Portsmouth civic centre - public realm
a proposal for change
The City of Portsmouth working jointly with the University, MOD, private interests and residents has the opportunity to develop a masterplan capable of delivering comprehensive future civic benefit.

CIVIC VALUE / OPTIMISM / GROWTH
CITY IDENTITY / HEART
USE OPEN SPACE / MULTIFACETED
HOLISTIC / PARTNERING

The City of Portsmouth - The Island City papers
by Walter Menteth 06/03/2016 R 5.b
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fig. 1 Cover. Central Portsmouth aerial view
fig. 2. Aerial view of central Portsmouth showing key locations
With the development of Gun Wharf Quays the centre of the city of Portsmouth has become fragmented and spread further across separate geographic areas. Visitors consequently have no sense of an identifiable city centre.

In the north east the civic functions and old commercial heart associated with Guildhall Square and leading through to Commercial Road has declined. To the south west lies the old historic port town which is now devoid of major commercial activity but remains a residential and tourist destination. The University is located across various sites to the north and the east.

These primary locations are disconnected by an area of low value usage, offering poor connectivity between the parts. This central enclosed location is occupied by playing fields of the United Services Recreation Ground and the sports grounds of HMS Ternaire, with Ravelin Park located further to the south. This tri-polar city centre has a pivotal central area that is largely impenetrable.

The severance, lack of connectivity and poor cohesion between the established parts dissipates the city’s civic heart, diminishes cohesion, spatial comprehension and identity, constraining economic potential, growth and civic consolidation.

In this proposal it is envisaged that Portsmouth be provided with a connecting public realm, new functions and vibrant activity in the location of the current fields; and that the existing facilities there be relocated. This is a spatial design approach that offers an opportunity to stitch together the existing urban fabric, whilst allowing for long term sustainable growth and expansion.

The proposal could provide the city with something it currently lacks which is an identifiable central heart. It releases new potential for expansion of educational, leisure, amenity, residential and commercial development within a high quality, clearly defined and benevolent high density public environment capable of contributing in the longer term to sustained growth in the wider urban context.

To understand the potential envisaged by this outline proposition, it is illustrated by established precedents and scaled diagrams.

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**fig. 3. Portsmouth centre diagram showing the polarisation of its plan**

The university campus is distributed largely to the east, with parts located to the north and south of the central area.

**fig. 4. existing layout diagram - Portsmouth centre**

Showing the layout of existing physical components and interconnections.
The following pages illustrate by analogy a spatial proposition which enhances perceived opportunities, whilst delivering a framework that fulfills the strategic requirements identified by the University of Portsmouth.

This spatial strategy is principled upon a place making strategy for delivering quality and sustainable public realm and a university integrated holistically within the city.

This example explores scalar comparisons between Portsmouth (fig. 5) with the central square of Krakow, Poland (fig. 6). This is reputedly the biggest public square in Europe and contains a large orthogonal market hall located in it that provides a central focus of public activity. Various historic stages of the cities development have been linked together by the square.

In fig. 7 Krakow central square has been graphically overlaid onto Portsmouth at the same scale. This illustrates how an urban transformation might be envisaged by focusing on the possible public realm benefits and opportunities of a well shaped environment.

By introducing into Portsmouth’s strategic master-planning a holistic and sustainable concept developed around place making the capacity and possibilities become more clearly apparent for linking the existing centres, regenerating the city, defining its heart and civic distinction, and delivering future growth and opportunity.
This is a discrete proposal that develops a sequence of streets and new public squares inserted in the existing urban fabric (fig. 8). It provides flexible development opportunities that can respond to multifarious future needs.

The proposal offers new connections linking to existing arteries, and to the old town (by securing long term public rights of access). These contribute towards providing the new civic focus.

The wider impacts of this spatial intervention, its civic extension, well structured and hierarchical sequence of public spaces and improved connectivity are illustrated in fig. 9.

This proposition robustly, simply and coherently unifies the existing fragments of Portsmouth city into an articulate, distinct and definable urban spatial form and composition.

In the initial phase proposed development would allow the University of Portsmouth to deliver its own master-plan outputs, on its own land whilst contributing to wider objectives and benefit (fig. 10).

There would be active frontages to all public spaces and routes at ground level, with a presumption to develop diverse, convivial, public social activity at ground level. Entrances to academic and residential accommodation would be through block courtyards, or by secondary route-ways so as to maintain urban vitality.

The lesson from history and comparable cities (having recently undertaking regeneration) is that by having the vision to postulate well considered propositions that are attractive, ambitious and optimistic and also of sufficient scale; engenders the confidence that drives capacity to attract private partnership investment to lever growth and investment further.
The loss of existing recreational amenities could be addressed by providing these, in part, within a multi-storey building. This might occupy the centre of the square in the manner of Krakow’s market hall within its main square.

Such a building would have the appropriate load and span characteristics, with facility for the dedicated rehousing of the existing open space amenities provided for by HMS Tremenare, the United Services playing fields and the University Sports centre.

The Sendai Mediatheque, Sendai, Japan by the architect Toyo Ito, or the Rotterdam Market Hall by MVRDV architects can be regarded as successful exemplars of recent large civic buildings having a similar civic programme, scale and ambition.

Supplementary facilities might be developed beneath the ground level public plane. This is a common and frequently adopted approach within new urban development. In this way the ground plane of the central square might also be raised 2m or higher above sea level to improve flood resilience. Consolidating the university staff parking provision underground within this new development is an example that, on its own would also release a number of further sites across the city centre for expansion, development or sale, allowing further enhancement of the urban environment and a step towards a more sustainable transport strategy.

Recreational facilities not suitable for housing in the central amenity building, underground or elsewhere within the new development might be relocated off site away from the town centre. Such locations might include The UoP Langstone site, Canoe Lake, Southsea common, or for the MOD in particular Hornsea Island or Gosport.

This proposition releases prime land in the centre of Portsmouth for repairing, regenerating and consolidating the city, providing a heart, and allowing future growth and expansion.
The figure ground map below shows the new and existing buildings in central Portsmouth to scale, indicating the street patterns generated by the forms of the proposed urban blocks.

In this instance new urban blocks are shown configured with internal courtyards, indicating approximate layouts providing daylight, ventilation and servicing opportunities.

To improve the city’s flood resilience the ground surface of the central square would be raised at least 2m above existing sea level and ramped on its approaches.

The resulting plan diagram of pedestrian and cycle circulation below shows how increasing connectivity can bring about beneficial impacts; coalescing the patterns of movement within the city centre into a coherent form that relates particularly well to existing street patterns.

A number of new connections outside the core central area are proposed (keyed & yellow). It is considered these would be secured by embedding them in the long term strategic plan or acquired through planning gain.

1 & 2 New pedestrian & cycle tunnels through the rail embankment to Sun street, and to Dennis Sciama building, the back of Burnaby terrace and onto Richmond terrace

3. Adjacent to the rail embankment Park Road is continued east to pass through the existing unused rail tunnel (located to the north west and rear of Park Building). The route continues through Victoria Park to Stanhope Road, to connect with commercial Road. En route the access stairs to the former pedestrian bridge over Anglesea Road are removed.

4. From this route (3) to the south and adjacent to the railway embankment a connection behind Park Building links to the Cenotaph and on towards the station and Guild Hall Square.

5. Access from Wiltshire Street in the west to Waterloo Street in the east be improved with connection through between Earlsdown Street to St James’s Street secured.

6. Access between Hampshire Terrace and Cambridge Road through Ravelin Park

7. Penny Street to Museum Road increases old town connectivity. Although this route passes through the grounds of Portsmouth Grammar school, the potential for opening this might be addressed by compensatory benefits or land swap arrangements.

fig. 21. Key to proposed plot areas and phasing

fig. 22. Proposed pedestrian and cycle connectivity
In this configuration the overall area of development amounts to 13.81 ha. of which 7.23 ha is proposed for new building plots.

The core site covers 12.86 ha. with plot areas amounting to 6.25 ha.

Sites adjacent or in close proximity provide a further 0.95 ha.

It is proposed that the sites be developed in the six phases identified.

Priority being given to the following functions above ground level within each area:

1. Academic
2. Residential
4. Civic, amenity, recreation and leisure
5. Public realm
6. Residential
7. Academic

The 12 city square plans (fig. 15) provide scalar comparisons which further illustrate other well loved high quality urban spaces. Conceptually they are spaces formed and defined by their perimeter enclosures, like an urban living room.

There are also squares which are almost diametrically opposite, such as Prata della Valle, Padua, Italy Djema el-Fna, Marrakesh, Morocco and Trafalgar Square, London where the objects or activity within the space largely define the urban space, form and character.

In relationship to Portsmouth these unique urban spaces invite further learning, exploration, comparisons and evaluation to inform progressive place making strategies which deliver wider public realm benefits.

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Fig. 23. Key to proposed plot areas and phasing

Fig. 24. Plan showing 12 City squares to scale

(from Hudson M., The City Square. Thames & Hudson 1990)
The previous illustrations are provided as examples of how a high quality public realm and place-making strategy, rooted in the European tradition, might inform the improvement, expansion and renaissance of Portsmouth.

The proposition aims to explore robust, flexible, mixed and integrated functions suitable for this central city location, along with the provision of facilities and amenities required for the expansion of the university as part of the development of their master-plan. It posits that the University be developed forward more fully integrated within a vibrantly healthy mixed use and diverse urban environment, rather than by isolated development.

With the relocation of the existing amenities this proposition is considered viable, and designed to appeal equally to the UoP estates, the city authorities, the MOD whilst being capable of catching the public's imagination and endorsement. This vision would require the parties commitment and efforts to work jointly towards this mitigation.

Outside the core a key building which by its siting and location constrains future potential is the University of Portsmouth's King Henry Building.

A functionally integrated proposal should however be informed holistically, aspirationally and primarily by the long term societal and economic needs for sustainable place-making, improved facilities and civic improvement, that can deliver benefit for all.

A regeneration programme requires partners working together with the private sector to lever and unlock resources to deliver any proposal. This proposition provides a vision, scale and the civic confidence attractive to private investment.

For the future development of this proposition might Considerations should include:-
- How an urban area of this scale might be phased.
- The delivery of functions, the form massing and density, quality standards and development framework of any proposition should be grounded in the economic possibilities, logic and sense.
- Securing the primary connectivity of the new urban route-ways into and out of the area, and in conjunction with the rail authorities, local stakeholders and by embedding in the local plans.
- How new development would be integrated with and address the existing built fabric.
- Which components and elements are strategic keys to implementation of the wider proposition.

This might be developed by further analysis of the Krakow based hypothesis or by development of alternative place making urban forms.

The expectation would be that by founding development on a robust public realm place making strategy first, development should lead to more benevolent a civic regeneration.

The objective of this proposition are to raise aspirations and the wider possibilities afforded by thinking intelligently and holistically; and for working forward in partnerships for mutual and common benefits.

In this case the university, city and MOD are invited to consider that master-planning can develop more than self interest constrained within any limited self imposed site ownership, financial and administrative parameters.

A master-plan should be regarded holistically as a civic responsibility having sufficient vision, aspiration, ambition and scale with the capacity to generate and deliver transformational and sustainable quality.

This is a vision to engender confidence and open opportunity to attract private partnership and other external investment to lever growth and investment further towards enhancing the city’s civic and economic stature.

The city and university be regarded as enlightened patrons of progressive social, economic, civic and urban development, enhancement and beautification, capable of aspiring to raising the public realm and environmental standard of the whole city to the highest, and to advance culture, economics, education, learning and civic life.
Notes

This Walter Menteth article amplifies a proposal originally described in a design brief for a two week masters students academic programme in autumn 2015-2016, at the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture. The programme was developed and run by MUD studio (Making, Understanding & Doing) with colleagues Francis Graves and Martin Andrews from the Portsmouth School of Architecture, along with the university’s appointed master-planner’s, Architecture PLB. After its instigation, the remit of the programme’s academic investigation was circumscribed, following intervention by the UoP estates department.

Credits

fig. 1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 Google and W Menteth.
fig 2 Battle Mc Carthy, S333 and W Menteth
fig 3, 4, 8, 9, 12, 16, 17, 18, 20-23 W Menteth.
fig 24 Hudson M., The City Square. Thames & Hudson 1990

Portsmouth - The Island City papers
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