

Opportunity knocks – but for whom?

It's hats off to architect Ken Shuttleworth, who designed The Gherkin and The City Hall buildings in London.

Why? For declaring what many of us had long suspected. He recently said, 'I think a lot of architects are really egotistical, almost like artists who see themselves as a one-man show.'

It takes one to spot one. Some people say that the prestigious RIBA tag may also stand for, 'Remember I'm the Bloody Architect'.

It can, of course, be a very personal thing. Beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder.

In St Albans, some architects have been allowed to be somewhat less than creative. What legacy have they left us? Beautiful always it is not.

Take, for example, Lockey House and Forrester House, those rectangular blocks that front, or rather affront, the centre of the eastern side of St Peter's Street. Architecture? Some would say, just building.

Then move over to Alma Road via the top end of Liverpool Road. Who could fail to notice the two tower blocks looming over the Victorian street scene? High-rise buildings have a place and purpose, but need they be so dull, and so brutal to their surroundings?

How were they allowed to happen? And who was responsible?

To avoid disasters like this, local people need to make it clear to developers that they will not accept having inferior designs foisted

on them. Besides this, the council must have in place a definite policy befitting a cathedral city - a policy it is prepared to stick to, regardless of what developmental temptations may come its way.

So it's rather disconcerting that the City Vision exercise – remember that public exhibition in an empty shop in the Maltings – seems not only to have stalled, but to have acquired a new name: the City Centre Opportunity Site. Opportunity for whom? Developers? Architects? Or those who live here? This really is getting serious.

Mistakes have clearly been made in the past. Let's make sure they don't happen again.

Eric Roberts

Programme of events

Saturday 28 January

Residents First Weekend, Clock Tower opening (St Albans' 93 Steps!)

Seasonal punch, shortcake and great views, 2:00pm - 4:00pm - FREE (Provisional - check nearer the time in the RFW programme)

Thursday 16 February

Domestic architecture in central St Albans circa 1800

Illustrated talk by John Bethell following on from his successful exhibition at our Kingsbury Barn 50th Anniversary Reception. The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8.00pm - FREE

Thursday 8 March

The importance of creative tension - the Civic Society and the Council working together

Talk and questions with Daniel Goodwin, Chief Executive of St Albans City & District Council. The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8.00pm - FREE

For up to date information on events and other Society matters go to the Society's website www.stalbanscivicsociety.net

Thursday 19 April

Olympics 2012 architecture

A joint event with the Hertfordshire Association of Architects. Talk by Eric Parry, Architectural and Overlay Design Services Provider to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Cross Street Centre* Dagnall Street at 8.00pm - FREE

Saturday 19 May

Spring coach visit Three Suffolk gems - Lavenham, Long Melford and Clare

(See insert for members in this newsletter or call 01727 851734)

Saturday 29 September

Autum coach visit Kenilworth and Coventry

(See insert for members in this newsletter or call 01727 851734)

*Disabled parking only at The Cross Street Centre

Membership Matters

To join or renew membership

Subscriptions are renewable on 1 April each year

Individual Members	£10
Family Membership	£15
Pensioners/Students	£7
Residents' Associations	No charge
Corporate Membership	£50

To join or check payment details please contact the Membership Secretary, Bryan Hanlon, tel: 01727 851734.

The Society acknowledges with gratitude the support from the following Corporate Members:

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St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

1961-2011 50 years caring about our city

Newsletter | Winter 2011

President: Geraint John

Vice-Chair: Peter Trevelyan 01727 843656

This edition has been prepared by Peter Trevelyan (Vice-Chairman) and Eric Roberts (Committee member). If you have any comments, do write to the Editors at 3 Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN or email ptrevelyan@aol.com.

Editors' Notes

This Newsletter's chief focus is on **planning issues** at both national and local level, and rightly so for the subject is central to the Society's activities. Articles on the draft National Planning Policy Framework, our representation to the Government, and proposals for important sites in the St Peter's Street and around Civic Centre demonstrate this point.



In November, at the first members' meeting of the year, there was an excellent and inspiring talk by Tony Burton, Director of **CIVIC VOICE**. He showed just how much diversity and activity there is in the Civic Society movement nationwide, and how important it will be to get involved in the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans. More about this in future issues.

This edition comes with the Society's **programme of events** for 2012 and details of two visits, to some Suffolk gems and Coventry. We hope as many of you as possible will support these events.

Good news so far on the **Maltings Arts Theatre** - OVO have a contract that runs to the end of March 2012. They are offering a varied programme of productions, plays and music, including the return of



Reception at Kingsbury Barn

"Bad luck old bean, what a party you missed". Those who were there will know what we mean.

Many thanks to Jill and Adam Singer for allowing the Society to use the barn for the evening on 10 September last. Some 150 people attended and enjoyed the remarkable and unusual surroundings of the second oldest building in St Albans, fine food and wines, and excellent side shows from John Bethell (pictures of good and bad buildings in St Albans); Donato Cinicola (how to lay a hedge); Anna Reynolds and team and delightful usherette (The Odeon Journey); plus the story of the restoration of the barn.

A special 50th Anniversary Civic Society plaque was presented to Jill and Adam

Jill and Adam Singer with the 50th Anniversary plaque



Fansofstan's David Newton jazz concert on Saturday 10 March.

The **20mph zone** proposal for Romeland, Fishpool Street, St Michael's area progresses. The principle is fine, but great care needs to be taken to ensure that there are not too many signs and excessive highway paraphernalia, especially around Romeland.

Singer in recognition of their restoration of the barn and generosity in encouraging and promoting its use by the community.

There were two brief speeches; one by our President, Professor Geraint John, the other by the Mayor, Cllr Aislinn Lee. Geraint used a quote from the architect Christopher Lee which is worth repeating:

"The City should have an architecture that is governed by reason and beauty, not by an irrational market and by exuberant architects and developers. The City needs an architecture that is comprehensible, accessible and agreeable to all."

"The city (made up of its citizens) must have an unequivocal say in the architecture that it builds, with procedures in place to reject the architectures it objects to or to defend the architectures it champions. It must be clear that this city rejects nimbysism. It does not support an uninformed conservatism. Neither does it accept the unquestioning positivism of 'progress' for the sake of the new. It allows change but favours consolidations over growth. It conserves resources and makes the most from the least."

"A city is an accretion of the achievements and struggles of its citizens in built form, its heritage and its legacy for future generations."

We sincerely hope Councillors who had to deliberate over the St Peter's Street development proposal and the Civic Centre took and take note of these profound thoughts.

The Society's Annual Awards

The event was held this year at the Abbey Theatre on 11 October. We thank the Awards group, Margaret Grainger, Janet Ouston and Michael Dunkley, for an informative and successful evening. Nearly 130 people attended. The full report is on the website.

Commendations

Open Door
Bricket Road (right)

Clarence Park Mews
Clarence Road (middle)



Reasons to be fearful

The draft National Planning Policy Framework slipped out for consultation after MPs had gone off on summer holiday, with an end date of 17 October.

The NPPF sounds a bit of a bore – but beware. Framework? More like a possible frame-up.

It suggests that there should be ‘a presumption in favour of sustainable development at the heart of the planning process... and that local authorities should plan positively for new development, and approve all individual proposals wherever possible.’

This really will tilt the currently less than level playing field even more in favour of the applicant. And what, we wonder, does ‘sustainable’ mean, exactly? The planning

lawyers won't believe their luck.

As if things weren't difficult enough already. For the likes of you and me, it's one strike and you're out. If a decision to grant goes against your objection, you have no redress, whilst a determined developer can either appeal against a refusal, or go on submitting applications again and again, gradually wearing everyone down. The Railfreight application is a good example.

There has been widespread criticism of the NPPF proposals, from the National Trust, the CPRE, English Heritage and the Women's Institute to name but a few. The result: insults back from government junior ministers, Greg Clark and Bob Neil to those daring to enter the consultation process. And heavyweights like George

Osborne and Eric Pickles have waded in, declaring “No-one should underestimate our determination to win this battle” in a statement in the Financial Times. Some consultation! More like bare-faced opportunism and a short-term fix.

And lest the Civic Society be deemed party political here, it isn't. The same intransigence was displayed by the previous government when the relaxation of licensing laws went out for comment. So once again, consultation is interpreted as consent, and any constructive but opposing views as irrelevant.

It's just not good enough. So much for the government's drive for Localism – scuppered before it's even got started.

With St Albans Council's Local Plan long overdue, we are in a very vulnerable position. Reasons to be fearful indeed.

Eric Roberts

The draft National Planning Policy Framework

The Society observations to the Government are summarised below. We also sent a full copy to Anne Main, our MP, who wrote back to say, inter alia, that she shared our concerns.

Planning - a complex process

Proper town planning is a complex process, a balancing exercise involving many competing interests. The public should be able to trust the decisions made on its behalf, and this depends in turn on a fair process and unbiased decisions.

The Government intends that the planning system “does everything it can to support sustainable economic growth” (para 13). The result is a double presumption in favour of development - “pro growth” policies of dubious intent and effect embedded in a plan-led system.

In St Albans, it is said that we have the oldest surviving ‘local plan’ in the country. The process of updating and replacing this document has regularly been frustrated by changes in Government policy, among other

things, so we are no further forward fourteen years after commencing the update process! Where there is no plan, local authorities are told simply to “grant permission” (para 14). This would not be fair on the residents of the City and could destroy its historic heritage. Replicated nationally, it will lead to increasing challenges and a general loss in faith in the system.

Communities need the power to say ‘no’ to prevent unacceptable development - there have been a succession of outstandingly harmful examples here in St Albans which have rightly been rejected.

What is ‘sustainable’ development?

There seem to be as many definitions of ‘sustainable’ as people writing about it. In lieu of precise definition, the draft document has a three woolly phrases. Henceforth, all applicants will claim ‘sustainability’, defying planning officers and committees to reject their proposals. The number of ‘beauty contests’ could also increase, as developers

contest the relative merits of rival schemes in front of planning inspectors and in the courts.

How serious is the consultation?

The Society questions the merits of the consultation exercise (see companion article) and asks why planning is blamed for the dearth of new houses. The current slump in housebuilding is the result of a lack of finance, both for home-buyers and house-builders, prevalent since the ‘credit crunch’. Planning policy is at best a long-term and blunt tool with which to influence the rate of house building or development generally.

Deliberate omissions?

There is no single mention in the draft of the words ‘enforce’ or ‘enforcement’. Enforcement is crucial for the preservation of the historic fabric of our conservation areas. It is also important to protect the everyday urban and rural environment that has no particular designation. Will this remain unchanged?

Peter Trevelyan

(Right and below)
St Albans Civic Society Award Winner
St Paul's Church Blandford Road

Architect: MEB Design Ltd

Contractor: Farnrise Construction Ltd



City centre developments

The draft planning brief for part of the city centre including the Civic offices and the Arena has now been published by the Council. We hope members took time to view the documents and to comment by 13 December. See also the article ‘Opportunity Knocks, but for whom?’.

We have also had an interesting email from member Alan Shenton. The full text is on the website, but his concluding thoughts (referring to proposals for Hertfordshire House, and the hotel in St Peter's Street) are particularly apt:

“I feel, as, I am sure, many others do, that development planning for central St Albans should reflect traditional architectural styles and entail the use of local construction materials, with a view to producing buildings that are in harmony with their surroundings and will enhance the city's character and appearance. The two schemes outlined sadly fail to meet such criteria and the design approach on which they are based is highly questionable.”

“One contributor to the summer 2011

edition of this Newsletter referred to the need for heritage to influence development and the importance of continuity, advocating sensitive betterment, not radical change. It is to be hoped that the developers can be persuaded to work with their architects to draw up plans which take account of such factors and whose design characteristics reflect the predominant features of the city centre's architectural history, thereby ensuring greater appeal to and acceptance by the residents of St Albans.”

Interestingly, visitors to Kingsbury Barn during Heritage Open days, and at our Reception, were asked to vote on their favourite building in the city, and to identify the one they would most like to demolish.

Forrester House, and its neighbour Locket House, typical of the 1960s, destroyed the cohesive character of St Peter's Street. Neither are high enough to have challenged the historic skyline of the city, but this survey gives a real indication of what people think. Which brings us to the scheme for the budget hotel at the top of St Peter's Street.

- The top three favourites**
- Clock Tower (92 votes)
 - Abbey (63)
 - Old Town Hall (27)
- The top three for demolition**
- Forrester House (96)
 - BHS (64)
 - Police Station (53)

As much as we would like to see this investment in this location, there is every danger that history will repeat itself and this time permanently breach the historic skyline of the city centre.

Just because it is a budget hotel in a somewhat neglected location shouldn't mean, as some have indicated, that an intrusive and insensitive building should be permitted. It will be highly visible and not, as one Councillor intimated, hidden away. Surely, a good building should be able to stand up to scrutiny.

As was said on our Anniversary Heritage walks, we are not sure who the Councillors were who approved the 1960's schemes. Nor if it was up and running at the time, what stance this Society took. But we will know this time which Councillors voted to make this decision and what the Society said. (Since writing this, on 22 November Councillors refused this plan by five votes to four.)

The Editors