

HCS ANNUAL LECTURE 23rd March 2017

Planning Hereford?!

How to get it right Call for an Urban Room

- Hereford's historical context
- The Farrell Review and the Development Process
- Current planning dilemmas in Hereford
- Proposal for an Urban Room



At the University Centre in Folly Lane the 2017 lecture was delivered by chairman, John Bothamley CBE FRSA BA(Hons), to an audience of members, local business people, Councillors and planning staff. Referring to his experience of design, planning, and the development business, Bothamley highlighted the pertinent points emanating from the Farrell Review, the development industry and led onto the vexed matter of consultation. From here, he took the unconventional route of calling for communities to work with local government rather than forever protesting. Our environment affects us more than we might appreciate and Bothamley started his presentation by recommending the book – 'The Architecture of Happiness' by Alain de Botton - citing examples of places he likes and those where he is less comfortable.

Past and Recent history

Hereford started here as the Wye was easy to cross and its religious history might be even earlier than Canterbury. Over the centuries it developed into much more than a market town and is the regional centre for farmers from Wales and the Marches. Railway companies came and went and now we are left with just the north south route and a very slow route eastwards to London. The old bridge was sufficient until 1967 when the new bridge was built with four lanes. Newmarket and Blueschool Street were then widened and improvements made to the cattle market. Since then piece meal improvements have been made, continuing with, apparently ad hoc, improvements.

Where we are today

Completion of the inner link road from Edgar Street to Aylestone Hill, which will, hopefully, take traffic from Newmarket and Blueschool Streets is anticipated by the autumn. This will allow the creation of the boulevard between the new Old Market and the City centre that was promised in the Edgar Street Grid Design Framework (November 2007) proposals. It is a great shame that, so far, only the retail part has been delivered, but that appears to be a great success in bringing more people into the City. What would be good to see soon is the urban village; for the Civic Quarter there is the refurbished Blueschool

House. Of course the financial crisis of 2008 interrupted progress but this is a perfect example of what Terry Farrell writes about – developers decide what they want to build and when – not necessarily what the community wants.

Farrell Review and the development process

The Farrell Review (April 2014) www.farrellreview.co.uk referred to the absence of public engagement with the entire issue of the built environment. The comprehensive report considered the subject under five heads – Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering. PLACE. It set out how society should consider our surroundings in a much better informed way. Many suggestions cover how we should teach PLACE in schools, better prepare planning officers and committee members and talk much more about this fundamental subject. Attractive places make us happy. **Developers** are not a popular breed but play an important part in the construction of new and retro fitted



buildings. If a site owner or developer thinks a profit can be made on a site all that is necessary is that the plans conform to the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Subject to those guidelines being satisfied there is little the public can do. Of course there are various policies that have to be observed from the Core Strategy etc. but if the developer or site owner has a project that is broadly NPPF compliant then they have a free hand. The community does not really have a say.

Recent Projects as examples

Bothamley went on to cite some examples of what he was referring to, taking care not to personalise the players:-

Edgar Street Grid retail part – this development could have been so much better had the developer been guided into making it a more City wide inclusive shopping area; instead of attempting to make it a destination in its own right. From an appearance point of view he felt there was an ugly rear wall facing the City – not the cafes and shops spilling out onto Newmarket Street that were shown in the planning publicity. How did this come about? It has turned out not what was sold to us. It was supposed to link with the City Centre, not be marketed as a separate destination.

Nell Gwynn residential development – a derelict pub in the middle of the proposed Urban Village (UV). The success of pubs relies much on the landlord and in Hereford there are examples of good and bad. Here it was suggested that the pub was not profitable and plans were submitted for conversion into flats together with new build. But this area is shortly to be developed with high density housing. Whilst we cannot vote for the new community that will move in we ought to consider whether they might want a local "boozer" – a community pub like the successful Victory and Volunteer? Removing a community asset shouldn't be taken lightly. It is unlikely that a new developer will want to build a new one in the UV, and new build pubs are difficult to get right.

Blackfriars Street – here, at last, there is a consent in the UV for social housing, three blocks of three storey flats. But there is retail on the ground floor facing Blackfriars Street. This is not in the ESG proposals which remain a current planning document. Hereford has plenty of retail capacity, especially bearing in mind the new shopping trends and the vitality of the centre is further put at risk by creating more. How did this happen? Why were the policies not adhered to? 'Well it meets NPPF so better let it go through' is what I suspect was said.

Hafod Road – a well designed group of bigish houses in a road known for its sizeable plots. Is it fair to change the balance and grain of the area? Certainly HCS didn't think it was right that the developer wanted to make it a

gated estate. HCS's objection quoting the NPPF was that relationships with neighbours and integration is important and the locked gates will not be installed. Rather surprisingly, the local community did not comment on the site's density.

Blueschool House – The developer here is the Herefordshire Council who want to improve the existing premises and create more suitable offices. HCS lobbied hard against this proposal citing the ESG report but that was put to one side and, in spite of the majority of councillors speaking against the proposal, it was in fact voted through. The community didn't want it, the Councillors didn't want it but gave themselves consent. A thoroughly confusing outcome.



Core Strategy

Statement of Community Involvement – this document runs to too many pages but states clearly the need for us all to be involved, and to be able to comment on the Council's proposals. What it doesn't say is just how the consultations should proceed. This could be made so much better.

Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) – these plans sit below the adopted Core Strategy (CS) which, of course have to 'obey' the NPPF. Herefordshire has more NDPs than any other county. However there was never an intention by Central Government that every little parish should have its own plan, which usually requires the use of consultants, and a pretty tortuous programme of steps including local referendums etc. How can the business of allocating housing sites and school facilities be discussed and decided at such small scale? Only one councillor had the foresight to get the parishes in his ward to group together in logical clusters.

Hereford Area Plan – this is yet to be started and is required as the Hereford City Council, the parish council for the City, is not developing its own NDP. But as suburban chunks of the City are outside of the City boundaries, and essentially part of the City it is clearly sensible to include them in a proper City wide plan. But several of these neighbouring parishes do not agree and want their own NDP, as well as being included in the Hereford Area Plan. As all plans need to be compliant with the Core Strategy this is just more administration; and hardly encourages us to become involved if we think the work has already been done before.



Compulsory Purchase - The principle behind compulsory purchase is that it must be for the greater public good, not for private gain. Of course it must be used carefully and the process has been simplified recently. However following the High Town fire it was obvious to most that in the prevailing climate restoration of the burnt out buildings will not be forthcoming. Why is it still such an eyesore? Councillors – you must act.

Bothamley said 'These examples of recent developments, I suggest could have been much better for us all as a community. We can only achieve that by coming together and making better decisions. By together I really mean everyone – site owners, developers, planning staff and Councillors and us the general public – the community. We can do it better – here are more examples – one a failure in my mind, one a success story and, thirdly, an idea of how we might move forward'

High Town – here the site owner is the Council and, together with Balfour Beatty, they had an idea to re-pave High Town, in spite of the fact that it had been relaid less than ten years before; full on high quality replacement.

HCS objected:-

1. When moving around individuals pay attention to each other and their surroundings rather than where they are putting their feet.
2. The clutter around temporary facilities requires attention.
3. Replacement after such a short period of time fails to meet the Council's environmental credentials.
4. Funds can be far better spent improving other junctions to provide, a far greater effect.
5. Placing all the work in one company's hands, is unlikely to provide the best value.

The consultation was extensive and included questions that many would have found difficult to answer and, as always with consultations, mainly those with vested interests bothered to respond, and I suspect, felt that it was, to some extent, a tick box exercise. A small proportion of our population was actually counted and the consultation was reported to Cabinet in a 65 page report. There was not even a one page summary explaining the results. The money could have been spent, in my opinion and of the experts I consulted, so much better – we took an overall view looking at the bigger picture. Bothamley then showed various examples of junctions that could have been improved at low cost, including the use of 'Shared Space' concepts.



Church St / West St

Former Boys' School, Bath Street – here again the owners are the Council who chose not to consult but attempted 'to do a deal' with the Fire Service for a new fire station. There was an outcry by locals, many of whom appreciated the pleasing red brick buildings being an

intrinsic part of the history of Hereford which was both a home and training place for the orphans of Hereford. There was overall opposition to the plans and the behind the scenes deal. HCS took time to look at the site in detail and proposed a different future. With a huge need for housing this site was ideally suited being close to the City centre. However the three buildings facing the road were so much part of the PLACE we sought to retain them. In Winter 2014 we proposed keeping the three buildings, demolishing the less than special buildings behind and building new flats. Negotiations continued, we republished our ideas and were especially pleased to see them taken up by Hereford Housing. New life will be breathed into this part of the City – still much detail to be decided but it looks as though it will happen. Again, my opinion, and partly because I have been involved, I most respectfully suggest that this is the best possible use of this site. The developer has been persuaded

- to provide a better deal for the community
- to respect our history
- to make the best use of this site, in a financially positive way

Arriving at this solution has not been easy, but in a strange way it has been collaborative and consultative, albeit in a bizarre manner.



HCS inspiration for Bath St



proposed Bath St scheme

St. Owen's Street contra flow – pre-consultation. Co-production is a term often used in the social care sector, where solutions are arrived at jointly by the commissioner and the provider. Here we have a novel idea where, together with the designer of the proposal, HCS are hosting a Pre-consultation meeting, in conjunction with the Council, of enlightened stakeholders, with the intention of ironing out potential areas of dispute, so that a refined proposal can be presented at the official consultation level. When I refer to enlightened, I mean individuals with broad experience, individuals who are not just banging the drum for their particular purpose. I am being frank – a group of bright people able to see others' points of view. Overseen by an independent and professional facilitator this pre-consultation meeting will last two hours, a summary of the points discussed will be recorded, changes made by the scheme designer and sent out for consultation. It is about to happen next month – it is a first – and there is no guarantee of success, but this particular road scheme has been out for consultation several times before at great expense. We need to find better ways of drawing conflicting views into a workable solution. Surely this is a fair question? We have lots of clever people in Hereford, we ought to be

able to work in teams to bring about real change. We all need to be better at sharing our views and the Council better at organising and publicising the results. None of us like to be consulted and then not to be clearly informed of the results.



urban room meeting

Urban Room – these physical places are sprouting up around the country, and a specific PLACE for considering on-going projects has some merit. There are many types and often include a relief map, drawings, computer links into council records. I am on the steering group of the Urban Rooms Network, part of Place Alliance. However I take a different view from most of my colleagues who are keen for Urban Rooms to be separate, and seen to be so, from Local Authority influence. Surely we should be working together, Council and Community creating and developing our new environments? I am aware that Cheltenham Borough Council have set up their own Urban Room in a neutral PLACE. Just where and how this Urban Room works is up for discussion. We could pinch one of the free standing units from the Old Market and install it in High Town – that was not my idea, but one of our Council's staff. But, most

importantly, it must be a collaborative initiative between the Council and the Community. Obviously the council would be best placed to provide maps and plans, but I guess would be hard pressed to provide staff. I would suggest that volunteers could man the facility on a part time basis and I'm prepared to offer the assistance of HCS members who would be happy to be on hand one afternoon a week, I respectfully suggest the BID might assist one day a month, the Woolhope Club, St James and Bartonshaw Community Association, NMiTE and others.

I hope I have illustrated that possibly ill-informed members of the public, and poorly designed questionnaires, often do not result in the best result. The to-ing and fro-ing at Bath Street was a sort of virtual Urban Room conducted in many different places, and with a lot of acrimony. How much better if the ideas had been floated in an accessible place, suggestions made and alternatives considered before a final scheme was drawn up. St Owen's St could also be there once our Pre-consultation individuals have ironed out the initial queries and provided the background information in the clearest way.



proposed urban room in high town

Every town and city should have an **Urban Room** and every rural area should have a **Rural Room**. The purpose of these Rooms is to foster **meaningful connections** between **people and place**. They set up accessible and **transparent dialogues** between people in the places they live and work. They use **creative methods of engagement** to encourage **active participation** in the future development of our buildings, streets and neighbourhoods.

Collaboration with transparency

Let's talk more about PLACE, let school children, students, parents and everyone come to our Urban Room, to try to make sense of proposals. More talk leads to the eventual development of a coherent plan. But plans are just that and have to be delivered and Hereford must get better at discussing, drawing a conclusion and then delivering. Leadership is required to deliver our visions. Perhaps our next lecture should be about the delivery of complex developments. With NMiTE wanting premises just how will they proceed? Might they best gather sites together with a commercial developer with their own agenda? We are already great supporters of the project – we suggested how they might upgrade Franklin Barnes on Blueschool Street. Let us all keep talking and communicating and turn Hereford into the enlightened City of the West Midlands – 'where they all work together'

Much debate followed

John Faulkner, former chairman, agreed with the overall theme and pleaded for better leadership from Councillors with more vision, and the ability to get ideas turned into reality. JB reminded everyone that Built Environment is considered 'cultural' and confirmed HCS backs the bid for City of Culture 2021.

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