

Jamie Ritblat: Heritage can lead, not follow

News by Tim Burke

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Institutional, Residential



Jamie Ritblat's role as a Historic England commissioner feels like a post he has been building towards since childhood. "I've always had a love affair with heritage and history," the founder of investor-developer Delancey told *Estates Gazette*. "I used to copy the designs of castles in the sand when I was a child, like Beaumaris. I've always loved it... It's both our fabric in terms of the built environment and our fabric as people living in this country."

Now, with the public body having published a [new strategy](#) to take its heritage-focused work through to 2031, Ritblat and his colleagues have an opportunity to, in his words, "improve the narrative, improve the relationship" between the development world and heritage organisations.

"There's an education piece to be done between developers, heritage organisations and planning authorities to try and understand better the metrics that go behind development," Ritblat said.

"One of my strongly held beliefs is to help educate within Historic England about the world of development, because they have to understand it and how it works... And by the same token, to educate the developers: you don't have to be fearful, this can be additive. This can be constructive, productive, this can add value to your project."

That latter perspective can too often be lost, with developers seeing heritage – and the organisations that protect it – as hindering rather than helping growth.

"People think heritage means you cannot touch," Ritblat said of some developers' misconceptions. "It's stuck in formaldehyde. If a cobweb is on the left, you can't move the cobweb. It isn't about that. It's about respecting heritage and recognising it's there."

Early engagement

Ritblat sees much of the misalignment stemming from fear. "Not fear of failure but fear by way of a lack of understanding," he added. "We see that right across our industry, between the industry and vocal communities or local authorities or heritage organisations. It's this fear that there's some dark art going on in the world of developers, when actually there isn't much of a dark art frankly. On the other side, the developers are going 'well, these people aren't really on our side and they're looking to make life difficult'. Then people don't talk and when you don't talk, you end up in an even worse position."

Ritblat and the Historic England team want to encourage earlier engagement so that challenges around heritage aren't left until late in the planning process. "Get people early into the piece," the Delancey founder said. "It's not just about developers. It's about architects, planning advisers, conservation officers."

And its not just about bodies such as Historic England, but entire communities affected by a changing built environment.

"The earlier you engage with community, the protagonists who are going to play a part in your story, the easier your progression will be," Ritblat said. "And the more you make it simple and clearly reflective of what you're planning, the easier it is for people to understand. It's about engagement and I think Historic England's [new strategy] is all about early engagement."

Historic England's co-chief executives, in post since last October, echo the sentiment – and reinforce the need for action, highlighting projects such as Berkeley Group's regeneration of Bromley-by-Bow Gasworks as an example of close collaboration with a developer to de-risk a project early in the process.

"There are developers we work really closely with who recognise the value of our role, and of our advice in the process, and who are strong advocates for heritage and for Historic England," said Claudia Kenyatta. "We do recognise that that's not universal, and that there are possibly some perceptions out there in the sector about heritage as a blocker to growth."

"That is the perception that we are really keen to work hard to address. We want the development community to [know] that we understand that use is really important for historic buildings and places. Sustainable places need to change and evolve in sensitive ways in order to deliver all the great things that heritage can do. We want them to know that we are ready, open and available for conversations and that engaging us early can improve schemes and can bring certainty. It can de-risk projects, it can save money."

Co-chief executive Emma Squire agreed with Ritblat that too many developers have an outdated view of the stance of Historic England, noting that in fact the organisation only raises objections to one in every 100 projects it reviews.

"I think some developers still think that being listed means no change is possible or change is very hard and that we will seek to see things preserved in aspic rather than work with them constructively and pragmatically to bring forward a scheme that works for them commercially but is sensitive to the history of the building or the place – and actually is a better scheme overall that holds its value for longer because it reflects heritage rather than ignoring it," she said.

She added: "One of the three priorities in our new strategic plan is growth, and Jamie has been particularly valuable talking to our development advice teams and thinking about how heritage can be repositioned as an enabler rather than a blocker to growth, helping us think through the role of empty historic buildings in provision of housing and meeting the housing supply crisis. Just bringing real commercial insight to test some of our thinking on policy and policy development."

Keep your cool

Ritblat and the Historic England chief executives stress the need to find balance. We speak before the government directs the City of London Corporation to hold further hearings over its City Plan 2040 and the impact of office towers on the Tower of London, but Ritblat highlights the Square Mile as an area in which heritage and new development must find ways to co-exist.

"We recognise that the City has to grow. Nobody's going to argue with that because the economic benefits are huge," he said. "Equally, the economic benefits of The Tower of London are also very important, as is a Beefeater and all those other things that go to soft power, where heritage has a very strong part to play in representing Britain globally... Those things are important and we need to protect them and recognise them, but we also need to allow modernity to sit alongside in the right fashion."

And in many cases, he added, history will influence a brighter future anyway. "I think it's very clear that heritage can be a catalyst for growth," he said. "Lots of areas of London in the past became cool because of their heritage. Hackney was cool before the developers got there because of its heritage. Shoreditch was cool because of its heritage. Clerkenwell was cool because of its heritage. Heritage is often the leader in your future, not the follower of your future."

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