MADE IN BELFAST
SMITHFIELD AND UNION, RESTORE PROJECT

Since the 1980s, 'regeneration' schemes have transformed much of Belfast city centre as part of major developments aimed at multi-national retail business and tourism. These have been delivered through infrastructure, building and public realm (landscape) projects and market-led investment incentives provided from government level. However, areas of independent traders and unique local shops concentrated in the shadow of these developments have not benefited to the same extent; suffering instead from more deterioration due to neglect and needless demolition without the same influx of investment as elsewhere.

A recent success supporting local areas outside the city's retail and commercial core however is the ReStore Project, a Department of Social Development (DSD) funded initiative modelled after schemes in Washington D.C. These programmes directly target distinct commercial districts and small retailers and traders to support their development of a unique identity and to promote their areas as a place for shoppers and visitors. Following its use in Castle Street in 2010, the most recent ReStore helped fund capital works around Smithfield Market, just northwest of Royal Avenue and Castle Court.

On Winetavern and Gresham Streets the project revitalized Victorian-era terraces and shopfronts with independent traders, while around North Street it sourced and installed bespoke hoardings and artwork to cover derelict buildings and gap sites. This completes the first concrete steps toward locally promoted regeneration in a wider area now called Smithfield and Union that stretches from Smithfield Market, north to Frederick Street between Royal Avenue and Carrick Hill/ Millfield.

Smithfield and Union, a new identity for the area launched at the end of 2010, is not another generic retail-led branding or 'quarter' for Belfast but is based upon the area's history as one of the city's oldest districts, and its future potential for genuine diversity and living opportunities. It was conceived in collaboration between local businesses and residents, Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM) and DSD, with support from Belfast City Council and research from the University of Ulster's Departments of Architecture and Visual Communications.

Support for these initiatives reflects changes in DSD's approach, which at one time considered the expansion of Castle Court and demolition of Smithfield Market and existing traders' buildings altogether. Instead, the new scheme supports local individuals who transformed themselves into a self-promotional organization called the North West City Centre Regeneration Committee (NWCCRC) and offered an alternative vision. It was also these local people who consolidated existing buildings around Smithfield Market for continued use as independent businesses rather than selling or demolishing them during the building boom.

Seeking creative ideas about the area's future development and branding, NWCCRC extended an invitation in 2009 to the University of Ulster. With the stakeholders, university students and staff from architecture and visual communications jointly undertook studies, surveys, exhibitions and interventions that
documented unique local character and helped to connect the current identity around the area’s history, physical environment and unseen narratives. This include listed structures, important streetscapes and venues that continue to reflect a vibrant and diverse social, cultural, economic and architectural setting. The uniqueness found in Smithfield and Union, which belies its physical condition, is how it shows local businesses continuing to exist and support each other while major retailers cut and run from the city centre or seek large scale demolition and a return to market-led and top-down development.

Within this context, ReStore has brought real change and a unified character back to the area around Smithfield; a credit to the efforts of BCCM staff who implemented it on behalf of Belfast City Council, DSD and NWCCRG. Still, ReStore remains only a small successful step. North Street, like Gresham and Winetavern Streets, were once fully lined with buildings but continue to suffer from derelict premises and areas of waste ground and surface car-parking. Smithfield remains under threat and a lack of consistent activity means its surrounding area remains primarily a pass through rather than a destination. Pivotal located between the City core, Shankill, North Belfast, Cathedral Quarter and University of Ulster, the area has potential as a natural gateway but needs cooperation from all local and regional levels to address its future holistically.

ReStore should provide important benchmarks of conservation and promotion of something that is not another generic approach to Belfast’s regeneration. Parallel initiatives like Living Above The Shops (LOTS) also have added potential to capitalize on the area’s diversity with continued emphasis on street life activity and architecture if coordinated with new mixed-use housing and retail development. These locally grown examples show how shared vision could address local area, and the wider City’s, social, economic and physical future.

For further information on Smithfield and Union and the ReStore Project, see www.smithfieldandunion.com or search at www.belfastcity.gov.uk

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