.7600

## INTRODUCTION

In Glasgow's planning history, the conservation-based planning in Merchant City exemplifies a model of post-industrial regeneration within historic city centre. This approach is representative of broader trends in the city's planning history and highlights a somewhat contradictory aspect within built heritage management and practices. The narrative can be traced through the major transition in regeneration strategies, epitomizing a paradigm shift from comprehensive redevelopment to conservation-led revitalization. Initially, in response to the urban agenda of regeneration stemming from industrial decline and the associated issues of physical, social, and economic decay, the city adopted a modernist urbanism approach. This approach was characterized by 'tabula rasa' development plans, which advocated for extensive clearing and rebuilding. By the 1950s, the City Council had implemented strategies for managing population overflow beyond the city limits. In 1957, the City's Development Plan (DPR) identified 29 areas, including the city centre, as Comprehensive Development Areas (CDAs).<sup>1</sup> Accompanied by this establishment, a series of implements were conducted: slum replacement, high-rise flats construction, and turning marginal spaces into usage and dispersal of population to peripheral estates; re-arrangement of the transportation system with setting up the new M8 Motorway.<sup>2</sup> However, over 100,000 people were still on the city's housing waiting list in 1960, and the physical decline issues were not well-solved. Furthermore, the urban expansion brought new social and economic issues.<sup>3</sup> As Florian Urban concluded this redevelopment, 'attempt to convert an ailing industrial city into a flourishing decentralised metropolis was largely unsuccessful.'<sup>4</sup>

The turning point of Glasgow's regeneration brought from the launch of the Glasgow Eastern Area Renewal (GEAR) in 1976, the project announced by the Secretary of State for Scotland and supported by the Scottish Development Agency and the City Council. The GEAR scheme marked the beginning of the new urban policy. The project aimed at environmental, physical and economic renewal, and it contributed to a far more traditional way of city regeneration, refocused on the inner city. Glasgow is initiating conservation-led regeneration instead of comprehensive redevelopment from this moment.

Accordingly, Glasgow's revitalisation strategy has predominantly aimed at channelling development towards the city centre, emphasizing the importance of ensuring access to various advantages and facilities.<sup>5</sup> The revitalization of Merchant City forms the central strategy of this procedure, aimed at transitioning the district from a predominantly industrial quarter to a service-based centre. Historically, the Merchant City area has been the commercial heart of the mid of 18th century in Glasgow, well known for the tobacco and sugar business. During the 1960s, this area was used by wholesale trade warehouses, manufacturing factories and public buildings. The government moved the industrial activity to suburban areas and demolished outdated buildings for new roads. The deindustrialisation and comprehensive factors such as the rearrangement of traffic and the end of retail price maintenance caused the dramatic decline of properties in this area.

By 1980, about a third of the property in the area was vacant, and Glasgow City Council owned a third of the property, including two-thirds of the vacant property.<sup>6</sup> The situation arose from

a confluence of factors, including the unsatisfactory conditions of existing buildings for modern demands, major road proposals afflicting the eastern edge of the area, and the OCDA<sup>7</sup> proposals, which resulted in additional areas of land in Merchant City coming into public ownership.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, marketing industrial built-heritage assets received significant attention from city authorities. Moreover, since local authorities held most properties at that time, the first stage of regeneration was launched through cooperation between Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Development Agency (SDA). Most scholars define the regeneration strategy of this area as housing-led revitalization, which converts old buildings into residential use and housing projects.<sup>9</sup> This implementation aimed to attract young, middle-class individuals to live, work, and invest in this area, thereby stimulating economic activity in the city centre.

For the SDA-supported projects in the area, the provision of 10.5 million in public funds attracted a total investment of around 51 million: showing a leverage ratio of 4.87 per pound allocated by the development agency.<sup>10</sup>

In this process, the City Council provided approximately 5000 pounds per house for conversion support, and SDA also offered great funds for the development, including later in supporting the private sector investment.

## RE-EVALUATION OF FORMER INDUSTRIAL- BUILT HERITAGE

Re-evaluation and rearrangement of the former industrial-built heritage could be seen as the consequences of the implementation discussed above. However, the task of assessing the historical value of these industrial structures within the designation framework is fraught with challenges. This difficulty arises not only from the subjective nature of heritage values but also because heritage conservation is often viewed as an effort to preserve relics from a pre-industrial past.<sup>11</sup> Industrial heritage remains relatively underestimated and neglected compared to other types of heritage. This is largely due to the persistent negative associations and memories with the process of deindustrialization, which continue to overshadow its cultural and historical significance.

In fact, the industrial landscape is closely linked to late 20th-century city redevelopment in most post-industrial cities in Europe. Unless there was significant demolition, the industrial-based transportation, buildings, and infrastructure fundamentally shaped the urban context. In 1983, a reassessment of Glasgow's industrial buildings was undertaken, revealing that only 300 of the 1,100 structures recorded in the 1974 database remained, largely due to extensive redevelopment and urban regeneration initiatives.<sup>12</sup> Still, large-scale warehouses were preserved and restored from the 1980s, especially in the Merchant City area.

The situation of re-evaluation the former industrial buildings in Merchant City is complex and contentious due to the architectural diversity and historic significance of its former industrial buildings. These buildings showcase a remarkable variety of styles including Free Classical, Renaissance, Art Deco, Glasgow style, Edwardian Renaissance, Edwardian Baroque, neo-Egyptian, Edwardian Freestyle, and Italianate, most of which date from the mid-nine-

teenth century.<sup>13</sup> The uniqueness of these structures can largely be attributed to the contributions of renowned local architects such as Alexander “Greek” Thomson (1817-1875), who left a significant mark on the area with designs like the famous Egyptian Hall.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Glasgow distinguished itself as one of the first cities to incorporate cast iron into its industrial buildings, a pioneering move in street architecture during that period. An early newspaper review celebrated this innovation, noting that unlike the great masonry structures seen in the Albert Dock, Liverpool, or St Katherine’s Dock, London, Glasgow opted for bold facades in glass and cast iron, which were unique in Britain at that time.<sup>15</sup>

The reality is that although these historic industrial buildings are distinguished by various styles, scale, and historic significance, most of them were classified as B-listed, with the majority being designated during the redevelopment of the area in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>16</sup> The revitalization of historical quarters and the revaluation of former industrial buildings were established concurrently. This classification, it appears, does not derive exclusively from their historical values; rather, the listing system serves principally as a mechanism for urban historic environmental management within the Merchant City area.

## CONSERVATION PLANNING

The establishment of conservation areas under the 1967 Civic Amenities Act represents a key manifestation of conservation-based planning within heritage preservation policies. The definition highlighted the importance of heritage surroundings, “areas of special architectural or historical interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.”<sup>17</sup> This legislation aligns with the modern conservation movement and the evolving concept of international heritage, which extends the conservation scope from individual monuments to peripheral areas, ultimately aiming to unify entire regions under conservation directives. This approach ensures any development or change within the boundaries respects and retains the historical integrities. Despite the drive towards scientific conservation, the regulations are frequently critiqued by both practitioners and scholars for the constraints they impose on physical practices and management.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the concept of conservation-based planning is propelled by the recognition of heritage value in contemporary society. A more nuanced interpretation of heritage value and authenticity has emerged, extending beyond the original focus on materiality. The evidence is found in the international charters. While the Venice Charter (1964) primarily associates heritage authenticity with tangible aspects, the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) expands on this framework. It introduces the concept of ‘progressive authenticities,’ which recognizes that historical modifications to sites over time are both reasonable and intrinsic to their authenticity.<sup>19</sup>

John Pendlebury employs the concept of assemblage to describe a provisional unity across the field of conservation planning in the UK, linking diverse actors, narratives, and legal and policy frameworks into a complex, dynamic social entity.<sup>20</sup> In light of the above, Glasgow embodies this approach, from legislative frameworks to the recognition of heritage values, the

central objective of conservation appears to be the management of former industrial buildings for modern purposes. This strategy, underscored by the specific contextual circumstances of the 1980s, was aimed at facilitating the regeneration of areas.

## MORPHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION AND INTERIOR MODERNISATION

During the 1980s, besides the development of preservation regulations, urban policies in Glasgow were recalibrated to rejuvenate the city's economic landscape. This period saw the implementation of a series of neoliberal urban policies. The Scottish Development Agency initiated 'Glasgow Action,' a business-led venture designed to enhance private-sector participation in urban development.<sup>21</sup> In this context, urban planning consequently adopts a more cooperative posture with market mechanisms, prioritizing investment attraction and adaptation to emergent developments over directive regulatory control. The expansion of the retail sector in the city centre evidences this transformation, reflecting a general movement towards market-driven urban development strategies.<sup>22</sup>

Methodologically, the influence of follow-up planning on conservation practices predominantly focuses on controlling exterior design to cater to the demands of a postmodern retail environment.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the adaptations of these former industrial structures typically involve preserving the exterior façade while modernising the interiors. Especially for street buildings used for retailing, this process is also intertwined with ongoing aesthetic transformations, iterations of window display, the programming lifespan of the buildings, and the renovation of architectural materials. Despite Glasgow City Council's statutory protection covering both the interiors and exteriors of all listed buildings, the exterior-centric preservation policies can still be observed within the regulatory framework and practices of built heritage consultants.<sup>24</sup> A detailed examination of preservation regulations and design guidance for street architecture in conservation areas reveals that 13 sub-articles emphasize limiting modifications to building exteriors. These include specific regulations on features like 'Basement Light Wells' and 'Signs and Advertising,' which constitute the main portion of the guidance.<sup>25</sup> Compared with the detailed sub-articles dedicated to exterior preservation, there are only three sub-articles concerning interior modifications, which are relatively brief and primarily focus on layout considerations. Additionally, frequent alterations in building programming, driven by shifts in business dynamics, retail competition, and changes in ownership, lead to rapid interior iterations. These changes are particularly pronounced in buildings frequently used as mixed-use and retail spaces at street level. As a result, a discernible historical discontinuity emerges, manifesting not only within individual historic buildings but also across the broader streetscape. Specifically, from an architectural perspective, there is a clear visual distinction between the street level and the upper levels of the buildings, highlighting a separation in function and design. Likewise, from a broader street and area viewpoint, the adaptations made to the first floors of these historic warehouses collectively contribute to a contemporary streetscape that diverges from the historical context. This creates a distinct split between the new, modernized uses at street level and the traditional architectural elements preserved above.



Fig. 1. Argyle Street.

Taking Argyle Street as an example, beginning with the Renaissance-style warehouse constructed by William Spence in 1873,<sup>26</sup> there is a clear 'line' between the modernised shop on the first floor and the upper level: large display window panels and a black paint frontage on the street level are contrasted with richly decorated ashlar facades with unique motifs on the upper level. In addition to this, the Ionic attached, masque keystones, and the pleasing proportion of entablature, all the details mark a clear boundary with the surrounding buildings; however, despite these distinctive upper-level features, the modernized ground-floor shops blend seamlessly with adjacent units due to similarities in materials and design. (Figure 1)

The homogeneous phenomenon of adaptation emerges as a consequence of conservation-oriented planning and mixed-use development. These policies, while aimed at macro-level control, often sacrifice the historical significance at the individual building level. Moreover, this phenomenon reflects the regulatory challenges inherent in balancing the diversification and authenticity of historic properties at both the street and area levels.

## BLOCK-LEVEL ADAPTATION

As previously discussed, navigating the complexities of modernization while preserving historical integrity in the city centre poses significant challenges for both planning practices and conservation policies. The renovation of Merchant City exemplifies an eclectic approach that

addresses the evolving comprehensiveness of heritage policies and the adaptability required in urban governance. This strategy involves the adaptive reuse of entire historic blocks, moving beyond conventional individual building conservation to embrace an assemblage concept. The associated intervention includes enclosing historical blocks with new constructions and creating intermediate courtyards. Such an approach was innovative during that period, impacting both conservation planning history and adaptive reuse methodology. In the context of subdivision planning, adaptations at the block level effectively mitigate the restrictions imposed by area conservation efforts, which could otherwise hinder developmental progress. Additionally, this method not only aligns with the local topographical features but also arises from negotiations between public and private stakeholders.<sup>27</sup> These projects signify a shift from modernist planning to a more integrated theme of placemaking.

## INGRAM SQUARE

Ingram Square's transformation marks the first block-level adaptation project in Glasgow's Merchant City. Initiated in the 1980s, this redevelopment serves as a seminal case study for integrating historical preservation with contemporary urban needs through collaborative efforts. This project also stands as a pioneering example in urban regeneration and planning history, marking the first initiative in the region to incorporate a collaborative relationship between public and private sectors. It involved key public entities such as the Scottish Development Agency and the District Council, alongside private partners like Kantel Ltd. It illustrates a transition toward more participatory and inclusive urban governance.

The proposed area originally contained 14 buildings, including three former warehouses and a department store with separate vacated sites. Most are abandoned, and only one was used as a furniture store. Among these, the most notable is the Baronial-style Houndsditch warehouse, situated at the corner of Brunswick and Ingram Street. This building serves as a prominent landmark, occupying nearly one-third of the block. The warehouse was designed by John Baird and Robert William Billings. Billings was specifically responsible for the eccentric façade. (Figure 2)

The entire adaptation encompasses the processes of refurbishing the existing host structure, inserting new buildings to enclose the courtyard, and redeveloping the semi-public space. The conservation efforts commence with the rehabilitation of existing buildings that remain in acceptable condition, such as the former fruit warehouse and the commercial building (Nova) at the corner of Wilson and Candleriggs Street. The alterations focus on updating the energy system and interior finishes, with minimal structural changes to the host buildings. The intervention adheres closely to the buildings' original design prototypes.

The primary challenge of the adaptation process was managing the large-scale host structure, exemplified by the Houndsditch building's adaptive reuse. This project involved reconfiguring the historic layers to harmonize the façade with contemporary housing requirements. The final decision was to retain the façade while constructing three new floors aligned with the

existing elevational network, incorporating two mezzanine levels. To fully utilize the unusually high ceilings, four additional floors were set back above an elevated ground floor. This intervention preserved the block's overall rhythm while providing spatial flexibility. The interior layout was systematically redesigned, with bathrooms, kitchens, and staircases reconfigured to integrate the new floors, ensuring both functionality and the preservation of historical integrity. Accompanying the conservation process was the construction of new buildings; one notable mention is the corner building at Wilson and Brunswick Streets. This structure featured contemporary design elements, such as protruding steel railings and a penthouse, which visually engage with the historic streetscape and provide a modern contrast to the older buildings. While Ingram Square's project integrates historical aesthetics with modern functionality, it also invites scrutiny into how heritage narratives are constructed.

The enclosing form with the courtyard is the pivotal design concept in this adaptation project. This form intrinsically defines space both physically and in terms of *genius loci*—the spirit of the place. It facilitates the creation of new circulation patterns and semi-public spaces, enhances natural ventilation and daylighting, and improves air quality and energy efficiency. Additionally, it contributes to acoustic comfort and the thermal regulation of spaces,<sup>28</sup> which are essential for new residences in the crowded city centre. In turn, the sense of enclosure also contributes to the placemaking process by establishing community focal points and enhancing connectivity. The entire project offers a methodological blueprint for examining similar regeneration efforts and provide a practical demonstration of how contemporary urban challenges can be addressed through innovative planning solutions.



Fig. 2. Left: Facade Designed by Robert William Billings; Right: Newly Formed Courtyard of Ingram Square.



## VIRGINIA COURT

Virginia Court is another exemplary case of block-level adaptive reuse, with new planning extending from a collection of diverse historic buildings, including the former Stirling's Library, to encompass a large Renaissance-style warehouse built in 1877 at 70 Miller Street.<sup>29</sup> The developer, Credential Holdings' master plan aims to integrate these areas into a cohesive shopping district.<sup>30</sup>

The project was completed in 2008 and is renowned for its adaptation featuring an alley courtyard. The intervention in this area is akin to curating an exhibition: the general layout was preserved except for the addition of a rear building. The conserved scenario atmosphere exhibits a strong aesthetic synergy with the medieval old town. Benefiting from the preservation of the former industrial buildings, the site offers a unique visual experience. Upon entering through the larger gate, visitors encounter a continuous warm-grey textural layer that subtly shifts upon closer inspection. As one approaches, the juxtaposition of different layers of textured walls and roofs creates an artistic collage visible from the entrance. The intervention's delicately and expertly rendered materialization and detailing of textural could be observed from the alley gate in Miller Street. The new rear building shaped the courtyard in a route-oriented form, with two arch gates enhancing the sense of spatial rituals. The large arch at the alley gate imparts a ceremonial feel to the space and the state of obsolescence imparts a distinctive ruin-like aesthetic to the site. (Figure 3)



Fig. 3. Entrance Views and Renovated Courtyard of Virginia Court.

Both cases demonstrate that block-level adaptations are instrumental in redeveloping areas by supporting sub- infrastructure and addressing evolving programmatic needs.<sup>31</sup> These adaptations, which involve a process of reorganizing spatial relationships within and around the block, enhance interactions with public and semi-public spaces such as streets, pavements, inner courtyards, and gardens, thereby improving the block's walkability and connectivity. Hence, block-level adaptations simultaneously addressing the rehabilitation of historic built heritage and the development of public realms. This approach not only preserves architectural legacies but also enhances community spaces, embodying the principles of conservation-based planning.

## CONCLUSION

This case study examines the morphological transformations in Glasgow's urban landscape, specifically focusing on how the city has woven its industrial heritage into the fabric of contemporary urban planning. The signifier and signified of industrial-built heritage and the associated values reflected in the planner and city authorities' decision through conservation-based planning. The critical questions about the extent to which alterations can be made before the historical and architectural integrity of these buildings is compromised. Glasgow's case presents eclectic solutions through addressing its industrial past while simultaneously forging a new identity.

The development of preservation policies and the practical application of regulations and urban policies from the 1980s signalled a transition to conservation-based planning. Beyond urban management associated with built heritage conservation, this period is unique in planning history due to its multidimensional approach, influenced by various historical processes and factors such as economic decline from deindustrialization, social issues like housing problems, and challenges related to government funding. Changes in planning legislation that encouraged public-private partnerships also significantly impacted the decision-making process for the reuse of former industrial built heritage. Consequently, the homogeneity observed in the adaptive reuse of historic street buildings and integrated block-level interventions reflects the effort to balance neoliberal planning principles with historic environmental preservation.

Block-level adaptation also represents a context-specific approach within the discourse of built heritage adaptation in the Merchant City. These cases exemplify critical aspects of urban physical regeneration, heritage conservation, and the socio-economic revitalization of historic urban districts. Although critics often argue that overly rigid policies can stifle the ability to respond to contemporary urban demands, block-level adaptations serve to alleviate the constraints of area conservation, which might otherwise impede development within a subdivision planning context. However, challenges remain in balancing material authenticity and aesthetic continuity, as block-level interventions often blur the boundaries between individual heritage assets. Such adaptations also raise issues regarding architectural integrity and initiate discussions about potentially incongruous designs with the introduction of new

constructions within historic contexts. Although mixed-use development has been a common strategy among planners to enhance diversity in urban landscapes, this postmodern approach can paradoxically lead to the standardization of streets within historic environments and diminish the historic significance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to my PhD supervisor, Prof. Florian Urban, for his methodological assistance. I would also like to express my appreciation to the archivists at Glasgow City for their diligent efforts in sourcing materials for me.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

**Xiaohan Lu** is a doctoral candidate at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, Glasgow School of Art (supervisor Prof. Florian Urban and Dr Thea Stevens). He holds a master's degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. His main research interest is adaptive reuse of built heritage and urban conservation.

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## IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1 Photograph taken by the author.

Figure 2 Ibid.

Figure 3 Ibid.

