

Feldmann Architects



Rutland Street

An architectural guide to the Cultural Quarter in Leicester

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The Cultural Quarter along Rutland Street developed out of the Leicester Regeneration Masterplan, a city wide strategy established in 2000 by the council to revitalize the city centre.

The area was built upon between 1840 and 1880, mostly with a mix of low quality housing and large factories and warehouses. By the end of the 19th century all of the land along Rutland Street and adjacent roads had been fully developed. A large number of the original buildings are still in place and, with few exceptions, occupied, although all with alternative uses.

The most noticeable interventions in the 20th century were highway works to two main roads: The widening of Charles Street up to Belgrave Gate in the 1930s, and the creation St. Georges Way up to Humberstone Road in the 80s as part of the inner ring road around the city centre.

These roads now form the western and the southern and eastern boundaries of the Cultural Quarter respectively, which extends up to Humberstone Gate to the north. Almost all of the key buildings are located along Rutland Street, which runs diagonally through the area, changing direction at the newly created Orton Square at the heart of the area.

This is one of my favourite parts of the city, benefitting from a metropolitan scale and strong sense of containment, created by tall buildings along narrow streets, and full of references to North American architecture, both subtle and obvious.

The concept and location of the Cultural Quarter was formally established in 2001 in the Leicester Regeneration Company Masterplan, illustrated by Alsop Architects on behalf of Leicester City Council. The idea of a creative neighbourhood was triggered by the requirement to replace the Haymarket Theatre, no longer suitable for modern touring productions, with a new building and the hope that this relocation could bring civic and economic life to a neglected part of the city centre.

A key consideration when selecting the area between Charles Street, St Georges Way and Humberstone Gate as the Cultural Quarter was the availability of land and buildings in public ownership, intended to become development triggers to start a wider regeneration process.

In this guide I will comment on the architecture of key buildings as well as the regeneration progress so far, both the council's ambition and the contribution of private developers of this regeneration instigated by the public sector.

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We start at Makers' Yard on Rutland Street, a humble Grade II listed group of buildings, which is assumed to be the oldest surviving hosiery factory in the East Midlands, built between 1855 and 1862 for hosiery manufacturers J Brown and Sons. First came the factory at the back of the site, visible from the street through the archway on the left. The warehouse on the right followed shortly afterwards, before the second factory along Rutland Street was added to complete the ensemble.

This development represents a very good example of a hosier who builds a factory to house and oversee knitters, who previously worked in their own homes, to improve quality and ensure control over their work. The addition of the warehouse to store and distribute the goods and the subsequent erection of a second factory are a testimony to the success of the business. The last occupier was Charnwood Hosiery, makers of socks for football clubs like Manchester United, Liverpool and Leicester City.

In 2013 the buildings were converted into workspace studios for artists and designer-makers by architectural practice Maber and a new lift core in the courtyard was added; the simple nature of the refurbishment allows the original character of the building to remain visible.

The ease of the conversion demonstrates that the simplicity of the original plans guaranteed a long and flexible life for the buildings by adhering to simple, but important design principles: a maximum of natural light and a minimum of internal structure created open floor plans and humble but robust elevations.

The contrast with the immediate neighbour on the left couldn't be greater: the former premises of the Pfister & Vogel Leather Company was built in 1923 by local architects Fosbrooke and Beddingfield. As Pfister and Vogel was an American tannery from Milwaukee in Wisconsin, the architects embraced the chance to design this building in a North American style, possibly modeled on an existing office building or store owned by their clients.

The elaborate facade is fabulous in its theatrical verticality and could have easily featured in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*; it is the first of many North American references that appear throughout this walk.

In 2008 the Grade II listed building was converted into apartments on the upper floors and a restaurant at ground floor and basement level. The only noticeable intervention was the fully glazed entrance to the restaurant, which replaced a low-quality loading bay door, itself not original.

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In 2015 the building saw a further change of use, when the unsympathetic restaurant fit-out was removed and ground floor converted into open plan offices, which benefit from the striking curtain wall glazing across the entire rear elevation, a first for the Midlands at the time.

Two aspects of the regeneration area are worth pointing out in this location: the first is an elaborate lamp post, part of the Art on the Move installation by Jason Bruges, a series of interactive lights between the Cultural Quarter and the Peepul Centre on Orchardson Avenue which also mark places of interest along the way.

The second is the absence of street life and noise. This part of Rutland Street is quiet and sees very little traffic of any sort, which is quite remarkable given its central location barely 500m from the Clock Tower. This is what the entire area felt like as recently as 2003, when all the factories and warehouses had been vacated.

Despite ten years of regeneration activity this part of the creative neighbourhood still has a long way to go to achieve any degree of vibrancy.

Alexandra House, the next building on this walk illustrates past and present state of the Cultural Quarter very clearly.

It was designed in 1898 by Leicester architect Edward Burgess as a bootlace warehouse for Faire Bros & Co, a major textile manufacturer, who went on to build further factories along Southampton and Wimbledon Street and became the biggest employer in the area.

The warehouse is striking in its detail and scale, yet manages to retain a very restraint sense of grandeur compared with other important buildings in Leicester at the time, for example the Grand Hotel on Granby Street of the same year.

The elegance is mainly a result of the uniform use of pale brown terracotta above a base of Norwegian granite, which was applied throughout and enabled delicate detailing, from the name plate on Southampton Street up to the statues of the projecting brackets to the top floor.

In 2005 the Grade II listed warehouse, as well as the adjoining factories, was converted into 175 apartments. The change of use had no effect on the facades, but altered the character of the area significantly - the building no longer contributes to the street life outside, as the noise of machines and deliveries has gone and the constant movement of employees and visitors has turned into a trickle of just a few residents throughout the day.

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This monoculture of small apartments, the predominant contribution of the private development sector to the area, now dominates this part of the Cultural Quarter, which is a major concern and one of the least successful aspects of the regeneration process.

Once we have crossed Southampton Street we get a glimpse of the Leicester Walk of Fame: a series of cinquefoils emblazoned with the names of local celebrities, distributed since 2008 throughout the Cultural Quarter and featuring the likes of writer Sue Townsend, suffragette Alice Hawkins, play write Joe Orton, architect Ernest Gimson and Thomas Cook, the travel entrepreneur.

We now stand outside of the former Odeon cinema, built in 1938 by architects of the Harry Weedon Partnership from Birmingham, who worked on all of Oscar Deutsch's cinemas in the country ("Oscar Deutsch Entertains Our Nation").

Realizing the potential of using architecture as advertisement they developed a particular Art Deco style to make all Odeon buildings instantly recognizable, as seen here on a building which had a capacity for over 2,100 people and was built with a stage behind the screen for live performances.

The cinema closed in 1997, but was converted into a banquet hall, conference centre and performance venue in 2006 and reopened as the Athena.

The exterior has been carefully refurbished and the interior recreates the opulence of the 1930s. The new use fits in well with the council's vision for the area and adds life, in particular at nighttime and is a good example of how a private company can successfully follow the public sector vision.

As we cross the road we step onto Orton Square, the newly created public space named after the author and play write in 2008, and its interactive Musica installation of street bollards with integrated lights that are meant to turn and respond to passers-by. Unfortunately they have stopped working and no longer provide the distraction of light and music envisaged by artist Andrew Shoben.

Facing onto Orton Square is the most significant and most controversial building in the Cultural Quarter, the Curve Theatre, occupying this prominent position at the bend within Rutland Street on a site that had previously been occupied by low grade housing and later by a surface car park, owned by Leicester City Council.

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The competition for the performing arts centre, as it was originally called, was won by New York based architect Rafael Vinoly.

His winning design is a radical departure from the traditional theatre arrangement of seating, stage and backstage area - here a dividable stage is placed between two auditoria for 350 and 750 spectators respectively, which can be combined to accommodate 1100 viewers either side of one central stage.

There is no traditional backstage area and the box for the stage and the drum shapes of the auditoria are placed in the middle of the public ground floor, surrounded by circulation space.

The building opened in 2008 and received a regional RIBA EM Award in 2009; the overall verdict is mixed though. There are obvious operational disadvantages caused by the detachment of workshops, changing rooms and ancillary spaces from the stage.

This is a significant price to pay for the concept of the central stage, which has not been explored as extensively as originally envisaged.

I have reservations about the design, both with the urban design and with the interior.

Due to the narrow streets around the building cannot be seen from a distance and therefore the fully glazed and louvred curved façade is unconvincing and a simplistic and inappropriate response for the setting on Rutland Street.

The promise of showcasing the workings within a theatre has not been delivered, not helped by the fact that the curtain screening the stage has never been lifted to display rehearsals, a key component of the original design concept.

The interior is disappointing and is a regrettable reminder that the project exceeded its original budget early in the construction period. The unfinished character of the concourse manages to make an expensive building look very cheap, despite the artwork Vestige by Jason Bruges Studio, an interactive light based installation within the entrances.

As we head for Halford Street we approach the Exchange Buildings, built in 1888 as offices by the local architect Stockdale Harrison. Looking at the sharp corner head the similarity with the Flat Iron Building in New York is charming, even on a much smaller scale, in particular as the Exchange Buildings predates the North American landmark by fifteen years.

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The Grade II listed building was converted and extended in 2002 by architects Allison Pike into shops and bars with apartments on the upper floors and a new penthouse level on top. The combination of the elegant horizontal black plinth and rich vertical fenestration creates a striking elevation which can comfortably accommodate the lightweight addition on the top floor.

As we look down along Halford Street towards Charles Street we start to see the lively street scene originally envisaged when the concept of the Cultural Quarter was first presented: plenty of pedestrian movement, pavements used for outside seating in front of the bars and restaurants and a sense of movement and activity.

It is here that it can be considered a success today, which demonstrates how long such a regeneration process takes, as well as highlighting the importance of the vital contributions private companies make to fulfill the council's ambition.

Our walk finishes at the Leicester Creative Business Depot, my personal favourite. The site was first used as a fire engine station to protect the nearby factories and wholesale market, before it was redeveloped in 1969 as the city council's transport office.

Today a converted and a new building either side of a courtyard accommodate over 50 studios and workspaces, meeting rooms and a café for the creative sector, designed by London based Ash Sakula Architects and finished in 2004.

The overcladding of the Rutland Street facades cleverly combines the traditional material of facing bricks with an interesting contemporary window pattern. The courtyard elevations allow glimpses of the old façade tiles to appear behind the glass curtain, which also contains the integrated artwork Seed by Linda Schwab and Cipher, a light sculpture on the ground floor by Tony Stallard reacting to movement in the courtyard.

The conversion into the LCB Depot used the existing robust structure and the industrial nature of the building to best effect and creates a fitting setting for the start up businesses, most noticeable in the entrance area, referred to by the architects as the New York Lobby.

The offices benefit from generous natural light and numerous quirky features, including the retained safe door of the original strong room, ensure that the small budget of the project resulted in an inexpensive and uplifting building, which received an RIBA Award in 2005.

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If you want to explore the area's rich history further through pictures, audio and video footage, go to

<http://leicesterstgeorges.co.uk/>

for a collection of interactive guides through the Cultural Quarter.

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