

It is more than depressing to return to Bath to discover the local body politic in the middle of a graceless spat over the value, or lack of it, of the city's status as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The row has been bubbling along for several months – ever since UNESCO expressed concern about one or two of Bath's planned new developments – and it has reached a climax, over the last few days, with the visit of a UNESCO delegation to some of the sites in question.

The gist of the argument is that some in the business and development community have begun to tire of the World Heritage business, and the additional planning delays it can entail, and to resent the role of UNESCO in – as it were – telling Bath to put heritage and history before much-needed economic development.

With hard times ahead, they argue, Bath will be left behind unless it is free to build large-scale commercial developments across the city, and will risk becoming a museum-piece of a place, doomed to picturesque decline.

To say that this is an unsubtle argument, though, is to put things politely. In fact, it is heartbreakingly shortsighted, particularly at this moment in the city's economic history. In the first place, the PR disaster surrounding the loss or deliberate surrender of World Heritage status would do incalculable damage to the unique and powerful global image of the city, damage that could, over the long term, begin to undermine every aspect of Bath's relationship with the wider world, from tourism and higher education, to efforts to attract inward investment.

In the second place, it would be madness to make such a sacrifice at precisely the moment when the engines of retail and commercial development are shuddering to a halt. In a recession, culture and heritage strengthen their appeal, while banks go bust, and new office developments lie empty. In other words, we will need our Festivals and our tourist industry more than ever before, not less.

And finally, the whole argument is based on a false dichotomy: that is, on the shallow and ill-informed idea that heritage and history are the opposite of dynamism and modernity, when in fact, in all the best cities, the two go hand in hand. There are dozens of forms and ideas in modern architecture that work superbly with the traditional shapes and colours of Bath. The city can and will accommodate new hotels, new palaces of commerce, new residences like Horstmann Close but, as we should have learned following the construction of the brutal Snowhill Development, there are developments which move from boldness to crassness, and from functionality to sheer ugliness, and if our World Heritage site status obliges Bath to conduct a more detailed and intense debate about where those dividing-lines lie, then that can hardly be a bad thing.

In that sense, World Heritage status is not a limitation, but a challenge, an invitation to create forms of the new that work with the past, rather than destroying or standardising it. Even in tough times, I sense that Bath contains enough creative talent and energy to meet that challenge. But it will only be met if our civic leaders get their act together, and begin to generate a vision of Bath as a city smart enough to reject the false idea of a war between past and future, and enlightened enough to demand, instead, the kind of creative synthesis of tradition and modernity that is not only beautiful but empowering, and strong enough to endure, even in the hardest of times.