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Our future city

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# OUR FUTURE CITY

As well as repairing the physical damage caused by last December's storms, our 'divided city' should re-imagine itself and re-invest, writes Dr Stephen Gibbs, a senior lecturer in global leadership and chair of Carlisle Flood Action Group



PHOTOGRAPH: CARLISLE FLIGHT TRAINING



**I** live in the Carlisle East End because it is a community. I write in the Beehive Pub, over ham and eggs. The pub is one of the beating hearts of my manor. But scratch below the surface of any Northern European city and the traces of tumult are still there. Carlisle is a divided city. Walls separate its communities. Carlisle was, and partly still is, of course, a walled city. As some of these outer defences fell into disrepair, new barriers appeared. With industrialisation there emerged a mysterious class of people. Never seen before. The Middle Classes, and they wanted smarter homes, in new areas. With their desire for exotic products came canals, rail and road to add to the rivers. These new lines separated people groups. Across industrial Europe communities evolved on each side of these physical and social barriers, developing distinct histories.

The collapse of heavy industry, the rise of welfare capitalism, technological progress, and

**A view of flooded Carlisle on December 6, showing Warwick Road and Brunton Park**

globalisation, conspire to press the Northern European peoples together. But the physical and social walls are still there in many places. Artisan coffee shops unite us momentarily, so do social media, but we in the North have not shaken off social legacies. And Carlisle is still a working city. As the rest of the UK wheezes industrially, Carlisle buzzes and whirs with furious industry. But, also, the countryside presses into the heart of the city, through Rickerby Park, to The Sands, through to Bitts Park.

This is a unique grafting together of agrarian and industrial. It makes it one of the most beautiful smaller cities in the world. Carlisle is a combination of manufacturing, services, logistics, in a vast agricultural valley dominated by the Eden watershed. It's a provincial city, with rich dialects, tracing a rich heritage. It and Cumbria sees itself as distinct from the rest of the North. Go one county across to Yorkshire, and you will find the West Yorkshire Urban Area. The fourth largest in the UK.



**‘The wall at the end of my street needs to come down. My friends are beyond that wall, and I find it madness. But the bigger barriers are political and spiritual’**

A multi-cultural mass of interlocking towns and cities where industrial capitalism was born. And it has had to renew itself still. A new spirit is re-energising the northern corridor; with small engineering firms successfully entering Indian and US markets after their management vision was refreshed by investment capital. Most of these bright businesses are woven into the profusion of universities across the region, and whose research groups act as catalysts and enterprise hubs. Mill towns have won awards for converting their

factories to lecture rooms and providing state of the art laboratories that businesses can hire by the hour, keeping capital flowing in the business.

From the city of culture, Liverpool, to Manchester, the Northern Powerhouse, with its sacred temples to industrial capitalism, to Leeds, going at faster speeds, they are creating metropolitan spirits to rival London, shifting the centre of gravity politically. Don't patronise the North with ideas of a Northern Powerhouse, says Huddersfield MP Barry Sheerman, in a Geldof moment; just give us the investment money now.

But what of Carlisle? What of Cumbria? Where does this city's future lie? What does it want to be? Who do we, its people, wish to become? Some traditional provincial Cumbrian values bump into globalisation. Rampant expansion of the Middle Class in the North, and their desires, shaped by interlinked global supply chains, hanker after products with no country identity. The world's barriers to markets have fallen away, but northern

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## 'For Carlisle and Cumbria to reimagine itself its vision has to be global. A global region competing for businesses to relocate, invest and enjoy an ecologically advanced business ecosystem that is a model for Europe and the world'

Britain has its walls, socially and physically. At the end of my street is a massive one. Reminding us of who we were.

My grandfather worked for K Shoes before the last world war, and the death throes of this once dominant British industry led eventually to mother escaping to the women's army via Carlisle Castle's recruitment office, never to return. When I came back 20 years ago it was clear Cumbria is a stakeholder county. It works differently to other places as there is a stake in the region not found in the South East, that amorphous region which has little shared sense of its self, but has benefited from trade with the Continent, and from London's overspill. Dormitory towns feed off the heaving metropolis. But this region and Carlisle also share a symbiotic relationship. Carlisle and Cumbria has the people, location and capability to attract major investment. The region and the Eden Valley are a vast space in which to reimagine Carlisle, Cumbria and the tentacle towns that link this epic area. The finely balanced ecosystem of economy and natural landscape offer something unique. A central point in the British Isles to trade at low cost, with high social value.

For all its crassness and vacuity America does some things brilliantly well. It fixes business problems. It recovered, in its own indebted way, from the 2008 crash a long time ago. It rejigged taxes here, shifted communities to over there. It drove over the top of its barriers. It goes to work. It can create new towns out of the dirt. Why? It has business leaders and a service ethic second to none. Now, we don't want this level of risk here. For one thing we have tried it before and we got burnt. And being European is infinitely preferable to free market America, as its social ills and education system testify. But we do need its scale of thinking. It thinks expansively and confidently about what might and should be. America is less a single nation at times than an idea and movement, undergirded by codified values that re-emerge in grassroots dialogue, acting as a drive-belt.

For Carlisle and Cumbria to reimagine itself its vision has to be global. A global region competing for businesses to relocate, invest and enjoy an ecologically advanced business ecosystem that is a model for Europe and the world. A low cost trading



environment, a value society, based on cute objectives, offering community-based relationships that build social capital as well as shareholder value. An alternative society, attractive to new investors, that takes the lead in destroying the residue of industrial and patriarchal feudal capitalism. But not lacking in the animal spirits of creativity or competitiveness. Remember that when companies go head to head they can destroy both corporate and social value. Look at the simultaneous success and failure of supermarkets in the UK from a community perspective.

**S**o the picture for Cumbrian growth is a complex one. Lazy simplism, the left or right debates, manufacture or services, have cost the UK economy so the time is to engage in the hard yards of dialogue and vision. Learning new language, new patience with hard realities, dragging parties into the room, maybe kicking and screaming.



Unlearning as well as learning. Attacking the icons of 'how we have always done things'. Learning that being the practical 'just do it' selves has to be balanced with the subtle and attentive. Acknowledging the issues are multifarious, and that extended dialogue, into the dark corners is where mature leadership really is, and charisma and heroics are probably better left for the movies. For example the reason London boomed centuries ago was simple. Transport. Business loves access. We live in a global economy where capital flies at the speed of light, and hates barriers. Where once canals and trains moved wool from London to Manchester, and merchants took a slice, fibre optics transfer monies, ignoring country barriers. We are a global village. If Cumbria, and its key hubs, wish to keep pace with the other economies it has to revisit all barriers, social, physical and consider its glocal (sorry for the jargon) potential. The insurance industry, or more so the insurance premium payer, will invest £1 billion to £2 billion in the region as a result of floods, the government a few million. The ultimate false economy. Piecemeal

investment passes the problem down the line. The wall at the end of my street needs to come down. My friends are beyond that wall, and I find it madness. But the bigger barriers are political and spiritual. I propose we do not just repair, we Reimagine : Reinvest : Regenerate. But this needs a concentration of effort, a shaking of the pillars of institutions locally as well as in Westminster.

The finely balanced ecosystem of the past, with its river keepers, who cleared the weeds, allowed the water to flow, and the artisans who read the seasons, husbanded the land around communities and worked in harmony with it, plus were shaped by it, never recovered from the power of the corporation and the rush to urban dwelling, with its barriers. Adam Smith never imagined monopolies and institutions having such power, restricting the ecology of markets.

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 Dr Stephen Gibbs is Chair of Carlisle Flood Action Group, and also a Senior Lecturer in global leadership and change at The Business School at The University of Huddersfield.

**'Carlisle was, and partly still is, of course, a walled city. As some of these outer defences fell into disrepair, new barriers appeared': Dr Stephen Gibbs photographed off Warwick Road for Carlisle Living**