



THE POWER OF CURIOSITY²

*A proposition by the James Reckitt Library Trust for the revitalisation of
Whitefriargate through knowledge, learning, creativity and imagination*

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*An extended presentation of the Trust's
proposition for the revitalisation of
Whitefriargate through knowledge,
learning, creativity and imagination*

The James Reckitt Library Trust

**Produced in association with
Purcell architects and
Andrew Mawson Partnerships**

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1. What are public libraries for?

Early in 2016 the James Reckitt Library Trust published an aspirational manifesto for the future of public libraries in Hull. This was called **The Soul of the City**, and it was the beginning of an effort to find new ways of thinking about the future of public libraries. This led directly to the publication in July 2017 of a detailed, wide-ranging and radical report on the city's public libraries. This was called **Rethinking public libraries in Hull: a framework for transformation and growth**, and, with City Council support, it was subsequently adopted by Hull Culture and Leisure as a basis for the development of a new ten-year strategy for Hull's library service.

The report put forward a new understanding of the essential purpose of public libraries. It argued that the mission of public libraries should not be defined in terms of any one method of work, such as, for example, the provision of access to printed books or digital resources, but more fundamentally in terms of a mission **to help people to expand their knowledge and understanding of themselves, their lives and the world about them, in the wider interest of building strong, knowledgeable communities.**

Libraries, the Trust argued, are not in the book business; they are in the business of knowledge, learning, creativity and imagination. Their challenge is to find new ways of interpreting that fundamental mission in a world so different from that in which they were founded.

The best public libraries have been developing increasingly innovative ways of delivering their mission. Libraries in Hull have been at the forefront in pioneering new approaches to public engagement in areas as diverse as: children's learning; artistic and cultural endeavours; literary programmes; support for digital literacy; business advice; nurturing interest in science and technology through design and production, and programmes to develop a sense of community identity through, for example, oral history projects. In Hull there has also been considerable success in attracting external funding for these new ways of working.

Our public libraries now need to embark on a comprehensive implementation of this 21st century agenda. Alongside this, they need to raise still further the quality of what they offer, engage in a sustained programme of organisational development, rethink and renew their physical and digital infrastructures, transform the public perception of their purpose, and they must build enduring funding models that reduce their dependence on local government funding.

Our vision for Whitefriargate is an important component of this programme of public library transformation. At the same time, and just as important, it is aimed at making a potentially decisive contribution to the regeneration of a vital part of the city centre.

HULL LIBRARIES

...everything, and the books...



2. The deconstructed library

Compare a library to a smartphone. A smartphone is a platform on which a personalised collection of apps is assembled. Some of these apps are common to all smartphones, such as the ability to make a phone call, send a text message or capture an image. The rest depend largely on the preferences of the smartphone's owner.

Now imagine a library not as a building but as a platform. This platform is dedicated to knowledge, learning, creativity and imagination. The task of librarians is to create a platform on which different apps are assembled to meet the needs of specific groups or communities.

Rather than talking purely metaphorically about apps, we prefer to talk in practice about enterprises. So the library is a platform on which various enterprises are built, and these enterprises are the specific ways in which librarians help people to expand their knowledge and understanding, to release their creativity and imagination. It is through these enterprises that we help build strong, knowledgeable communities.

An enterprise is an activity that is planned, financed, managed and delivered in a businesslike way in the interests of communities.

Understanding the library as a platform supporting an array of enterprises allows us to consider each of these enterprises as individual, self-standing, self-sustaining activities. We avoid thinking about the library service as an undifferentiated whole that is either present or absent in a community. Instead we can focus on it as an evolving array of activities, provided in different combinations at different times in different settings – settings that might be either physical or virtual.

The use of the term enterprise is intended to signal flexibility and innovation in management and financial arrangements. Crucially it is intended to suggest openness to partnerships with other organisations.

We refer to this approach as the deconstructed library. In the deconstructed library, mission and means are separated and all the various activities in which libraries are engaged to deliver their mission are disaggregated and treated as individual enterprises.

Note that the library service as a whole is treated as a regulated system; the deconstructed library is not a random collection of enterprises. The model assumes that many functions, including strategic planning, creative direction, marketing, and a wide variety of business services, would be managed as part of the system-wide platform supporting individual enterprises.



3. Buildings and the deconstructed library

We are convinced that physical spaces remain vitally important to the future of public libraries. We believe that strong, knowledgeable communities cannot be built without real human interaction.

However, we need a more imaginative approach to the creation of physical spaces. The familiar networks of central and branch libraries created in the 19th and 20th centuries represent a model determined largely by the demands of organising access to collections of books. We no longer need to be limited to this model when it comes to finding the right spaces for the many different enterprises that should make up a modern library service. We can almost imagine each enterprise having its own space. Think what an opportunity for creativity and imagination in the design of enterprise spaces this would provide.

The concept of the deconstructed physical library applies not only to the physical spaces that might be used in delivering library services across the city as a whole but also to that great icon of the public library service, the grand central library. From the 19th century to the present day, great cities have built great libraries as symbols of civic pride and emblems of public commitment to knowledge, learning and civilised values. Cities around the world continue to invest large amounts of public money in ambitious new projects. Yet it is sometimes hard to escape the feeling that sensational architecture is what these new buildings are really all about; that under the shiny surfaces they preserve very traditional, book-centric views of the role of the library. Could we imagine something more in tune with a 21st century perspective on the future of libraries?

In Hull, the call for a new central library to replace the outdated building in Albion Street was prominent in the James Reckitt Library Trust's 2016 manifesto. In the course of 2017 and early 2018, the Trust worked with consultants from Andrew Mawson Partnerships to examine this proposition in more detail. In the course of this work, we gradually recognised that a single building, however impressive, might not provide sufficient flexibility to embrace the fluidity and change that a modern library seeking new ways to fulfil its mission must demand. It might well rule out the organic growth, the scope for experimentation and the dynamic community involvement that we hoped to encourage. We also began to feel that a grand civic building in the city centre might not be consistent with an ambition to engage with new communities of users, and to create new partnerships.

So from that has emerged the notion of a library presence in the city centre consisting of a variety of spaces, each designed to accommodate a specific enterprise, some experimental, some enduring, each different in character and atmosphere, but all linked by a common purpose and supported by a common platform. This is the physical manifestation of the deconstructed library.

As a series of buildings, this deconstructed library offers several advantages over the traditional central library:

- It is a very flexible approach that supports organic change and growth
- It offers immense scope for creativity and experimentation
- It promises to enhance accessibility and encourage involvement for people who might be put off by a grand civic building
- Partnerships become easier to envisage in tailored spaces that can be designed to meet the needs and aspirations of all the partners in an enterprise, and where partners would feel more visible than in a conventional library
- It would be world-leading – nobody has ever tried to redefine a public library in this way.



Photo: Jerome Whittingham

4. The vision for Whitefriargate

The Whitefriargate project is an attempt to create a library presence in the heart of the city that is truly different: a deconstructed set of spaces that embody a genuinely 21st century vision of what public libraries are all about, and a catalyst for the regeneration of a vital part of the city centre.

The Whitefriargate area has long been crucial as a retail area and as a link between the Old Town and Queen Victoria Square. Architecturally and historically it is perhaps the most important single collection of buildings in the city, particularly along its south side which boasts 23 Grade II and 3 Grade II* listed properties. However, it has been in decline for many years and suffers from a high vacancy rate that currently stands at 38%. Whilst footfall remains healthy due to the street's function as a pedestrian thoroughfare between the core retail area of the city centre and the established visitor attractions within the Old Town, Whitefriargate currently serves as little more than a corridor, and the architectural value of the area has not been enhanced by unsympathetic shopfront development at the ground floor level. Since 2000 the increase in vacancies has been very closely aligned with a reduction in retail premises, in line with the widespread decline in the role of the traditional high street as a shopping destination.

The historic nature of the buildings on Whitefriargate offers a further challenge to the retail prospects of the street. Unconventional floorplans that are unable to accommodate the standard 'white box' layouts expected by modern retailers and the additional costs associated with using appropriate heritage techniques to adapt buildings have acted as additional barriers to bringing vacant property back into use.

Whitefriargate thus typifies the problems faced by traditional shopping areas as a consequence of social, economic, demographic and, above all, technological change. Numerous reports on the future of the high street have been produced in recent years, and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee of the House of Commons is currently undertaking an inquiry into the prospects for high streets and town centres in 2030. We can expect to see more government initiatives, such as the current Open Doors project, which is inviting landlords to take part in a pilot scheme to help regenerate the high street and support community groups, and the launch of the Future High Streets Fund.

Whilst not welcome, the recent announcement of the intended closure of Marks & Spencer, the main anchor store on Whitefriargate, provides an opportunity to completely reshape the function and appearance of the street. With the knowledge that the decline of streets like Whitefriargate cannot be halted on the basis of a retail offer alone, there is now a growing recognition that the future lies in bringing people together to experience something different.

We envisage the Whitefriargate area as a quarter of the city dedicated to knowledge, learning, creativity and imagination. Just as City of Culture 2017 brought people together in their tens of thousands to experience cultural and artistic performances and events, we believe that the people of Hull – and people beyond the city too – would respond with enthusiasm to stimulating new opportunities to expand their knowledge and understanding of themselves, their lives and the world about them; to be curious about their past, present and future.

It is our belief that libraries can be at the heart of this transformation. Not libraries as they are normally understood today – simply buildings with books – but libraries as spaces where people can explore, discover, imagine and create. Spaces designed by Hull's best creative minds to be intriguing and stimulating. And not just one large building but a 'deconstructed library' – a series of buildings in the Whitefriargate area, or, to narrow the focus, in the block of properties owned by Hull Trinity House, bounded by the south side of Whitefriargate, Trinity House Lane, Posterngate and Princes Dock Street, with Zebedee's Yard at the centre.

5. Whitefriargate and the integration of the city centre

The James Reckitt Library Trust invited architects Purcell to assess the concept of the deconstructed library in the wider context of the challenges faced by the city centre as a whole.

The map on the following page shows the importance of Whitefriargate for the integration of the city centre and of Hull's heritage. The routes shown highlight how the access through Whitefriargate provides a strategic opportunity to better connect and further develop existing retail, leisure, food and beverage hubs within the city centre. The deconstructed library would be the vital artery between the old and the new and provide an anchor service use on Whitefriargate that would serve to strengthen dwell time and sustain footfall during both traditional nine to five retail hours and beyond.

As a new destination on a key route through the city centre the deconstructed library has significant potential to fill a large void in provision in the western area of the Old Town that currently adversely impacts the connection of Hull's museums and heritage assets. This would represent a major step forward in achieving a priority objective within the Heritage Action Zone programme. Significantly improved wayfinding across the Old Town would be achieved through the establishment of a network of nodes that would better connect existing and future visitor attractions, adding value to the investments of external funders.

Whitefriargate could also become the point of integration for other popular parts of the city. The primary (orange) connections and the secondary (green) connections illustrate how this can be conceptualised.



MACRO SITE ANALYSIS

THE MARINA

ARGATE

SHOPPING

KEY



PRIMARY ROUTE



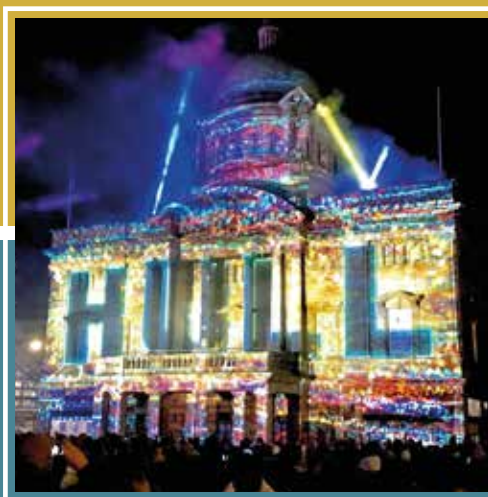
SECONDARY ROUTE



PRIMARY CENTRES OF INTEREST



SECONDARY CENTRES OF INTEREST



A place to nurture a culture of curiosity in the city

6. An opportunity for exploration – inside the deconstructed library

Imagine just four examples of library enterprises that might occupy buildings in the area

A space dedicated to children and their learning, a centre taking as its starting point the many activities provided by the library service today to encourage creativity, imagination and a love of learning among children in the city. The **Imaginarium** would be a new kind of library, created with and for children, where curiosity would be stimulated and knowledge explored through interactive experiences including experiments, tasks, reading, sharing and creating.

The physical space would consist of a series of 'rooms' – these could be real rooms or rooms created within a larger space – each curated to enable children to delve into a particular theme. The 'rooms' might be within a tower-type structure to be explored from bottom to top, or vice versa, or they could form a labyrinth where spaces are encountered by chance. Themes would change on a regular basis, and some could be tied to particular events. For example, the 100th anniversary of Sir James Reckitt's death in 2024 would see a room tell the story of his life: how he created a successful business by being curious, how he wanted to improve people's health and lives, how he transformed housing for his workers and fought with politicians to give access to knowledge for everyone. Experiments would be set-up to illustrate how RB products were and are now developed, and debates will be had about philanthropy, need and responsibility.

'We are Hull' is envisaged as a space to explore the identity of the city and its people, a place for history, for memory, for the treatment of current issues, and for considering and debating future challenges; a new expression of the sense of 'being Hull' that was such an inspirational feature of City of Culture.

The **Business Lounge** would provide a state-of-the-art business environment, including access to specialist business information resources normally only available behind a paywall, available for both start-ups and established enterprises to utilise in the development of their business. Specialist advice, workshops and networking events would also be provided through collaboration with organisations such as the Council's Economic Development team, the University of Hull's Business School, Bondholders, and C4DL.

A **Health and Well-Being studio**, a place for debating the health issues of our time and our city, for exploring the future of medicine, for learning about health and well-being, and for practical pursuits.

These are just outline themes, it must be stressed. They would need to be developed in detail, with flair and imagination, and with the involvement of the city's best creative minds. Then add to these examples, and begin to imagine the emergence of a distinctive area of the city with curiosity as its keynote, a place to nurture a culture of curiosity in the city.



Zebedee's Yard

7. Progress to date

The development of a new vision for Whitefriargate through the application of the concept of the deconstructed library has been enthusiastically received by those with whom it has been shared. In particular it appears to align exceptionally well with parallel thinking within Hull City Council about the future of the Whitefriargate area under the Heritage Action Zone programme.

Discussions have taken place involving the James Reckitt Library Trust, Hull City Council, Hull Libraries and Hull Trinity House. The interest of Hull Trinity House in the proposition has been extremely encouraging, and out of this interest has developed a particular focus on the block of properties owned by Trinity House, bounded by the south side of Whitefriargate, Trinity House Lane, Posterngate and Princes Dock Street, with Zebedee's Yard at the centre. This block contains some of the most architecturally-important properties in the area, exactly the kind of intriguing spaces that excite curiosity and invite exploration. The twinned Victoria and Albert buildings on Posterngate stand out among these, but there are many others, and it may be sensible to focus the initial projects directly on Whitefriargate given the higher level of accessibility there.

Whilst the refurbishment challenges would be significant, the buildings remain in a good structural state. Zebedee's Yard is also central to the vision for the area – a public square that has already demonstrated its potential as a venue for artistic and cultural events and onto which the backs of a number of the surrounding buildings already open.

We are not alone in recognising the potential of the area. The Conservancy Buildings are already being refurbished to provide space for artisan workshops. We are confident that partners could be found within the city to take forward both the ideas for the deconstructed library and new suggestions for related initiatives. For example, with the Marvell and Larkin centenaries on the horizon, there is already a potential HLF bid to develop a spoken word centre in the area. These partnerships could also involve businesses that want to share the opportunity to shape the future of the area.

Outside Hull, we believe that we would be successful in attracting strong interest and potentially funding too. Arts Council England has already demonstrated its support, and a combination of innovation in library practice and high street regeneration promises to press numerous policy buttons.



8. Next Steps

Three main steps now need to be taken to turn our increasingly widely-shared vision for Whitefriargate from a concept into a project.

In thinking about the next steps, we have been influenced by the approach advocated by our consultants from Andrew Mawson Partnerships, an organisation with thirty years' experience of partnership working in the field of community regeneration.

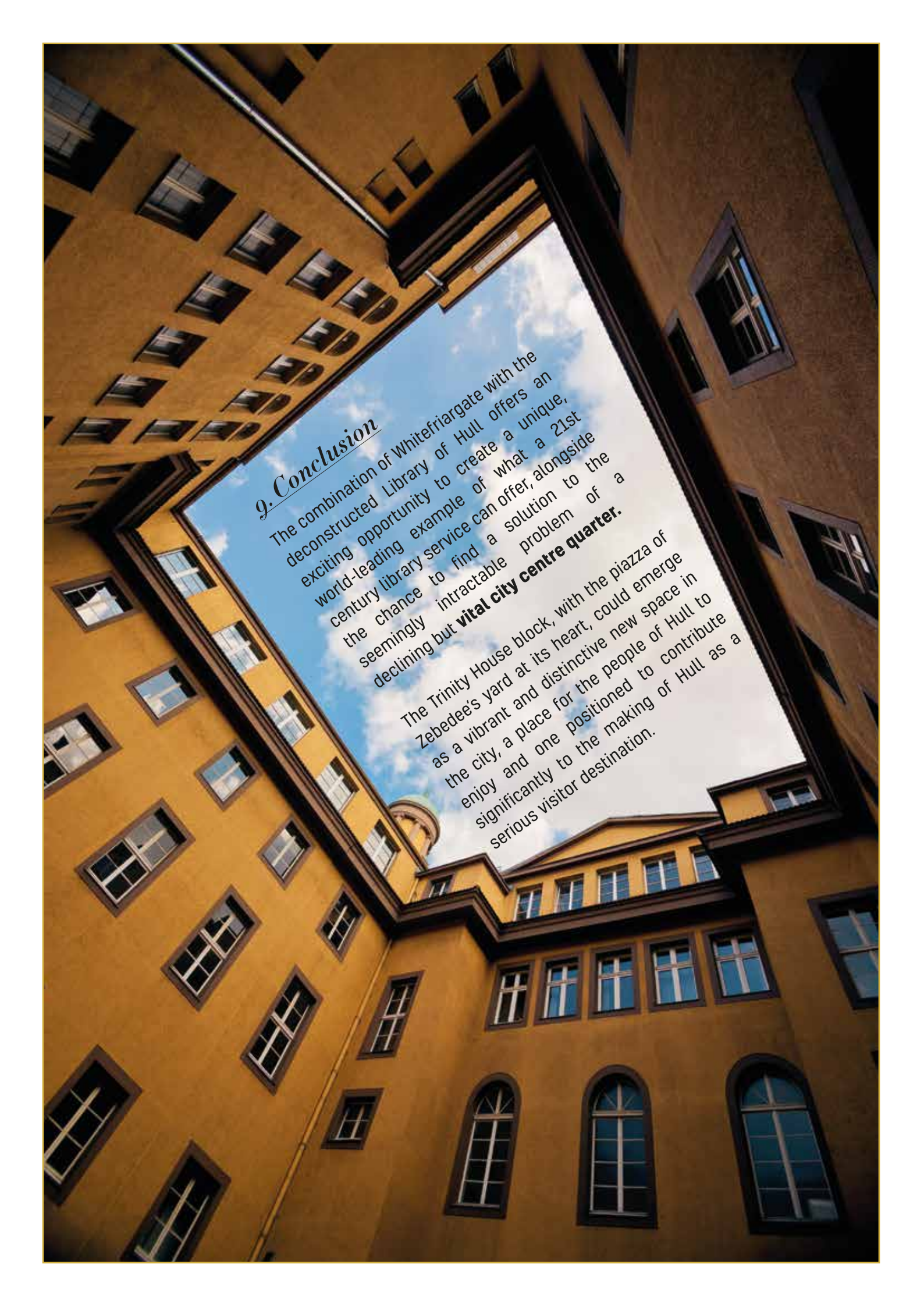
The most important next step is to gather together a group of individuals who are committed to the project and who are prepared to invest time and effort into it. It is not important at this stage to focus on the final form of future governance arrangements.

It is people not structures that are important.

We need a group of individuals who are empowered to lead and who, within broad organisationally-agreed parameters, have freedom of movement to take the project forward. We do not want a management committee made up of organisations protecting their own interests. We do want individuals prepared to work at speed in an open, transparent way to develop practical plans.

As a second step, it would be highly desirable to start exploring and experimenting with the practical expression of the concepts set out in this document. This would help maintain momentum, generate interest, provide opportunities to learn from experience, and, we trust, demonstrate success. We propose that three or four sites should be identified where enterprises of different types with a variety of partners could be located. These demonstrator sites could then be linked into other strategic initiatives to ensure that the Whitefriargate project is integrated from the outset with the ongoing development of the city. It would also make sense to connect this phase of the project closely with the completion and roll-out of the Library Service's new ten-year strategy.

Finally, we may need to move sooner rather than later to create a senior-level development post (with appropriate support) as an integral part of the project's leadership team, providing a full-time resource and expert input. We envisage appointing to such a post through a national recruitment process. The host organisation for the post would need careful consideration.



9. Conclusion

The combination of Whitefriargate with the deconstructed Library of Hull offers an exciting opportunity to create a unique, world-leading example of what a 21st century library service can offer, alongside the chance to find a solution to the seemingly intractable problem of a declining but **vital city centre quarter**.

The Trinity House block, with the piazza of Zebedee's yard at its heart, could emerge as a vibrant and distinctive new space in the city, a place for the people of Hull to enjoy and one positioned to contribute significantly to the making of Hull as a serious visitor destination.

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