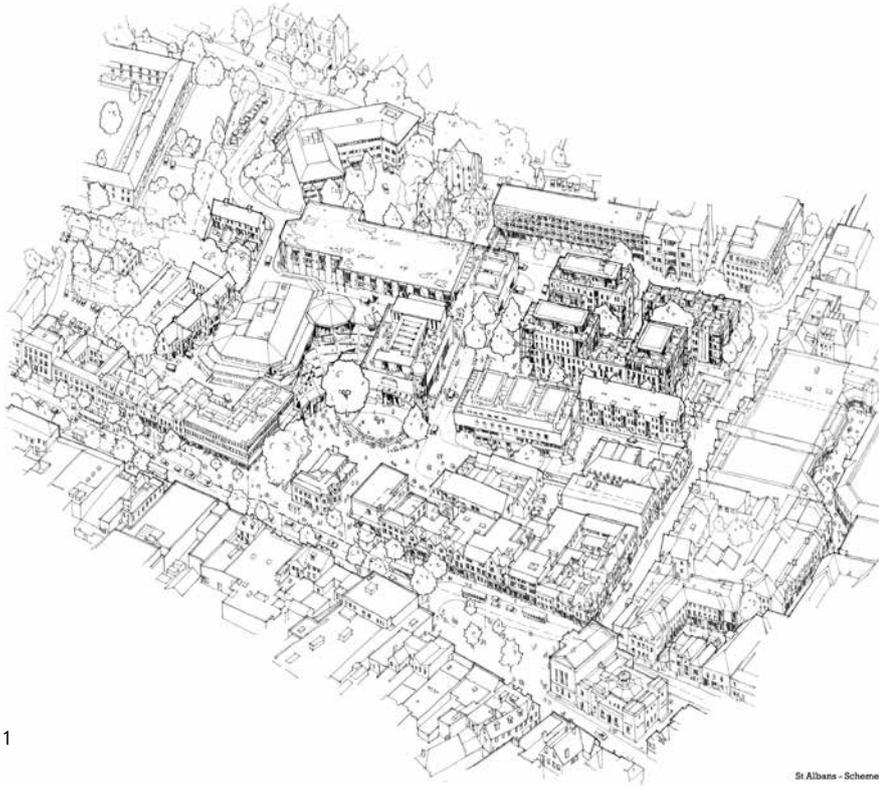


Design Codes for St Albans Conservation Area

Vanessa Gregory describes how the local community's involvement shapes conservation approaches



St Albans - Scheme 1

groups, the Cathedral, the Chamber of Commerce, St Albans District Council's spatial planning officer and portfolio holders for planning and community engagement. Look! St Albans, our community voice on design was born. Our one aim was to facilitate the *Enquiry by Design* process and to encourage the community to take part in our venture. We agreed that design codes would offer a clear and yet flexible tool to enable developments to take place. Our intention was not to stop development, but to set the bar at a level that was acceptable to the whole community, and would prove durable. Many in the community believe that consultation too often takes place just prior to a planning application being submitted to the local planning authority. Therefore irreversible key development decisions have already been made and designs prepared with associated costs. Consequently the wider community is excluded from the creative part of the process, when local knowledge and a diversity of skills could help to realise designs that everyone could be proud of.

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St Albans is a small Cathedral city northwest of London and was named after Britain's first Christian martyr. It grew on the hill adjacent to the Roman city of Verulamium, and the built environment reflects the many centuries that have passed. It remains a thriving market town today.

Significant areas of the city centre were ready for redevelopment, but there was continuing concern that many post-war developments within the historic core lacked architectural merit. As one resident said we were running the risk of becoming St Anywhere not St Albans. The city centre is important not only to the community who live within the historic core of St Albans central Conservation Area, but to people from the entire district who come into town to shop, meet, work and for entertainment. It is the district's collective front room.

THE START

In April 2009, I attended a Historic Towns Forum conference in Cambridge which included a presentation by members of The Prince's Foundation for Building Community. I immediately thought their *Enquiry by Design* process and clear and sympathetic understanding of historic fabric would be extremely useful in St Albans and readily told them so. They were enthusiastic to work with the community but finding the mechanism and funding would be the test. Thanks to the *Localism Act* of 2011 and The Foundation being part of the DCLG Communities and Neighbourhoods in Planning programme, the dream of getting them involved in St Albans became a reality later that year.

At the end of 2011 the City Centre Steering Group was formed; it included a wide range of individuals, community

LOCAL VIEWS

We asked everyone who was interested in being involved to take photos of aspects of our city that inspired them and that they found appealing. To enable anyone to join in we set up our web presence on the photo-sharing website Flickr. People soon found out that this was a new and exciting way to get involved, where ordinary members of the community sat down with professionals on an equal footing to co-create.

As one participant said 'I attended the workshop full of enthusiasm but very aware of my lack of professional skills. Our facilitator John Dales soon dispelled those fears by engaging us all with a wonderful mix of technical knowledge and experience, together with an open mind which relished all our suggestions and challenges. My confidence grew throughout the day as I realised that this was indeed going to be a community-based and co-operative exercise, and our combined local knowledge had real value!'

Look! St Albans published the workshop report including the draft design codes for central St Albans, co-authored by the community and The Prince's

1 The scheme developed with ImaginePlaces for the civic area in St Albans

Foundation. This was presented to the community and it was agreed that Look! St Albans would become a fully constituted group working in the spirit of neighbourhood planning. The intention was to invite willing developers and landowners to work with us on site-specific opportunities at an early stage, in preparing their proposals through our design charrettes.

DESIGN CHARRETTES

Our somewhat unique design charrette processes are independently facilitated by people acceptable to both parties. Neither party can change the outcome of the design charrette. It is understood that the concepts that flow from charrettes would need testing before being worked into planning proposals. Our charrettes are also open to all. The independent facilitators ensure that all participants can have a voice. The different ways in which ideas, concerns and comments are captured and translated into proposals means that there is a suitable mechanism for everyone to get their ideas across.

The cost of the facilitators and the output are met by the landowner or developer, and we act as community hosts, paying for local publicity and refreshments etc. Look! St Albans does not express an opinion, but we do write a letter of recommendation to the local planning authority endorsing the outcome of the design charrette.

We were asked to host our first design charrette by St Albans District Council, acting as trustees and owners of the Museum of St Albans, a small but sensitive site within the Central Conservation Area. On the opposite side of the road are the Marlborough Buildings (Grade II listed). The Museum had been gifted to the city in the 19th century and had housed the town's post-Roman history, until the building was assessed as not conducive to the current needs of a modern museum and art gallery. The building was much loved by the community and its disposal, to pay for a new museum in the Old Town Hall, could have been very contentious. Instead it was to be retained for conversion into new homes, and we were tasked with finding a design that would help this to work. The charrette led by a facilitator looked at layout, access, parking, landscaping, setting, scale, massing, height, uses, appearance, light, roofs, materials, durability, privacy, and orientation to include energy efficiency. Informed by the design codes, the history of the site, historical drawings, planning policies, the draft Area Conservation Appraisal, market and need site analyses, and the landowner's vision were also utilised. Forty-seven people attended one or more sessions of the charrette and contributed in total 329 hours of work.

To add fun to what could have been a daunting task, the lead facilitator used building blocks made to scale of the Look! St Albans design codes. After the charrette, one attendant wrote to say that he had visited the site again and felt so involved with its future that he would have liked to have helped with designing the interior!

Four different design concepts were developed and voted upon at the report-back session; the clear winner with the highest level of support was Design Concept 1 Oak Tree Gardens. This was worked up into a planning application, which passed through the planning process with very minor changes. Work has now commenced on site and we will soon see our concept plan become a reality. For members of the community to be able to walk past a development that they had been so intimately involved with will be something many will cherish.

WORKING AT A LARGER SCALE

Our second charrette was a different, larger and more challenging masterplanning process. The Partnership – consisting of St Albans City and District Council, Hertfordshire Constabulary, Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust and Boulton LDN (owners of the adjoining Maltings shopping centre) asked us to host the charrette. The three-hectare site in the heart of the city centre involves an ensemble of mid-20th century civic buildings, including the locally listed Alban Arena, a large car park, a public



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Our intention was not to stop development, but to set the bar at a level that was acceptable to the whole community, and would prove durable

garden and large swathes of underperforming public realm. To add to the challenges, the site included significant level differences and connected infrastructure networks between some of the partly vacated buildings.

The facilitators gained views, comments and challenges from attendees in various ways including site visits, hands-on drawing and placing scaled building blocks and trees onto site layout plans. One of the facilitators translated the concepts into computerised 3D image, which could be viewed from various perspectives. Two masterplan concepts came forward from which the landowners could take elements for further testing, before bringing them back to the community to work on design details ahead of detailed planning applications.

With the support of St Albans Chamber of Commerce and other local businesses, we were able to leaflet 35,500 premises in addition to our usual stakeholder invitations and general publicity

2-3 The design charrettes facilitated by experts to help the community to find designs that worked well



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to the wider community. On this occasion, 166 people gave more than 1,000 hours of their time, and in a remarkable atmosphere of joint endeavour. We, including The Partnership, and Imagine-Places, who provided the lead facilitator, were jointly shortlisted by the Royal Town Planning Institute Awards 2017 in the Excellence in Plan Making Practice category.

4 The design charrette process

For the Museum of St Albans design charrette, we achieved the only Highly Commended Award for Community led Placemaking (Southern England) in the Planning and Placemaking Awards in 2016.

It is important to note that our draft design codes are not adopted policy by St Albans District Council, but that their power lies in the fact they were community led and community endorsed. We have a unique Memorandum of Understanding with our local planning authority which states in essence that they support our methodology and will recommend us to developers at the pre-application stage. It is a process that we would recommend to other communities seeking to achieve greater control over their historic environments. ●

Vanessa Gregory, Chair, Look! St Albans



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Conservation in Milton Keynes

Chris Hooper describes his new role as a conservation officer

My career change from investigating fraud to becoming a conservation officer has been described as a sedate mid-life crisis. With transferable skills and a recent master's degree in Historic Environment Conservation I was lucky enough to be offered a role as a conservation officer in Milton Keynes.

The master's degree had provided hands-on experience of historic materials; knowledge of national guidance and legislation; use of recording; an

1 Bradwell Abbey, site of the Medieval Priory in the heart of Milton Keynes