

Conservation Area Developer Case Study - GreyFriars, Colchester: Development by OMCI, LLP, and the GreyFriars Project

This case study focuses on the redevelopment of the Grade II* listed GreyFriars and adjacent heritage assets in the Colchester conservation area. The developer and planning consultant involved were asked a series of questions about their experience and about conservation areas more generally. Their responses are set out below:

About OMCI, LPP, and the GreyFriars Project

OMC Investments Ltd (OMCI) is a private property investment and development company principally engaged in the commercial sector of the U.K. property market. Its investment portfolio comprises prime high street retail, hotel and restaurant and offices, including several listed buildings in conservation area, principally in Central London and the South East of the U.K. It purchased the site from Essex County Council after a competitive tendering exercise.

Lawson Planning Partnership Ltd (LPP) is an independent town planning consultancy located in Colchester, which advises a range of private and public-sector clients on local and strategic planning matters. Planning for heritage assets is also a key part of their work. In 2015, LPP was shortlisted as a finalist for the Royal Town Planning Institute National Planning Excellence Awards, in recognition of exemplary work undertaken in the built environment and heritage sector.

The GreyFriars site occupies a prominent position at the top of East Hill, at the eastern end of Colchester town centre, in the Colchester Conservation Area. It contains three listed C18th century townhouses - GreyFriars (Grade II*), Hillcrest and All Saints House (both Grade II).



The GreyFriars site. ©Lawson Planning Partnership Ltd/OMCI

The project involved the sensitive conversion and development of the listed buildings and associated grounds to form a 26-bedroom luxury hotel with ancillary restaurants, tea rooms and bar, with an overall investment of c.£12m, and the creation of 50 new jobs. The end product resulted in a significant boost to local economic regeneration and enhancement to the Conservation Area.

From a development point of view, what do you think the differences are between CAs and other areas? (e.g. costs, the planning process, how the local community is involved, the quality of the existing environment, and the restrictions and opportunities that CA represent)

Part of the attraction of a conservation area from an investment perspective relates to the quality of its existing historic urban fabric, which helps to define a sense of place and character. There is also an expectation that policy requirements and design standards will be higher. This in turn can generate greater investor certainty and confidence.

Sometimes local communities will regard conservation areas as a reason not to support particular types of development. At GreyFriars however, after community engagement exercises, our proposals received overwhelming support.

Development costs associated with most types of heritage asset, including conservation areas, are generally substantially higher. At GreyFriars, the emphasis was on quality and a high specification of work was deliberately planned, meaning that heritage and development objectives were essentially complementary. However, it must be recognised that the very high costs of converting listed buildings to commercial use and modern building regulations standards is a business risk which many companies will not be prepared to take.

The process needed to secure the various planning and listed building consents for the project took longer compared to other similar schemes that have not involved designated heritage assets, but the conservation area was not specifically a factor.

Do you think Conservation Areas encourage better quality development, and if so, how?

In general terms conservation areas do encourage better quality development. The main reason is by virtue of the special designation policies, and LPA's generally expect higher standards. There is also usually a higher quality environment for designs to relate to, which often results in better quality development.

In this instance, OMCI's decision to invest in GreyFriars was in part influenced by the character and potential offered by the existing built environment in the conservation area. The quality of the GreyFriars area has also certainly been increased by OMCI's developments, firstly with the launch of the hotel, and subsequently with the acquisition and refurbishment of the Grade I listed East Hill House and its associated grounds and coach house directly opposite.



East Hill House. ©Lawson Planning Partnership Ltd/OMCI

A further benefit of the conservation area designation is the expectation that other non OMCI development in the vicinity will also be subjected to the same policy and design guidance. In this way, it is hoped that good quality development is encouraged overall, providing a level of certainty and assurance, to help protect and enhance current and potential property assets.

Are the legislative and policy restrictions that apply to Conservation Areas too obstructive, preventing good growth? Or do the restrictions encourage creativity and quality?

Generally, concerning the GreyFriars experience, conservation area legislation and policy has encouraged growth, creativity and quality. Related policies need to continue to encourage development in a flexible way by identifying opportunities as well as constraints.

How useful are Conservation Area Appraisals and/or Management Plans (CAAMP)? How can they be improved?

They can be useful documents where they draw attention to buildings, structures and spaces that detract from the character or appearance of an area, in addition to positive features. Sometimes these factors are obvious and there to be seen, but having this position set out in a document can be useful in terms of the identification of constraints and opportunities to be considered.

In terms of their improvement, the main message to convey in this context is the importance of highlighting development opportunities. This is highly important from a development and investment perspective and OMCI will often be prepared to redress

existing unsympathetic development and alterations within a conservation area as part of its development projects. Therefore, the importance of identifying such issues in appraisals and plans should not be underestimated.

Will your experience working in a Conservation Area for Greyfriars discourage or encourage you to seek further heritage led regeneration in the future?

As highlighted above, the GreyFriars experience has in a way created a catalyst for further OMCI led investments in the vicinity, at East Hill House opposite the site. This will hopefully be followed by the acquisition and regeneration of adjacent land at Lewis Gardens, which has been derelict for some time (see attached photographs). Local Authority investment in the public realm has also taken place, which we would like to see a lot more of as a complementary measure.

What do you as developers and consultants look for from HE in this sort of circumstance?

In this context, it is important that the key personnel have the authority and confidence to provide clear advice and guidance whilst maintaining an open mind and degree of flexibility to help facilitate the desired conservation and development objectives.

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