

Managing Cardiff's conservation areas



▲ Cardiff St Mary St conservation area – traffic and clutter (Matthew Griffiths)

THIS PAPER LOOKS at conservation area management in the Welsh capital. It examines the wider issues involved in dealing with the city's conservation areas; and then focuses on the approach Cardiff county council is taking to conservation area appraisal. Amongst the initial appraisals undertaken has been a review of the St Mary Street conservation area in Cardiff's thriving city centre; the latter part of this paper demonstrates the relationship between conservation objectives and the strategic approach that is being taken in the heart of the city, where major development and renewal initiatives are in hand.

Cardiff has twenty-six conservation areas; largely long standing designations. They vary greatly in scale and character, including the villages of St Fagans and St Mellons, Victorian and Edwardian suburbs such as Roath and Pontcanna,

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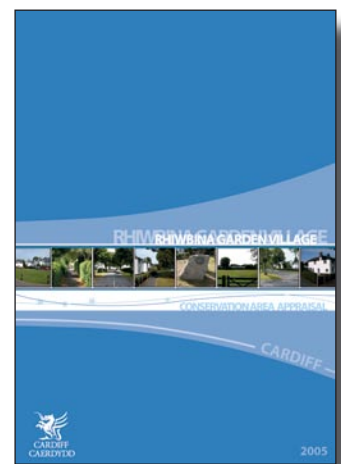
as well as the city centre, with its medieval street layout overlain by largely nineteenth- and early twentieth-century civic and commercial development.

The special features of conservation areas often extend beyond the buildings alone. The road layout, street scene, trees and green areas all contribute to the quality of an area. Conservation area designation should give special protection to this character.

Conservation area management in Cardiff is a cross-cutting activity that involves several service areas. Policy and guidance issues, including designation and appraisal, are handled by officers in Strategic Planning and Neighbourhood Renewal; other aspects lie with

Regulatory Services – where development control is located – or with highways and housing specialists. A collaborative approach is essential – not least if the Council is to maximise the resources available for conservation area improvement strategies. Officers also work closely with the city's conservation area advisory groups, and with local and community organisations concerned with the preservation of quality and character in the built environment.

The appraisal programme is now central to our work. It forms a basis for advice to property owners and residents. It is also the key to carrying out the council's responsibility to enhance conservation areas. Appraisal is a means of taking stock of existing designations; it will also be central to the consideration of future new designations. These may arise as consideration is given to the



Info

Cardiff's conservation area appraisals and related documentation can be downloaded from www.cardiff.gov.uk



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1 & 2 townscape quality and architectural detail in Cathedral Road
3 & 4 Whitchurch has a sense of place and good period housing that might justify designation
(images © Cardiff County Council)

special character of additional late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century areas of the city where there is a concentration of high quality townscape or architectural features that are worth preserving. Parts of Whitchurch and Canton, for instance, have been the focus of debates over proposed development that have led to interest in designation at community level.

Consultation is at the heart of any appraisal. The Rhiwbina Garden Village, St Mary Street and Llandaff Conservation Areas have been the first to be reviewed; Cathedral Road is under way. The appraisals set out guidance on how each conservation area could be enhanced and its special character protected when development proposals are considered.

In each case we have tried to maximise consultation, both at the start of the appraisal process, and when a draft document has been completed and the council is moving towards its formal adoption. The process is informed by Welsh Office circular 61/96, and by the council's Conservation Area Strategy prepared in 1997.

Amongst the factors we treat as central to appraisal are:

- a distinctive sense of place
- the presence of landmark buildings and/or key landscape features
- a well-defined hierarchy of public and private space
- good quality hard and soft landscaping
- the use of local or unusual architectural details, and
- high quality architectural detailing.

Cathedral Road

Such characteristics can easily be recognised in the Victorian Cathedral Road. It was one of the first to be designated and work is currently under way on its review. It covers Cathedral Road itself and adjoining streets, as well as large parts of Llandaff and Pontcanna Fields. As part of the appraisal we are

actively seeking local comment on what makes this part of Cardiff special and on possible amendments to the conservation area boundary.

An exhibition was held at the end of January 2005 to offer local residents the opportunity to make a contribution. There will be another opportunity to contribute once a full appraisal of Cathedral Road has been completed. Exhibition materials and the draft appraisal are available online.

In each appraisal we face similar generic issues. We need to identify the changes affecting each area and consider how these may be addressed in the context of a character assessment. How can we protect local character?

In the case of Cathedral Road, our exhibition analysed the development of the area and its neighbouring park land, chiefly by the Bute estate, and documented typical building styles and features, such as stables. We sought to focus discussion on the quality of architectural features, streetscape, vistas and landmark buildings, and on the way change has occurred since designation in 1972 – notably changes of use, pressure for higher densities, the infill of gardens, courtyards and mews, and the impact of the growth of the city centre and of major sporting events in the Millennium Stadium and Sophia Gardens.

Rhiwbina

The Rhiwbina Garden Village Conservation Area appraisal was completed and adopted in April 2005. Its adoption will be followed by amendments to the boundary of the conservation area. The appraisal exemplifies how an area can be analysed for its strengths and weaknesses and a framework for action developed around the identification of threats and opportunities. It also represents a practical example of the cross-cutting approach to

management in a context where resources are limited.

The Garden Village was developed after 1913, following Raymond Unwin's masterplan. A conservation area was designated in 1976 and the majority of the houses were listed in 2001. The village is marked by the harmony of its building style and the arcadian quality of its gardens, avenues, paths and green spaces. Building materials, the detailing of doors, windows, gables, roofs and chimneys, all contribute to a strong sense of character, by and large well-preserved. Erosion of this character has taken place through the loss of trees and street furniture, alterations to window detail, and the erection of porches and canopies. Traffic, noise pollution and parking are further pressures on local amenity.

A key outcome of the appraisal is the publication of guidance to homeowners on the importance of protecting building detail, with advice on materials, and issues such as roof lights, arials and extensions. Guidance is offered also on the preservation of landscaping and trees, with advice on how to maintain gardens and boundary hedges. While the possibility of a Town Scheme will be explored, most action by the council will be taken through development control, and the management of Council budgets.

Llandaff

A draft appraisal of the Llandaff conservation area followed an exhibition in June 2005. Its proposals again illustrate both the importance of public engagement and a collaborative approach within the council. The intention will be to promote understanding of the cultural and historic significance of Llandaff village through links with the Cathedral community, schools, libraries and community groups, including the active civic society – which has

undertaken informative urban design analysis of its own.

Cardiff City Centre: Conservation and the City Centre Strategy

The City Centre Strategy area contains nine conservation areas and 298 of Cardiff's listed buildings, not to mention one historic park and two ancient monuments. Conservation is an increasingly important aspect of the Strategy and we have been able to pursue conservation objectives through several mechanisms: development control, the former Town Scheme programme (which tackled key sites such as the historic Wyndham Arcade), and negotiations with owners and developers based on the Strategy itself (a process that has recently enabled us to influence the redevelopment of the David Morgan premises in the Hayes). Leverage is also possible through the Section 106 process to achieve public realm improvements.

The Strategy is a cross cutting document that co-ordinates council activity, sets key goals and aspirations for the city centre, and establishes collective responsibility for delivery.

A series of area appraisals is being produced, using the "Placecheck" methodology. Conservation area appraisals are also central to the implementation of the Strategy, influencing, for instance, the major redevelopment represented by the Saint David's shopping centre extension; the Hayes Island project – aimed at improving an important and characteristic townscape feature; and the conservation of St John's churchyard, at the core of the medieval street pattern.

The draft appraisal was the focus of a week-long exhibition held in St John's Church, timed to coincide with one of the Civic Trust for Wales' Open Doors weekends in which the church was taking part. The exhibition was placed online



▲ Hayes Island (Matthew Griffiths)

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simultaneously .

A character-led approach has considerable potential for improving amenity and strengthening the local economy. This is, of course, an extremely diverse area, heavily influenced by major developments such as the Millennium Stadium and the changing retail pattern in the city centre. It is both a financial and shopping area and a location in which food and drink outlets are concentrated.

The night-time economy has both positive and negative aspects. It embraces both a café culture and late-night drinking. Commercial advertising also threatens the special architectural quality of the area, and traffic congestion lowers environmental quality, dominating the pedestrian.

The development of the appraisal, linked to consultation with stakeholders, will enable the establishment of a strong strategic policy framework, and the identification of clear goals and aspirations. This approach should place the council in a strong negotiating position when it deals with development interests, since it should be able to clearly demonstrate the positive benefits arising from its proposals. Thus the appraisal foreshadows a "St Mary Street" project, which will focus on character-based environmental enhancements to produce a low-traffic, pedestrian-friendly streetscape with wider pavements and attractive paving and planting, within a wider context in which development control protects architectural character and detail.

It will be especially important, amongst other initiatives, to maintain the diversity of land-uses. There will be a special focus on protecting and enhancing the character of Mill Lane as a restaurant and café quarter and resisting the pressure for pubs and nightclubs in other locations within the conservation area. We plan also to progress a vacant floorspace

initiative to explore the potential for office refurbishment or conversion to other uses. We would like to encourage the use of vacant offices above ground floors to living space, bringing back a stronger residential element into the city centre.

We want to see a high quality public realm that has contemporary relevance, is historically consistent and has visually appropriate paving and traffic surfaces. An integrated system for pedestrian and traffic signage should be simple, elegant and contemporary, in a way that does not compete with built form.

We want to protect and enhance small-scale distinctive historic treatments, with new materials matching the old and a unity established with other streets. Street furniture should be simple, elegant and robust, and appropriate to the architecture and setting of the conservation area.

We would like to introduce trees and new planting to provide an accent to the architectural and spatial qualities of the area, while improving air quality. Lighting should highlight key buildings at night and define entrances and gateways to the area, emphasising both the special identity of St Mary Street and its surroundings while strengthening links between different city centre zones.

A well-conserved and managed historic environment can lift the spirits. The Council's approach is, through conservation, to place environmental quality at the top of the agenda. It is no coincidence that effective conservation simultaneously promotes amenity and enhanced property values.

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