



Lancaster Conservation Area Appraisal

Character Area 3. The City Centre

March 2013

3.3 Character Area 3. The City Centre

3.3.1. Definition of Special Interest

"The City Centre Character Area is the historic heart of Lancaster and still represents its commercial and cultural core. It is characterised by narrow medieval streets, gently curving with the topography and busy with people. These streets are lined by active buildings of various ages but common proportions, reflecting the incremental change and continuous importance of this commercial heart. A number of important civic buildings (including the Old Town Hall, St John's Church, Storey Institute, the former Centenary Church) punctuate the street form and feature in street vistas. A number of good quality small public spaces provide an attractive setting for historic buildings and relief in the street grid. A series of alleys and courtyards offer the opportunity to explore within the street blocks."

3.3.2. Historical Development

This character area covers the area of the Roman civilian settlement and the core of the medieval town, east of the Castle and Priory (Area 2). Archaeological excavation has shown that Church Street follows the route of the main Roman street east from the fort, and most of Penny Street and Cheapside are also of Roman origin (on the route south to Chester). King Street could also be Roman and was certainly extant by the medieval period, as were most town centre streets; Market Street was probably laid out after the market charter was granted in around 1220 and China Street is also at least 13th century in date.

The earliest clear map of the town, published by Speed in 1610, shows the medieval layout with houses fronting burgage plots. The Market Square had a cross, and to its west, the first Town Hall was built in 1668, equipped with lock-ups. Speed marks the fish market north of the centre, and a corn mill, on a mill race or fleet that curved south of the Lune to Fleet Square; it was culverted

in the mid-18th century and its the line is preserved in Damside Street and North Road. Most medieval houses in the town centre were timber-framed with thatched roofs; a devastating fire in 1698 led to the re-building in stone of many town centre properties, but timber-framed houses and thatch survived until the 18th or 19th centuries in poorer areas.

The prosperity of the port funded new private and public buildings; St John's Church (1750s) was built as a chapel of ease to the Priory Church before becoming a parish church, the Assembly Rooms (1759) and the [old] Town Hall was rebuilt (1781-83). The Shambles were built for butchers between Market Street and Common Garden Street (1776). On the edge of the town centre, warehouses were built for merchants on side streets such as Dye House Lane. The town was on the main west coast route between England and Scotland, with King Street and Penny Street the main routes into the town; inns were built to serve travellers. The King's Arms on King Street was the most important 18th century coaching inn, along with the Royal Oak and Commercial Inns on Market Square. On Church Street, the Sun Inn was re-built in its present form in 1785. New Street (1747), New Road (1752) and Sun Street were created in the 18th century by clearing burgage plots but followed their linear pattern. Fine new townhouses were built for the merchants and for county families on main streets, such as the west end of Church Street.

The status of the town centre declined after the maritime trade shifted to Liverpool in the late 18th century. This prompted denser, lower quality development behind frontages; for example Dr Marton's garden was built on in 1785, separating the Music Room from the house on Church Street. Some of the infill was for workers' housing, in courts and yards. The town centre was important commercially from the mid 19th century; by 1910, there were six banks, mainly located around the Market Place. The Shambles were converted to a covered market in 1846, rebuilt again in 1880. The main shopping streets were Market Street, New Street, Cheapside and Penny Street; the first co-operative store was built on Penny Street in 1860, and the Lancaster and Skerton Equitable Co-

operative Society built a large store on Church Street in 1901. Political clubs built at the end of the 19th century included a Conservative Club, Liberal Club and Masonic Hall on Church Street.

20th century development in the town centre resulted in the loss of some older buildings, some building uses changed and new facilities were built. In courts and yards, early 19th century workers' cottages were cleared in the 1920s. After the New Town Hall was built on Dalton Square in 1901, banks moved into the ground floor of the old Town Hall, converted to a museum in 1923. In 1938-9 a bus station was built on Damside Street, with the loss of around 18 houses. In the 1960s the Arndale Centre was built on the King Street/Common Garden Street junction, and in 1967, a shopping mall was built over the line of medieval St Nicholas Street, both resulting in the loss of historic buildings. The Victorian market hall was destroyed by fire in 1984, and the site redeveloped.

3.3.3. Archaeological Potential

Within the built up city centre, the potential for buried remains depends largely on the detailed history of each plot and the amount of Georgian and Victorian cellaring or modern redevelopment. Along the western part of Church Street Roman deposits are known to be particularly deep and, even where cellars have cut into them, the lower levels may be intact. Where no cellaring has taken place, such as gardens and yard areas, deposits may be extensive and contain material of prehistoric and later dates and the highest potential may lie in the small area of gardens behind 72-80 Church Street, followed by yards off Sun Street and Back Sun Street. Valuable and important buried remains can exist on sites subject to a long history of use and re-use, demonstrated by excavations at the former Mitchell's Brewery between Church Street and Market Street and at the former Streamline Garage site off King Street. It should be assumed that all sites have some archaeological potential which should be assessed and taken into account prior to development.

The pattern of prehistoric occupation of the city is not well understood, and it is difficult to predict where remains may survive. It is notable, however, that modern investigations in the City Centre have found traces of early activity, and there is potential for further survivals. In the southern part of the area a significant concentration of prehistoric and Roman burials have been recorded in historic reports and modern investigations, probably a cemetery area on both sides of the Roman road south from which the rare and particularly fine memorial stone to Insus, son of Vodillius, was recovered. The main area of Roman civilian settlement appears to have been Church Street and the northern end of Penny Street/Cheapside; at this time the river bank was at the foot of the slope between Church and Damside Streets and Roman material (but not as yet any quay or waterfront structures) has been encountered several metres deep within river silts alongside Damside Street.

Pre-Conquest material is rare in Lancaster and whilst the city centre was probably occupied during this period it is difficult to predict where remains may survive. Medieval remains are more robust and may survive in all occupied areas shown on Speed's 1610 map. Unlike earlier periods, medieval archaeology includes structural fabric – particularly timber framing or roof timbers – incorporated into buildings refurbished or re-fronted in the 17th and 18th centuries. Post-medieval remains also include standing structures and re-used structural elements. Archaeology associated with minor manufactories and trades of the 18th and 19th centuries, along with workers' housing has particular potential. North of Damside Street the land of the former Green Ayre was not developed until the 18th century (with the obvious exception of the medieval corn mill site located in the area of Dye House Lane) but by the mid 19th century the area was almost completely built up. Limited investigations undertaken during the construction of the present bus station have shown that foundations and other remains of this occupation are still extant.

3.3.4. Buildings and Architectural Quality

Building materials in this area are almost exclusively local sandstone, faced in dressed coursed stone or ashlar, with an occasional red brick building. Some late 19th century buildings are finished with a rough cast or smooth render on the upper storeys. Roofs are generally laid with Cumbrian slate in diminishing courses, but some have been replaced with concrete tiles. Where buildings have historic steps to entrances, these are of stone, with iron railings. Stone chimney stacks are an important feature of the area's roofscape, although many have been rendered.



Small scale, pre-Georgian houses on Church Street (with some recent infill)



Townhouses and The Sun Inn, Church Street, built 1785

This area represents the commercial heart of the city centre. Market Square is an historic focus with a group of municipal buildings

including the late 18th century Old Town Hall. Buildings that pre-date the 18th century heyday of the town are rare; Number 6 on Church Street is one of the few in the centre and has lower proportions than later buildings. Most of the surviving 18th century buildings were built as private houses for the town's middle classes. The area also contains some warehouses associated with the port.

As a result of the long evolution of the city centre, many buildings have been replaced at different times and in different styles, reflecting contemporary fashions. Styles range from relatively austere 18th century or early 19th century Georgian domestic buildings with restrained ashlar detailing, through to more flamboyant late 19th century Revival architecture and inter-war Art Deco. Early 20th century neo-Classical buildings illustrate the continued development of the town centre and provide a new interpretation of the style. Conservation from the late 20th century influenced the design of some new buildings, designed in a replica Georgian style, such as on Queen Street where ashlar is combined with coursed stone on the front and the window surrounds do not project as much as on Georgian buildings. Recent buildings designed in contemporary style are also prominent in this area, such as Rosemary House on Rosemary Lane. These tend to be of a larger scale than adjoining buildings and incorporate large areas of glazing.



Old Town Hall (1781-3 by Jarratt, cupola by Harrison)



Early 20th Century Neoclassical Palladium Cinema on Market Street, now a shop



Former cottages in Bashful Alley behind Market Street



Rosemary House, Rosemary Street

Some small-scale buildings in courts behind main frontages survive; built as workshops, warehouses or workers' houses, for example in Bashful Alley and Frances Passage. Buildings in Area 3 are generally low rise and vary between two, three and four storeys, with those along alleys built at a lower two-storey scale. High status historic buildings such as the Old Town Hall (now the Museum), the former Assembly Rooms, St John's Church and St Thomas' Church are of an overall larger scale, designed to stand out above the prevailing low rise houses and shops, resulting in a varied skyline. Buildings in the city centre are mainly constructed up to the pavement, although a few larger buildings such as churches are set behind railings.

Significant details are associated with particular periods of architecture: Georgian buildings are distinguished by moulded door and window surrounds, small-pane sliding sash windows, timber panel doors, fanlights, raised quoins, cornices and stone chimneys; larger town houses or public buildings have porticoes, parapets and cupolas. Victorian and Edwardian buildings also have sash windows to upper floors, but may also have more elaborate oriel or display windows, a variety of gables with finials and carved stone decoration.



18th century warehouses on Dye House Lane

The area contains some of the city's fine collection of warehouses, all with a strong vertical emphasis, with loading slots and gabled canopies; these mostly date from the 18th century. There are good quality late 19th to early 20th century shop fronts, either on

purpose-built premises or inserted into earlier houses; also a feature are decorative tiled entrances, part glazed doors and trade signs. Most buildings have a variety of cast-iron rainwater goods, some with dated hoppers, which should be retained where possible.



Tiled Victorian shop entrance on Penny Street



Late 19th Century Shop-front and large upper floor display windows on New Street



Unusual rocking horse trade sign on New Street



Early 20th century commercial block, east side of Cheapside

Creative late 20th century adaptations of historic buildings can enhance the street scene, such as the new steel railings on a former coach house in Sun Street add interest.



Inserted Railings, Sun Street

Few main streets retain historic street surfaces and roads are generally laid with modern bitmac, with concrete pavements. Exceptions are setted surfaces on side roads such as Calkeld Lane and Dyehouse Lane, sections of historic stone paving and kerbs survive on some outlying streets with setts and cobbles along alleys behind the main streets, such as Victorian Place off Penny Street. Pedestrianised areas tend to have a variety of modern setted or paved surfaces and recent street furniture.



Neo-Jacobean former Co-operative Store (1901 by Austin & Paley)

Many former houses were adapted for retail or commercial use in the 19th century with inserted shop-fronts. The Ring O'Bells on King Street retains a fine domestic doorcase. Purpose-built shops are rare before the Victorian period, but upper floor display windows are a feature of 19th century shops. Warehouses retain gables and loading slots but have been converted to residential or office use with the insertion of windows and railings. A former coach house on Sun Street was converted to a police station in the mid-19th century by masonry infill of a loading slot and was converted in the 20th century to a restaurant. The large Lancaster and Skerton Equitable Co-operative Society building on Church Street (1901 by Paley & Austin) was built as a department store in 1901, but was re-built for modern retail use behind the retained façade in the 1980s.

Of Lancaster's historic inns, The Sun on Church Street is a good example of a Georgian inn, but many pubs and hotels were rebuilt or are more recent; the King's Arms

Hotel was rebuilt in 1879 and is still in use as a hotel; a large 4-storey corner building, with oriel windows and pediments. The south end of Penny Street is framed by two prominent hotels designed in revival style with carved decoration; the Alexandra to the east (1902) and the former White Cross Hotel (1897) to the west (both are listed buildings and have been re-named).



Former Alexandra Hotel (1902) on Penny Street

3.3.5. Current Activities and Uses

This area today represents the City Centre of Lancaster and contains its primary shopping area. This is focused around the indoor shopping precinct of St Nicholas Arcades and the pedestrian streets: Penny Street, Cheapside, Market Street, New Street and Church Street. The whole area is occupied by town centre uses: retail, café/bar/restaurants, community uses and a small number of offices. It includes the indoor market and the City's principal bus station (both are new buildings). The City Centre is a busy and vibrant space. This is in part due to the street form which crowds people onto long and narrow streets. The area also accommodates a large amount of traffic. The one-way system concentrates this traffic onto King Street, China Street and Bridge Lane, leaving the inner core as a pedestrian dominated environment.

3.3.6. Urban Form

The City's medieval street pattern still predominates here. This, and the topography, dictates the urban form. This is one of narrow, gently curving streets. The

principal streets are King Street, Church Street and Penny Street, which form a triangular shape. These remain fronted by commercial uses. The east-west streets between still have the function of back-streets or side-streets and are used for secondary status uses or to service uses on the principal streets. The building plots remain narrow fronted on the principal streets and extend far back: a relic of the medieval burgrave plots. In the north of the area topography places a greater role. Cable Street effectively forms the northern boundary of the City Centre, though the environment between here and the rear of the buildings fronting Church Street has a secondary, edge-of-centre feel.

3.3.7. Nodes and Gateways

The triangular street pattern serves to define the key nodes and gateways.

At the southern edge of the area the bridge over Lancaster Canal forms a strong natural gateway to the City Centre. This is well defined by the scale and quality of surrounding development. North of this is the Y-shaped fork of King Street and Penny Street. This forms a strong node and an opportunity to accentuate the townscape with built form and public space. Unfortunately this space is dominated by traffic and poorly considered street furniture and the scale, quality and current condition of the Victorian development that faces this space (currently a KFC franchise) does not reflect its importance.



The junction of Penny Street and King Street

The gateways from the west of the Centre are well defined and strong. On the approach from the railway station the grand Jacobean Revival Storey Creative Industries Centre signposts arrival at the City Centre and marks the entry point northwards to the Castle precinct. The visitor then reaches the junction of China Street/King Street and Market Street which represents a clear and positive gateway to the pedestrianised shopping core.

The northern gateway to the City Centre could best be defined as Cable Street, Water Street and Chapel Street. The presence and activity of the bus station here generally makes this a positive gateway, although the pedestrian route into the City Centre could be better considered. The adjacent junction with Chapel Street represents the main entry point for motorists from the north. This gateway is weak: it is currently marked by a surface car park and the side of a building in poor condition, which is used to display advertising hoardings. Appropriate new development here would better define this gateway.

Gateways from the west are perhaps harder to locate as there are three entry points represented by bridges over the canal (NB. these are outside this Character Area but are perhaps best considered here). The most significant is from East Road, where the gateway to the City Centre is marked by the Cathedral and then the bridge over the canal. From these bridges eastwards the City Centre arrives gradually and subtly, given heavy vegetation and the lack of significant buildings in the area. The new apartment block on Quarry Road does at least mark arrival at the City Centre, and from here inwards views open up to significant historic buildings.

When approaching the centre from the east, the junction of Church Street/Moor Lane and Stonewell represents arrival at the City Centre proper. It is also the gateway between three distinct Character Areas. This gateway is well defined with an attractive public space, strong built frontages (even the facing multi-storey car park frontage has been well considered) and a historic fountain.

The junction of China Street/Church Street is a gateway that represents the entry point to the pedestrianised core at Church Street from the ring road and Castle Precinct. This is a strong gateway, well defined by both the built form on the corners (especially the Duke of Lancaster) and the attractive public space and historic stone cross on the opposite side of the road.



Gateway to Church Street

Within these gateways, key nodes are generally well defined within the historic street pattern. For example; Church Road/North Road, Chapel Street/North Road and Rosemary Lane/St Leonard's Gate. All of these are marked by positive frontages that directly address the often curving streets and junctions. Key buildings are often located at these points (e.g. St John's Church) or are aligned to make effective use of the vistas created by the street pattern and topography. New development (for example Rosemary House) is also well designed to address the corner it sits on.

Of slightly lesser importance are the nodes within the pedestrianised core: Market Street/New Street, Market Street/Cheapside and Penny Street/Common Garden Street. These are tight junctions with little public space but are nonetheless lined with strong continuous frontages that turn the corners, typically with a chamfered or circular edge and often greater architectural expression of the buildings. New Street/Market Street also benefits from an attractive public space here at the rear of the Museum.



Landmarks punctuate the street form

The other junctions in the area have lesser importance as they follow a historical hierarchy which means that one of the streets a side-street (typically the east-west roads). These do have some positive buildings and uses fronting them but the buildings on the principal streets present a side or rear elevation to them which is often blank or secondary. The corners of these streets are not defined or addressed by built form.

3.3.8. Landmarks

Landmark buildings are considered to be buildings that feature within views and vistas in the Character Area and buildings that are well known and used to navigate the City. They may or may not be listed and their inclusion does not necessarily indicate high design quality or historic importance. Landmark buildings within the City Centre include The Storey, the City Museum (Old Town Hall), St John's Church, Centenary Church, The Co-operative Store on Church Street, the Royal King's Arms Hotel and the new Market Hall on King Street.



Royal King's Arms Hotel

3.3.9. Frontages

Frontages on the principal streets (i.e. Church Street, Penny Lane, Market Street, King Street, China Street and Rosemary Lane/Stonewell) are almost uniformly positive overall. Buildings here directly front the back-of-pavement and present a continuous active frontage. Most of these buildings are historic but there has been some insensitive modern infill and insensitive alterations to shop frontages. Modern infill varies in its approach and there are examples of both well considered and inappropriate buildings. There are nevertheless many listed buildings on these streets and many well preserved historic frontages with much aesthetic interest. King Street in particular has a strong collection of individual buildings from different eras.

The original widths, proportions and heights of buildings on principal streets present a consistent framework within which there is an interesting variety of frontages. These long linear frontages, varied within a consistent framework, narrow streets and high footfall and activity are a defining feature of the experience of this Character Area. Away from these principal streets frontages are more mixed on secondary streets. Development here does not always front the streets, often there are vacant plots or exposed backs of buildings (for example on Damside Street, opposite the bus station). When buildings do front these streets the architecture is generally less interesting or well considered. There are also less 'active' frontages here, partly a historic feature of the

area's past functions. In general, frontages are positive throughout this Character Area.

3.3.10. Positive Spaces

There are a number of positive public spaces in the area. Notably these include Market Square, the small space on the western side of the Museum on New Street, the space where Moor Lane widens into Stonewell and Queen Square. These spaces are characterised by good quality surfaces and street furniture and good enclosure and interest from surrounding built frontages.

Market Square's main feature is the Old Town Hall (now the City Museum) and it has benefited from a recent high quality public realm enhancement scheme.

The space on Moor Lane has added interest from the historic drinking fountain.

Queen Square is a quieter, more restful space that has a more local function. It provides good relief from the bustle and noise of King Street and serves as a transition point to the more residential/secondary nature of the High Street character area. There is potential for this space to be further improved. The spaces are all well located in the street network and are active and well used. They provide relief in the otherwise dense street form and an opportunity for people to socialise, rest and appreciate the surrounding townscape. As such they are a vital part of the townscape experience.



Market Square

3.3.11. Significant Open Spaces, Parks, Gardens and Trees

Although the City Centre has a number of good hard landscaped spaces it does not contain any green space. Street trees and planting is minimal, largely a result of the narrow and dense street form. Street trees exist at a few but significant points: e.g. Market Square, New Street, Church Street, St John's churchyard, Sun Square and Queen Square. Overall this is an urban area but one that is not oppressive. Partly this is due to the changing topography, which often permits views to the surrounding countryside.

3.3.12. Public Realm

The streets themselves generally have good quality public realm in the pedestrianised core. Pavements are defined separately with stone flags, with setts in the central street, with good division between them. Where bollards are installed they are unobtrusive. Signage and street furniture has been minimised to avoid clutter; it is generally plain in form but does not detract. This quality of finish does not extend through all of the pedestrianised core. Much of Penny Street, for instance has a more standard flagstone treatment that does not reflect the quality of its historic buildings. Horseshoe Corner in particular (the junction of Penny Street and Market Street) is a space that does not fulfill its potential: the built form is strong here but the paving is poor, street furniture is limited and a CCTV camera is poorly sited.



Outdoor uses animate the street

However, improvements are proposed to the public realm in this area as part of the

Lancaster Square Routes scheme. There are generally no boundary treatments as the buildings front the street directly. Building lines are very strong but there is some variation in set-back to provide interest. Hanging street signage also animates the streetscene. The width of the streets mean there are few opportunities for uses to spill out onto the street but this does occur at a few places in the pedestrianised core and is a welcome addition.



Top: Horseshoe Corner; bottom: Market Street

The City Centre area contains a number of pedestrian alleyway, often linking to courtyards. Many of these are historic routes. Most of these are well used and some have strong character. Their use adds a significant element to the urban grain and to the richness of the pedestrian experience. There is further scope to enhance some of these routes. The historic guinnel linking Market Square and Church Street is an historic route and this could be enhanced to become more inviting. The parallel Vue passageway is well used but could better reflect Lancaster's distinct character.

Away from the pedestrianised streets the public realm is more standard in form and led by highways requirements. The narrow streets, heavy traffic and quality of public realm can make these streets poor settings for historic buildings and the pedestrian experience could be improved. The differing needs of users of these streets often present conflicts. For example between pedestrians, motorists, parked cars and cyclists. King Street is particularly oppressive due to the high volume of traffic.

Further interest is provided by the lanes and courts that exist within the blocks between the principal streets. These have often been opened up to shoppers as a series of linked spaces containing independent shops and cafes. The success of this approach varies, with much development in these alleys being occupied by new development of varying quality. Many of the alleys are historic (for example Bashful Alley) and many have scope for further enhancement. The alleys are sometimes covered and often link to the indoor shopping precincts. The approach is nonetheless welcome and offers greater permeability and activity within the principal street blocks. Gillson's Lane, adjacent to the new market hall represents a good mix of old and restored development, a good public realm treatment and good activity and permeability.



Gillson's Lane

3.3.13. Low Grade Environments and Detractors

Fortunately there are no real detractors or low grade environments within this Character Area, but there are opportunities for small

scale enhancement, i.e. the public realm of streets and alleyways and the improvement of insensitive frontages and infill development.

To summarise, the main opportunities for enhancement include:

- The building at car park at the junction of Chapel Street and Cable Street at the northern gateway;
- the public realm and adjacent building at the fork of King Street and Penny Street;
- Improved public realm at Horseshoe Corner.
- Pedestrian alleys: e.g. the historic guinnel linking Market Square to Church Street and the Vue passageway.

3.3.14. Building Condition

Buildings in the area are in generally good condition and have been well maintained. Buildings that appear to be 'at risk' include Number 35 Sun Street which is boarded up at its southern end, although it appears from the front to be in use. Further along Sun Street, to the north, a gap site is currently used as a car park. A few buildings show a lack of routine maintenance, such as No. 60 Market Street and the Assembly Rooms (now a market) on King Street.



35 Sun Street

Figure 3.4: Conservation Designations (Centre)

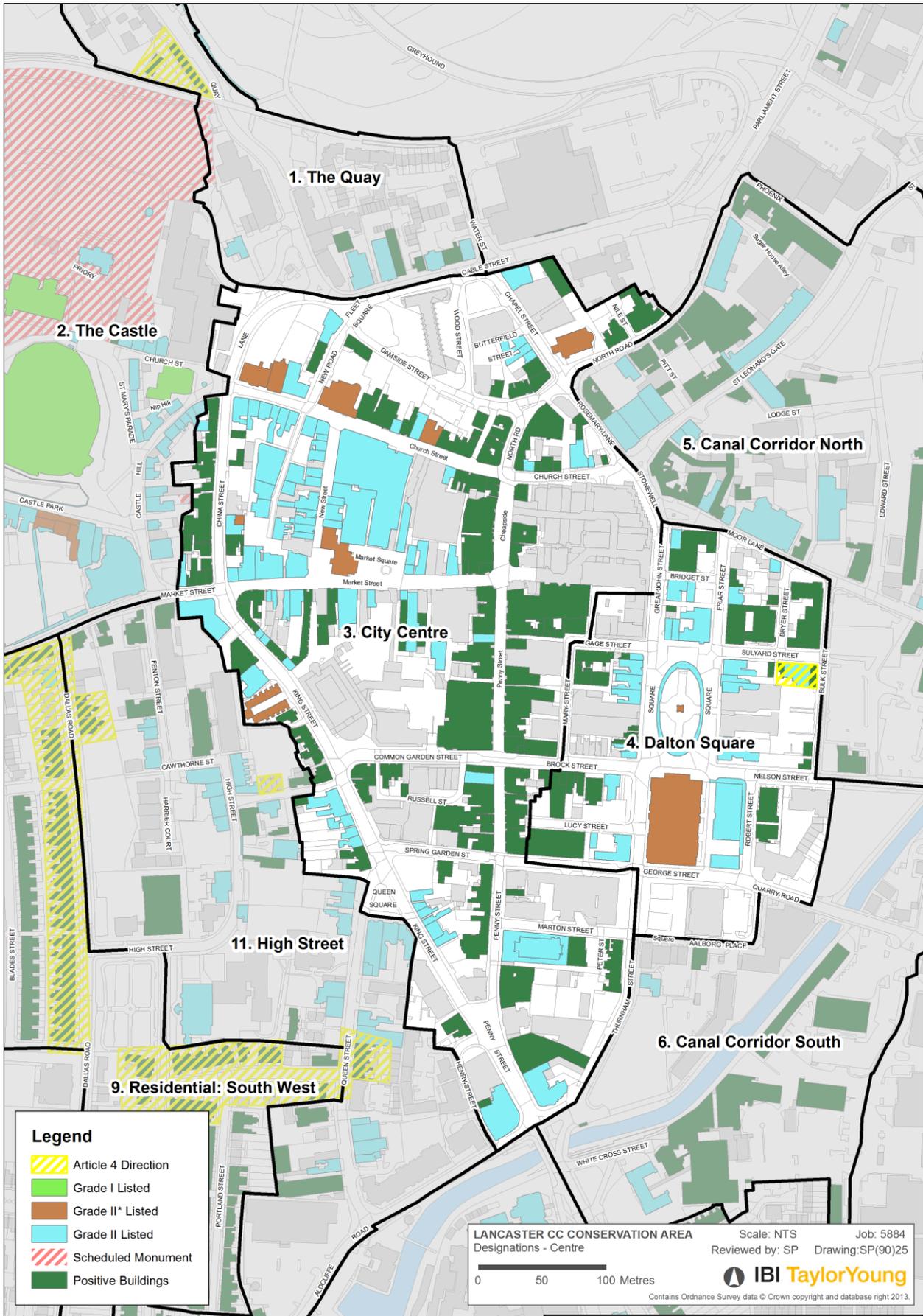


Figure 3.5: Townscape Analysis (Centre)

