Stories in their place:

2. Narrative Capital

This is the second booklet in a series based on blog posts I wrote between 2009 and early 2013. It expands on the concept of "narrative capital," the stock of stories that a city has to draw on.

Part 1 gathered together stories about some of Leeds' heroes, its industrial and scientific pioneers. Part 3, to be published shortly, takes a tentative look to the future, wondering if the heritage of the city and its wider region could be a foundation for a new, forward-looking "idea of the north."

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Corn and Grit: Notes from a talk at Bettakultcha VII

London has Christopher Wren; Barcelona Antonio Gaudí, and Leeds, well Leeds has Cuthbert Brodrick, the Victorian architect who left us just a handful of public buildings including the amazing, elliptical Corn Exchange. So when Ivor Tymchak and Richard Michie secured it as the venue for their lightning talks event, Bettakultcha, I didn't take much persuading. I wanted to give people a little context to the building, why it came to be here, what went on in it, and what might happen there in the future.

The French Agriculture Minister recently warned that rising food prices risked sparking riots in cities around the world. But it is hard for us to understand just how important corn, or wheat, was to people in the industrial cities of the 19th Century.

At Peterloo in Manchester in 1819, troops massacred a crowd protesting against trade restrictions, the Corn Laws, which kept prices artificially high. When those Corn Laws were finally repealed they split the Tory Party and pushed half of them into coalition with the Liberals.

Leeds sits at the boundary between Yorkshire's industrial west and agricultural east. In the old corn exchange at the top of Briggate the farmers and corn traders (or "factors") would bargain and make deals. The outcome of

these deals governed whether the poor of the town, crammed into yards just a short walk from the corn exchange, could feed themselves and their families.

By the start of the 1860s Leeds needed a bigger space for these deals to be done. For the design, like the corn, the city fathers looked east, to the Hull-born architect Cuthbert Brodrick.

Brodrick was already well-known to Leeds. At the age of 29, he designed the Town Hall, the acme of municipal magnificence. He also left us the Mechanics' Institute, now the City Museum, and the Oriental Baths, now sadly demolished.

The critic Jonathan Meades describes Brodrick as: "the greatest French architect to be born and to work in the Département of Yorkshire." For the Leeds Corn Exchange, he certainly took his inspiration from Paris' Halle au Blé.

Even today the Corn Exchange looks like an alien arrival, this Parisian form in the middle of Leeds, an agricultural incursion in an industrial city.

But it's not wholly alien, because Brodrick was working in local stone, the millstone grit quarried from West Leeds. And millstone grit, like Brodrick, does not do subtle. Every external surface is decorated, including many agricultural motifs in keeping with the building's purpose.

Now come inside and look up! The interior is plainer but all the more striking for it. The space makes me want to fill it with jelly and lift off the lid.

And it's an egalitarian space. The offices around the upper floor are carefully arranged so that all their doors have the same status. In an oval building, no one gets a corner office.

After its opening in 1864, the journal 'The Architect' found: "No roof that it has ever been our fortune to see has impressed us more then this one, as a work of original genius and thorough practical utility, and the degree of dignity and spaciousness which it confers upon a very simple interior is hardly to be believed without being seen."

The farmers and corn factors were less complimentary. Despite the amazing roof light they complained that it was too dark: "We are assured, and we regret to have to state it, that the unanimous opinion of those present was, that, in order to judge of samples, those who frequent the market will find it necessary to go outside the building."

The traders made their peace with the Corn Exchange. More glass was added to the roof. Boards still on display

in the building show the names of companies that frequented the Corn Exchange, East and North Yorkshire firms prominent among them.

And here they worked on market day. Samples would be placed on the tables for inspection, prices haggled over, and deals done.

In preparing this talk, Louise, the Corn Exchange manager, dug out a list of Bye-laws for me. I love a ruleset like this because we can learn so much about what went on here from all the things that were not allowed.

Inside, only authorised persons could engage in "shewing, exhibiting, soliciting and touting." Outside we might find others "hawking, loitering, smoking and with dogs."

But rules are there to be bent. There's even a photo of a dog show inside the Corn Exchange, because the building was always used for a multitude of things. I talked to several people who grew up in Leeds in the 1970s and 80s who remember coming here for model railway shows and the like.

As Jane Jacobs said: "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings."

Which brings us to the Corn Exchange today. It's still a place for shewing, exhibiting, soliciting and touting. And Bettakultcha turns it into a place for exchanging stories.

1 March 2011
http://wp.me/p1bV4-wh

“The bit where the screen went black and you said ‘look up’”: on the irresistible pull of a story in the place where it happened

This is my youngest son, Pascal, when he was two years old. He’s looking sheepish because he’s just picked an apple. It’s an apple from the orchard at Woolsthorpe Manor, Lincolnshire, the orchard where Isaac Newton first conceived of gravity.

We were drawn to this beautiful, remote farmhouse for a tea break on a long journey, and ended up learning some science. A master storyteller can make the laws of gravity come alive anywhere (even in a lift, as my friend James Piercy proves in a powerful talk that you can find on Youtube) but to experience them at Woolsthorpe adds an extra weight. The National Trust which now owns the house has turned a barn into a small discovery centre where you too can see the forces of nature anew, right where Newton did more than 300 years ago.

In his famous Proposition 75 Theorem 35, Newton wrote: “If to the several points of a given sphere there

tend equal centripetal forces decreasing in a duplicate ratio of the distances from the points; I say, that another similar sphere will be attracted by it with a force reciprocally proportional to the square of the distance of the centres."

That "reciprocally proportional square of the distance" bit means the attraction gets stronger, much stronger, as things get closer together.

So it is with stories. Sheffield and Leeds are 34 miles apart. When I told the story of Leeds steam engine pioneer Matthew Murray in the Cutlers' Hall, Sheffield, the Interesting North audience gave me polite applause. (Granted, it was 10:30am on a Saturday when many had got up early to be there.) When I told the same story in Temple Works, Leeds, just across the road from the site of Murray's Round Foundry the audience gave much more. I could have raised a mob there and then to tear down James Watt's statue in City Square.

It's more than just playing to a home crowd. A story in the same county is quite interesting. A story in the same city is more compelling. A story in the place where it happened is extra powerful. That's why it was so much fun to talk about the Leeds Corn Exchange in the Corn Exchange.

Afterwards, several people remarked on the same moment in the talk, something that brought this thing home

to me. The talk was part of Bettakultcha, a series of lightning talks, each with 20 slides in five minutes. When I reached the part about the amazing domed roof, there seemed little point showing people a PowerPoint slide of the inside of the Corn Exchange in the Corn Exchange. Cuthbert Brodrick's masterpiece speaks for itself. So I blanked the screen and asked people to look up. They looked up at the Spartan, modern-before-its-time structure above our heads, the one pictured on the cover of this booklet. It turns out this was the point of maximum attraction, the moment people were as one with place, the point most remarked on in conversations about it ever since.

Actually being there increases exponentially the return on just a small leap of imagination. We can picture the protagonists standing beside us, under the same sun, breathing the same air. For this reason the micro-content of heritage blue plaques – tiny snippets of information attached to important and interesting buildings – can be so powerful.

Local stories need not be static, parochial stories. As I hinted in my Corn Exchange talk and argued explicitly in 'The Makers of Leeds', our city owes its dynamism to outsiders and their connections with other great cities around the world. Without Egypt, we would have no Egyptian-style Temple Works; without France, no immigrant cinematographer Louis Le Prince. These unexpected links with other places, these wormholes, only

open up when we open our imaginations to the things that happened in the past, in the places where we now find ourselves.

An oft-remarked characteristic of the internet is that it erases distance and difference, that it allows a script kiddy in Kazakhstan to cripple a business in California. In this account it seems local differences will be erased by the swelling ranks of the Republic of Facebook.

But this emerging medium must surely also power a resurgence in situated storytelling. The location-aware dimension of the mobile internet is uniquely well placed to bring stories to people where they need to know them most. The hyperlinked web dimension makes it possible to leap through the wormholes from one situated story to its entangled quantum twin.

6 March 2011
http://wp.me/p1bV4-wY

You wouldn't burn a book, or some reflections on narrative capital

When I moved offices down the River Aire from Holbeck to Clarence Dock, the stark contrast between the two areas set me thinking about a city's built environment and how it can make a difference to people's lives.

Holbeck Urban Village and Clarence Dock are two districts to the south of the River Aire. Both played important roles in the city's commercial past. Holbeck, at the terminus of the Leeds to Liverpool Canal, was a manufacturing district rich in textiles, engineering and pin-making. Clarence Dock was, from 1843, the city's main dock. By dock I do not mean a place to charge your iPod but rather, in the archaic sense of the word, a big basin of water in which ships stopped to unload and take on goods.

Both areas have been developed in the past 15 years, but with very different approaches and results.

The designers of Holbeck Urban Village have deliberately reused as much as they can, breathing new life into even the humblest old buildings. Where new build has been more practical it follows original street patterns to

create small, interlinked public spaces with pubs and cafes. New media businesses pump pixels in the Round Foundry complex where once Matthew Murray's men cast steam engines. Across the road, Grade I listed Temple Works is at the start of an exciting revitalisation. The amazing Tower Works site will be next so long as the promised funding comes through.

Holbeck was a magical place for a historian to work in a high-tech business. I self-indulgently imagined that the world-changing importance of Industrial Revolution pioneers like Murray, his mentor the flax magnate John Marshall, and pin king Colonel Thomas Harding could rub off on my own work as a spinner of the mobile web. I was not alone. In the last few years Holbeck has inspired many others to create art and literature based on its multi-layered history. Granary Wharf now boasts Candle House, one of the best of the rash of new tall buildings, not to mention its own urban storyteller.

A mile down the River Aire, Clarence Dock is a different story. Cleared for redevelopment earlier in the Nineties but only recently completed, it seems there is literally nothing of the Dock's historic fabric left above ground level, though occasional warning signs hint at something more interesting below the waterline. Compelling though it is on the inside, the Royal Armouries Museum is an alien arrival. Before it came to Leeds, it was meant to go to Sheffield where its magnificent Hall of Steel would presumably have had more resonance.

Clarence Dock is all bread and circuses, the ultimate blank canvas for the retail spectacle. I took my sons for a canter round the Armouries and to watch the Dragon Boat races where teams of workmates rowed for charity in vessels emblazoned with their logos. A good time was had by all, and in a good cause, yet there was a randomness, disconnected from any sense of why the water was there, or how it played a part in the life of the city.

The history of the Dock is acknowledged – literally beneath the visitors' feet - on dockside flagstones. These words seem to add insult to injury, like sticking plasters applied to a gaping wound of the collective memory. A paving slab that says "20 Tonne Crane" is not the same as a 20 tonne crane.

I don't mean to knock everything that's happening at Clarence Dock. The "ghost town" tag applied by some seems overblown. And I don't know enough of the backstory. Maybe not a single building was fit for reuse. Maybe every crane had rusted beyond repair, even as a heritage totem pole. But it seems to me that at Clarence Dock, Leeds has squandered a huge amount of its narrative capital.

By narrative capital I mean this. When a building is first made it belongs to the builder, the architect and their paymasters. They alone can tell stories about why and how it came into being in its pristine form. But over time, the balance tips in favour of the place's users, its neigh-

bours and even to passers-by. Their stories become the building's stories and the building's stories become inspirations, symbolic of the city's authentic character. Past achievements become our achievements to be equalled and bettered. Shared memories of past sins and humiliations can be just as valuable.

In the part of the city where I live, there is a Victorian police station. A few years ago the police sensibly moved out to a corrugated fortress with ample car parking. Local residents came together to campaign to turn the redundant building into a community centre. They lost the battle but got a half-happy ending when some new-build flats were developed nearby with a space for community arts. The new-built space is great, yet a world away from what would have been had they won the old police station. It would have been less convenient, messier, but more truly owned by the community from day one. The old police station had accumulated narrative capital that the new arts space will take years to put by.

Just about the most shocking offence against cultural life is the burning of books. Totalitarian regimes burn books to erase traces of dissent, not just to prevent transmission but also to deny the existence of inconvenient ideas. To destroy a book is to destroy a story and to destroy a story is to rob human life of a little piece of its meaning. I know that buildings are not books. For one thing they take up more space. But I do believe there's a parallel that should give us pause for thought before destroying places

high in narrative capital. It's not the long-dead architect's freedom of expression that's impoverished but the story-telling and meaning-carrying capacity of the whole community.

A rich environmental fabric makes a city resilient. By all means tug at loose threads, patch it up and reuse it as has happened in Holbeck. But it seems a wanton waste for any city to cut a clean swathe as big as Clarence Dock.

9 July 2010
http://wp.me/p1bV4-ns

Down with Façadism: a provocation for Culture Hack North

I was honoured to be asked to give a short talk on the opening afternoon of the brilliant Culture Hack North event. For one thing, it was a chance to appear alongside Rachel Coldicutt's dream team of Rohan Gunatillake, Natasha Carolan, Lucy Bannister, Helen Harrop, Frankie Roberto and Greg Povey. Also, I got to try out a half-baked thought about an unexpected way in which situated stories could lead to long-term, physical changes in our cities, even better, to do so with some people whose Culture Hack projects could be pivotal to bringing that change about.

What if the interior lives of buildings were as exposed as their exteriors? I ask because I think we're heading for a profound change in the way we experience our built heritage.

We'll start by considering a heritage concept that got a bad name in the latter part of the last century. There was a trend for ripping out the hearts of old buildings but leaving the shells intact. Critics called this trend "façadism" – the privileging of the exterior or front to the detriment of the building's deeper character.

Wikipedia says: "Façadism (or Façadomy) is the practice of demolishing a building but leaving its facade intact for the purposes of building new structures in it or around it."

Victorian architects and builders sowed the seeds of this practice themselves in the way they put their emphasis on the public face of a structure, while skimping on the unseen parts.

Take, for example, Temple Works in Holbeck, Leeds. In front, it's a grand millstone grit temple; round the back, nicely detailed but workaday red brick. That tension remains today. The building's blue plaque focuses on the spectacular facade, the industrialist and architect who erected it. But if you listen to local people, the complex is important to them as something else, the unglamorous Northern Distribution Depot of Kay's Catalogues, the Amazon.com of its day. Slung Low's Original Bearings project sought to capture some of those real Holbeck stories and expose them on the street.

Fittingly, Reality was the name of the last company to occupy the complex. Now it's possible to see inside buildings through time and space. The inside of Kay's as we found it a couple of years ago was a pre-digital data centre abandoned by its previous occupants. The pun is too good to miss – if we geo-tag pictures of the interior

and super-impose them on a street view of the building, we get Augmented Reality.

All this would be academic if it wasn't for the fact that planning law is shifting, away from purely national, architectural significance, towards a system that gives weight to local people's views of what's important in their environment.

The Draft National Planning Policy Framework says "heritage assets" should be: "identified by the local planning authority during the process of decision-making or through the plan-making process (including local listing)."

According to English Heritage, local listing is: "... a means for a local community and a local authority to jointly decide what it is in their area that they would like recognised as a 'local heritage asset' and therefore worthy of some degree of protection in the planning system."

And while the Tory-led government seems to use localism as cover for an attack on communities' rights to resist inappropriate developments, the National Trust is leading the fightback by positioning heritage in terms of dialogue between people and places. It's Planning for People petition asked signatories to state: "I believe that the planning system should balance future prosperity with the needs of people and places – therefore I support the

National Trust's calls on the Government to stop and rethink its planning reforms."

The upshot of this focus on local significance is that the images and stories of use that we expose through geo-location and augmented reality could influence which buildings are preserved and reused and which are demolished. Historic buildings won't just stand or fall on architectural merit, but also on local residents' attachments to them.

Those attachments tend to arise from the activities carried on inside buildings as much as what they look like on the exterior. I visited the old Majestyk nightclub on City Square because it was on Leeds Civic Trust's Heritage at Risk list. Drawn with care in chalk on the side of building I found a spontaneous display of affection for a derelict building. Someone had written: "We loved you."

And while it's a striking building in a prominent location, I don't think whoever wrote that loved it for its architectural merit. They were remembering the good times they had at Majestyk's – the laughs, the drinks, the music, and the snogs.

Then there's an unassuming late 90s box, called the White House, on Melbourne Street It has its own Facebook page! Or rather the people who worked here do. In this building they launched Freeserve, the UK's first free ISP which got millions of Britons on the net for the first

time. If anywhere deserves local listing for its historic significance surely this does.

I think the real potential is for places like the Leeds district of Chapeltown. Currently buildings get protection for their contribution to the Edwardian streetscape. But the really interesting stories are ones like the launderette started as a co-operative in response to the needs of the immigrant community in an area that many had written off as a slum. Such narrative capital is fragile and often completely disregarded in the name of regeneration. If stories like the laundry co-op's were better known, they might count for something in decision-making about the district.

Finally, there is the Mandela Centre, also on Chapeltown Road. I stopped to take a picture because I loved the big sign commemorating Nelson Mandela's visit to Leeds in which his drove through this area. But then I noticed a row of gold and silver trophies in the window. I have no idea what they're for, but they speak volumes about the activities that go on in a community centre and the pride of the groups that meet there. What if those stories were as obvious as the sign on the wall? The great thing is that, for the first time, they could be.

Maybe in the future buildings will no longer need to shout for attention with elaborate architecture. In fact, to do so will be useless, as nobody will see their peacock finery through the data smog. Instead, places will be re-

cognised for the richness of their inner lives, meaning we preserve a fuller, messier cross-section of structures for their historic significance. Just as in quantum theory, the act of observing changes the outcome. Facadism is dead; the future is all about interiors.

12 November 2011
http://wp.me/p1bV4-DC

Disembodied headquarters

The annual Heritage Open Days weekend always reveals hidden gems, interiors usually closed to the public. This post for the Culture Vulture concerned one such revelation.

Tetley's brewed beer on Meadow Lane from 1822 until 2011 when last orders came quietly with a little knot of satellite vans and a flag at half mast. It was a vast site, but they wasted little time stripping out the equipment and grinding the biggest buildings to dust. Now all that remains is the 1931 headquarters block, a bodiless head poking out amid the rubble.

But what a head! The Depression Era Tetleys didn't, as the later slogan went, do things by halves. One gets a sense that as with the Civic Hall up on the moral high ground of town this art deco gem in the manufacturing underbelly was an attempt to out-build the downturn.

It may not be obvious from the exterior though because this is the antithesis of South Leeds' other post-industrial poster child. Temple Works is all facade. "Look at me," it shouts to the passer-by on the grim streets of Holbeck, "I'm a fucking Egyptian Temple!" Grade I heritage status nailed on.

Tetley's HQ by contrast is neat, unassuming brickwork on the outside. You have to push the brass plate on the

beautiful revolving door to see why it's a crime that this place remains unlisted.

Stepping inside, a steady flow of Heritage Open Days visitors were able to appreciate just what this company stood for at the height of its powers, when even city councillors judged its product to be "the most popular brew in the view of the Corporation".

In the panelled entrance hall, memorials to the workers who died serving in the two world wars, erected they say "in their honour by their grateful employers". Straight ahead, the deco centrepiece of the original scissor-lift. It's a beast that looks frightening to operate sober, let alone after enjoying the free bar that apparently blessed the building in its heyday.

Winding round the lift, the original staircase takes us up to the well appointed office floors and onwards to the most surprising space I have seen in the city in a long time. Seeing the sun stream in through the roof lights onto a double-height hall it's easy to see why Project Space Leeds were so eager to get their hands on this place for a gallery.

It was heartening on the open day to see PSL eager to engage with the building's history and to hear the stories of those who worked and, by all accounts, played there. A place with this much architectural and narrative capital deserves to be treated as the opposite of a blank canvas.

It's going to be brilliant, but not yet, for the building is to be refurbished ahead of the gallery opening in the Spring of next year. Thanks, in the mean time, to Heritage Open Days and Project Space Leeds for letting people have a peak inside this place at a moment of transition.

23 September 2012

History is the handrail

With this blog post, we make a diversion 200 miles south to the Museum of London, where an exhibit set me thinking a bit more about narrative capital, and how, like financial wealth, it becomes attached to privilege.

History is the handrail for which we reach when knocked off balance by the present day.

Therefore it seems apt that at the Museum of London a "timeline handrail" runs from 1688 to 2012, around the new Galleries of Modern London.

At first sight this is a cute way to lay out the span of years through the expanse of the gallery, surrounded by some excellent exhibits that bring past generations of the capital's people back to life. But the handrail left me feeling queasy, unsteady on my feet, because here London's past is for sale.

I don't mind the principle of sponsorship so much as the way it is done. Critically, for £5000 corporations and wealthy individuals can not only affix their names to a year, but also dictate the very events with which that date should be associated.

It's a strange price, £5000 – beyond the reach of mass participation by ordinary Londoners, yet chickenfeed for

the City's many firms and institutions. And, the website boasts, it counts as gift aid so: "if you are a 50% higher rate taxpayer, your donation could cost you even less at £2,500."

In other words, the rich may occupy a year of London's narrative for half the sum that their history-loving cleaners or chauffeurs would have to scrimp and save.

Regular followers of my ramblings will know that I have a special thing for the year 1794. I wondered which of the various happenings of that eventful year might have made it onto the timeline.

- The hounding from Hackney of the nonconformist minister and scientist Joseph Priestley?
- The trial and acquittal of radical leaders after a massed rally of the London Corresponding Society?
- The composer Haydn, writing and performing in the city?
- Publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Origin and Progress of the French Revolution' or William Blake's 'Song's of Experience'?

From the latter, 'London'

"I wander through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe."

You'll see where this is leading, for the handrail entry for my favourite year reads: "1794: Robert Charsley is admitted to the Court of King's Bench and founds international legal practice Norton Rose."

Now I know nothing of Norton Rose LLP and their business, sponsors of that eventful year on the timeline handrail. Well done them, I say, for 217 years of lawyering in London.

Yet this entry inadvertently speaks volumes – more even than those lines of William Blake – about the nature of power in the City of London. The structure of this sponsorship scheme guarantees a history written by the victors. It underwrites the narratives of the already powerful.

When you place your hand on a rail it does more than offer support; it also guides your direction of travel. Where do you want it to lead you?

18 December 2011
http://wp.me/p1bV4-Er

Five minutes, one year, two buildings, a thousand stories

Notes from a presentation at Leeds Town Hall, on Wednesday 9 January 2013. Thanks to Richard and Ivor for giving me yet another five minutes on the Bettakultcha stage.

What an amazing venue. I could spend the next five minutes just talking about this building. I could tell you how the Leeds Corporation raised a special tax and set a budget of £35,000 to build a grand new town hall.

I could tell you how an unknown East Riding architect named Cuthbert Brodrick won the competition with his Classical Baroque design, championed by Charles Barry, architect of the Palace of Westminster.

I could tell you how, part-way through construction, rivalry with surrounding towns spurred on the architect and his clients to add a tower and bust their budget, finally completing the structure at a cost of £125,000. But you know all that stuff, right?

I could tell you about the year construction began, 1853. A year of industrial strife in which Preston cotton workers were locked out of their mills, inspiring novels by both Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell.

A year of innovation. Dr John Snow anaesthetised Queen Victoria with chloroform during the birth of her eighth child. The year Sir George Cayley's terrified butler flew across Brompton Dale, near Scarborough, and resigned as soon as got back down to earth. But that's not what I want to talk about.

Because while the great and the good of this city were signing the contract to build this town hall, a mile across town, a very different group of people were laying the foundations of another remarkable building.

The area on Richmond Hill known as "the Bank" was populated in early Victorian times by Irish weavers and labourers, drawn to the city to work in factories and construction. Their numbers were swollen in the 1840s by refugees from Ireland's Great Famine. The Bank was a slum, with badly-built housing, poor drainage, overcrowding and disease.

Yet in this place, the poor Catholic congregation, with their priests and an order of Oblate nuns, found the resources to replace their makeshift church with a massive cathedral-scale Gothic creation known as Mount St Mary's. They called it the Famine Church.

It took four years to build. In that time, workers were killed and injured in a lightning strike; the order of nuns faced financial ruin, and due to old mine-workings the

foundations below the ground cost as much as the structure above.

The church's first architect was York-born Joseph Hansom, inventor of the horse-drawn Hansom Cab. Later additions were by Edward Welby Pugin, whose father gave us the rich interiors of the Palace of Westminster.

In Bradford in 1858, John Ruskin asked why it was that the churches of the period were so often Gothic, while the mills and mansions were Classical: "But now you live under one school of architecture, and worship under another. What do you mean by doing this?"

This was more than just a question of taste. Ruskin hated Classical buildings because every detail had to be specified according to the laws of proportion and precedent – that pesky golden ratio. Symmetry trumps practicality. Perfection frustrates adaptation: "If you... make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them."

With Classical, it's all big design upfront. Adding the Town Hall tower was costly and disruptive. At St Mary's it was natural for Pugin's transepts to blend into Hansom's nave. A tower was planned, but, no matter, it never got one.

Mount St Mary's Church was in use for more than 130 years. But since 1989 it has lain empty, stripped of its contents and allowed to decay.

> *"A sign on the vaulted front door said, 'Keep Out, Private, Danger' – a warning, a threat and a promise."* – Bernard Hare, 'Urban Grimshaw and the Shed Crew'

The English Heritage Grade II* Listing for Mount St Mary's says it is "An important building on a prominent site," with "fine proportions and remains of important features."

Developers now have planning permission for "a scheme that preserves the most important parts of the buildings and creates an innovative and exciting new residential development." I really hope it succeeds.

It's worth reflecting on the differences between these two buildings, Leeds Town Hall and Mount St Mary's. Both begun in the same year, but on different sides of the tracks. One Classical, the other Gothic.

One built by civic power, the other by the faith of an immigrant community. I am neither Irish nor Catholic – I was married here in the Town Hall. But both buildings have provided a stage over the years for marking our city's countless births, marriages and deaths.

One well-maintained and in use to this day, the other neglected now for two dozen years. What do their parallel stories tell us about the kind of city we want this to be?

9 January 2013
http://wp.me/s1bV4-2904