

## **Conservation Area Developer Case Study – Nottingham’s Lace Market: Development by Spenbeck**

Spenbeck is a family-run property development company based in Nottingham’s Lace Market, run by two sisters, Becky Valentine and Victoria Green.

Victoria describes conservation areas a ‘beautiful idea’ – but believes passionately that they can be so much more than that. Indeed The Lace Market illustrates what conservation area designation can achieve in the regeneration of places, when developers, local government and civil society make common cause. Becky warns that the designation must be ‘followed through’ by all parties if the benefits are to be fully realised.



Becky Valentine and Victoria Green outside the Birkin Building, the first of the former lace warehouses to be renovated by Spenbeck. © Nottingham Post

### **Emergence of the Lace Market**

The Lace Market developed in the C19 when entrepreneurs built palatial factories and warehouses in the streets of the original Saxon borough of Nottingham. By the 1960s, however, the lace industry was facing competition and changing fashions. Buildings were deteriorating and rents were falling.

Local activists, including the Civic Society founded in 1962, saw that The Lace Market rivalled the proud industrial architecture of other cities. In 1969 it was designated as a

Conservation Area, with grants available to renovate the buildings for a new generation of textile manufacture. However this and successive regeneration strategies in the following years ran aground because of continued industrial change and recession. The pace of demolitions was slowed, but economically The Lace Market remained in the doldrums.

In 1992 the Lace Market Heritage Trust was established with a radically different approach. A charitable body, it took advantage of grant aid from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the European Union to convert two landmark buildings. The old Shire Hall became what is now the National Justice Museum; and T C Hine's ornate Adams Building is now part of the campus of Nottingham College. These transformational schemes, together with a boom in the residential property market, launched The Lace Market on a new trajectory.

In 2013, an award-winning Creative Quarter was founded, capitalising on the area's renewed confidence. The jury for the European Enterprise Promotion Award commended Nottingham's Cultural Quarter for showing 'a strong holistic approach to regeneration and improving the business environment – set in a conservation area it has brought back into productive use the historic buildings and offered access to new technology'.

### **The Developer's Role**

The unifying factor in this success is Mich Stevenson OBE. He founded Spencebeck in 1981 with his brother Don, and renovated another of Hine's landmarks, the Birkin Building, along with adjacent buildings, for mixed commercial use. Mich was instrumental in establishing the Lace Market Heritage Trust, with Alan Swales, and was the founder and inaugural chair of the Creative Quarter Board. And Becky and Victoria are his daughters.

The sisters now have two generations' accumulated experience of property development in a conservation area, and the effect of designation. In their view, if there is a problem with conservation areas, it is not that decision-makers and pressure groups take the regime too seriously. If anything, they say, it is not taken seriously enough.

For Becky and Victoria, the designation of a conservation area opens up imaginative space for its ongoing regeneration. Like many conservation areas, The Lace Market is rich in stories and has played a pivotal role in the evolution of the city as a whole. Designation enables that story to be told in the present day, and re-told to guide decisions and create value into the future.

Crucially, they say, that unfolding narrative should not just be the preserve of planning documents and local authorities. People also have to hold and tell the story: businesses, amenity groups, politicians, experts, and, of course, developers.

Designation creates an understanding for a conversation between them all. For instance they find that one of the biggest challenges for The Lace Market is finding a balance between commercial and residential uses, so that the area is vibrant and inviting in both daytime and evening. Conservation area status enables stakeholders to recognise this

tension and to work together, although in The Lace Market they acknowledge it is a tension that has yet to be resolved.

Designation can also create an infectious enthusiasm for the place – something Becky and Victoria find when showing prospective tenants round their properties: ‘You can feel the wonder they feel’, they say. Tenants go on to report happy working environments with low staff turnover. That is a selling point Spenbeck are determined to promote and capitalise on, for themselves, their tenants and their city.

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