

# Conservation and (sub)urban form: reviewing policy in Stratford upon Avon, 2004-2019

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## 1. Introduction

The interplay between urban morphology as an academic (sub)discipline, albeit supported by a wide range of more established disciplines ranging from geography, architecture and history to urban studies and urban design, and professional practices of urban planning, architecture and urban design is complex and problematic. This chapter addresses one part of that problem using the example of a small-scale morphologically-informed study of parts of a small English country town, albeit one with an international reputation and high tourist traffic. The town is Stratford upon Avon, and the tourists demand a particular image and identity. In fact the town's contemporary character is commodified and increasingly aimed at, and created by, tourists; and this has major implications for the planning and conservation of the built environment (Hubbard and Lilley, 2000). This has become most obvious in the past three or four decades, when a wider consensus about the importance of conservation has emerged (Pendlebury, 2008) and processes of selection and management have identified an 'authorised heritage discourse' (Smith, 2006). That discourse is very managed and authorised in Stratford given the importance of its millions of tourists to the town's economy.

Part of the conservation discourse in England has been driven by the legal definition, in the 1967 Civic Amenities Act, of the 'conservation area' – areas of towns, identified normally by the local planning authority (LPA). These are 'of special architectural or historical interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to conserve or enhance'. Hence 'character' and 'appearance' have become key concepts, elusive to define and subject to legal challenge over the years (Daniels *et al.*, 1993; Skea, 1996). This chapter explores the key questions of what gives a place its 'character', how can that be expressed in terms of its urban form characteristics, and how can that knowledge be effectively communicated in ways that relate to the needs of the English planning system. This is an application of urban morphology, and particularly that part of it derived from historico-geographical theories of urban form, to the professional context.

## 2. Conservation, urban morphology and urban planning

### 2.1 Tensions of change and non-change – or conservation

Our towns and cities – are being continuously shaped and reshaped by economic forces, architectural tastes, planning ordinances, building controls, changing public fashions and a myriad of public-private regulations governing the form and use of space. Sometimes that change is fast, sometimes large-scale to the point where it can be thought of as catastrophic. At other times the change is small scale and incremental.

It is common to consider that cities are palimpsests of successive layers of redevelopment over time (Martin, 1968; Khirfan, 2010; Vâlceanu *et al.*, 2014). Some features persist between layers: Conzen (1962) noted the longevity of street patterns in comparison to plot patterns and buildings, and Sabelberg (1983) studied the persistence of palazzi in Tuscan and Sicilian urban landscapes. Not only do persistent forms represent the investment and ethos of past societies, but it could be argued that retaining them contributes familiarity, character and identity; and to sustainability through minimising resource use in replacing them. However, there are also studies of the speed and scale of change particularly in

urban central areas, relating to issues such as changing land value and use (Hoyt, 1933), and other constraints such as existing structures and societal values that might form a 'morphological frame' for subsequent development proposals (Larkham, 1995). As While and Short (2010) suggest, the survival of particular structures, landscapes and morphologies reflects choices about what to retain in response to social, commercial and aesthetic opportunities, preferences and aspirations. These preferences are enmeshed in judgements about the value and meaning of different aspects of the past and the present (Graham *et al.*, 2000). A significant thread of work on conservation policy has sought to make sense of factors that shape decisions about what to protect, why and how (i.e. what counts as valid 'heritage') especially at the local level. This has included work on the selectivity of statutory protection regimes and the role of advocacy groups in ensuring that certain aspects of the built form are preserved in the face of economic and political pressure for change (Hobson, 2004; Larkham, 1996).

Within the ebb and flow of urban change, it is, of course, important to note that the form and appearance of many cities is also shaped by powerful forces of conservation and preservation (although with changes between cultures and over time: Jokilehto, 1999; Glendinning, 2013). As a range of literature has demonstrated, the protection or promotion of 'heritage' involves the selection and (re)interpretation of certain aspects of the past to serve interests in the present: according to Graham *et al.* (2000, 17), "heritage is that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, be that economic, cultural, political or social".

Local heritage narratives are unavoidably entrenched, to varying degrees, in the history and materiality of particular buildings and places (While, 2007), and thus to the materiality of place-identity and character. These narratives are also consistently highly selective, prioritising certain histories, meanings, associations – and material artefacts – over others, and thereby favouring certain pasts, presents and futures (Atkinson *et al.*, 2002; Wright, 1985; Massey, 1995). The promotional dimension of heritage management is especially marked given intensified competition between places for visitors and investment, with implications for identity, branding and promotion (Uzzell, 1996; Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2011).

## **2.2 Character and form**

The Conzenian historico-geographical morphological approach considers a hierarchy of physical characteristics: streets (of all types) and their arrangement in networks; plots and their arrangement, bounded by streets, as street-blocks; and buildings. Land use is also a consideration as it has implications for physical form. These can be considered at scales from the micro-morphology of architectural and structural elements of individual buildings, to the macro-morphology of settlement-scale patterns.

In any one period, the dominant fashions and technologies create characteristic patterns, but the palimpsest and layering effect of different morphological periods over time and the differential survival of features provide, at any particular period, the character and form of the plot, street, district or settlement. These elements can, of course, be manipulated; with a Stratford example being the use of structural exposed timbers at various periods to create a town-centre where the character and appearance are heavily influenced by 'Tudor' structures – genuine, replica and fake. This impact on character was recognised in the early 1920s (Abercrombie and Abercrombie, 1923) and has enduring implications for conservation planning; and there are also examples in the interwar suburbs (Fig.1).



**Fig. 1** 77 Tiddington Road, built in 1924: neo-Tudor possibly containing architectural salvage from Bradley Hall, Kinswinford (Source A. Birkhamshaw, 2005)

### **2.3 Planning and conservation: making it work**

English local planning authorities have a legal duty to review their areas “from time to time” to consider whether conservation areas should be designated or the boundaries of existing areas changed (1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act). This duty has existed since the early 1970s (1971 Town and Country Planning Act, section 277(2)), but this has never been undertaken frequently, systematically or consistently, with many authorities having insufficient resources for a regular review programme, instead responding in an *ad hoc* manner when particular issues arose (Daniels *et al.*, 1993, p. 54). The reduction in resources and staff within authorities, and especially for conservation, since the 2008 economic downturn has exacerbated this problem.

The drawing of boundaries has been problematic, and approaches have varied since 1967. Some have been drawn widely, others extremely sharply focused on individual features. Some boundaries follow obvious landscape (morphological) features while others cut across them (for example medieval plot tails: Larkham, 1990, Figure 16.1). ‘Obvious’ features have been excluded on the instruction of the elected councillors who make the decisions (Birmingham Jewellery Quarter: information from former Conservation Officer). Areas can be designated because self-interested residents exert pressure on councillors (Larkham, 2004, pp. 252-255).

Once designated and/or reviewed, the LPA has a duty under the same legislation both to produce enhancement plans, although this is rarely done; and to pay ‘special attention’ to planning proposals within the designated area. While it is difficult to prove in court that ‘special attention’ (as distinct from ‘ordinary attention’) has been paid, the development of area-specific policies, design guidance and related tools has been common; all helping to demonstrate that designated areas are treated differently in decision-making processes.

Conservation areas have become embedded in the English planning system (Pendlebury and Strange, 2011): they are popular and numerous, but the system does have problems (Daniels *et al.*, 1993; Skea, 1996). A major issue is understanding the implications of small-

scale change over extended periods (Skea, 1996) since, even in conservation areas, the volume of development proposals can be high (Larkham, 1996, chapters 8-10).

### **3. The Stratford example**

Stratford upon Avon District Council (SoADC), responsible for a large and largely rural district with over 80 conservation areas (all village cores plus the tourist 'honeypot' of the town centre) hoped to review 10 areas per year by the early 1990s, although these reviews were being carried out by consultants after a tendering process (Daniels *et al.*, 1993, p. 54). SoADC had previously used urban morphological expertise – employing Dr Karl Kropf – to develop its district-wide design guidance (SoADC, 2001, 2002). However Kropf had left SoADC by the time that this study was commissioned, and other staff have also subsequently left; so the suggestion that a focus on character areas and morphological underpinnings of the 2001 design guide might have been in their mind remains unproven.

#### **3.1 Making the policy: 2004**

In 2004 there were concerns about changes to the character of the residential approach roads to the town centre. Following its previous use of external consultants to carry out conservation area reviews and, with its recent history of morphologically-informed policy-making, it now appointed morphologists and planners to review the suburban areas adjoining the already-designated town centre conservation area. An approach was made to the School of Property, Planning and Construction at the University of Central England (now Birmingham City University). A positive response from David Chapman (DC: Professor and former Head of School) and Peter Larkham (PJL: Professor of Planning) secured a contract. As this was a short-term consultancy, Dr Nick Morton (NM: Lecturer in Planning) joined the team, with Alex Birkhamshaw (AB: PhD student, Birmingham University) as a research assistant. This was a very experienced team. DC was an architect and urban designer, formerly conservation officer with Birmingham City Council. PJL and NM had undertaken PhDs supervised by Jeremy Whitehand, and had worked and published with him; PJL's research on conservation areas had included commissioned report for the Royal Town Planning Institute (Daniels *et al.*, 1993); AB was still a PhD student supervised by Whitehand; his research was closely related to the subject of this consultancy and later resulted in a published paper (Birkhamshaw and Whitehand, 2012).

The brief identified a series of 'mature residential areas' – a topic researched by several members of the Birmingham Urban Morphology Research Group (Larkham, 1999a; Whitehand and Larkham, 1992; Whitehand *et al.*, 1991). These were the principal approach roads to the town (with the exception of the more commercialised Birmingham Road but including Alcester Road, Banbury Road, Evesham Road, Shipston Road and Tiddington Road), and three residential roads of varying dates and qualities (Avenue Road, Clopton Road, Loxley Road). The areas were tightly drawn on aerial photographs. Within each area we were to report on the distinctive character, and recommend whether some or all of the area was worth including within the town's existing conservation area designation.

The team carried out a search of relevant literature and policy; searched the planning history of the areas; carried out GIS-based measurements of key plot characteristics, including areas where changes were proposed or had been implemented; and carried out a plot-by-

plot field and photographic survey, travelling daily from Birmingham for several weeks and basing themselves in the café of a major supermarket next to the railway station, adjoining one of the areas. Information was been obtained from a wide range of sources, including intensive on-site examination of areas and buildings; from historic maps in several local libraries and archives; from the local planning authority's records; from the County Sites and Monuments Record; and from local publications. For some areas, plot dimensions and other measurements were obtained from digital mapping. Building dates were obtained principally from visual inspection and comparison with historic maps.

Based on the fieldwork, we attempted to persuade officers that some of the area boundaries were illogical. A line drawn along the road-centre while lines separates the two sides of the road; while these may have been developed at different times and in different forms, the road user perceives them as one unit. In particular, an early interwar social housing estate and a burial ground south of the Evesham Road clearly had distinctive characters, and social housing estates had been identified as under-designated in conservation terms (Daniels *et al.*, 1993). However, the response was that there were no further resources available for this work, and any extension of the delineated areas, while welcome, would have to be at the consultants' expense.

In the field it was felt that the most important "headline indicators" of the condition of an area as it has changed over time were the conversion of original wooden windows to new materials (both aluminium and especially uPVC frames) and the conversion of front gardens to car-parking spaces (Fig. 2). Our recording of the latter was based on a field estimate of the amount of the front of the plot that has been converted. Conversion of timber to uPVC window frames was something of a conservation issue in the 1990s and 2000s (Larkham, 1999b, pp. 364-5), and the increasing conversion of front gardens to hard-paved parking surfaces was not just a conservation problem, but was increasingly recognised as causing problems for drainage and biodiversity (DCLG, 2008).



Fig. 2 Front garden conversions (blue) and replacement windows (red), Banbury Road (Source Larkham *et al.*, 2005)

By 23 March 2005 a draft Residential Character Study report had been drawn up (Larkham *et al.*, 2005). An important facet, informed by morphological work on town-plan analysis, was that many of these areas clearly consist of a range of sub-areas, each having distinct characteristics (Fig. 3). These are often the results of particular phases of design and construction. The report identified such areas and dealt with each separately, making specific development management policy recommendations (Box 1) and suggesting whether or not the area character was sufficiently 'special' to be included within a conservation area (Table 1). It is worth highlighting that the management recommendations were deliberately focusing on a wider concept of urban landscape management, rather than solely aspects of urban planning. The included comments on managing the public realm aimed at the local



authority and public service providers, encouraging property owners to improve their properties, etc.

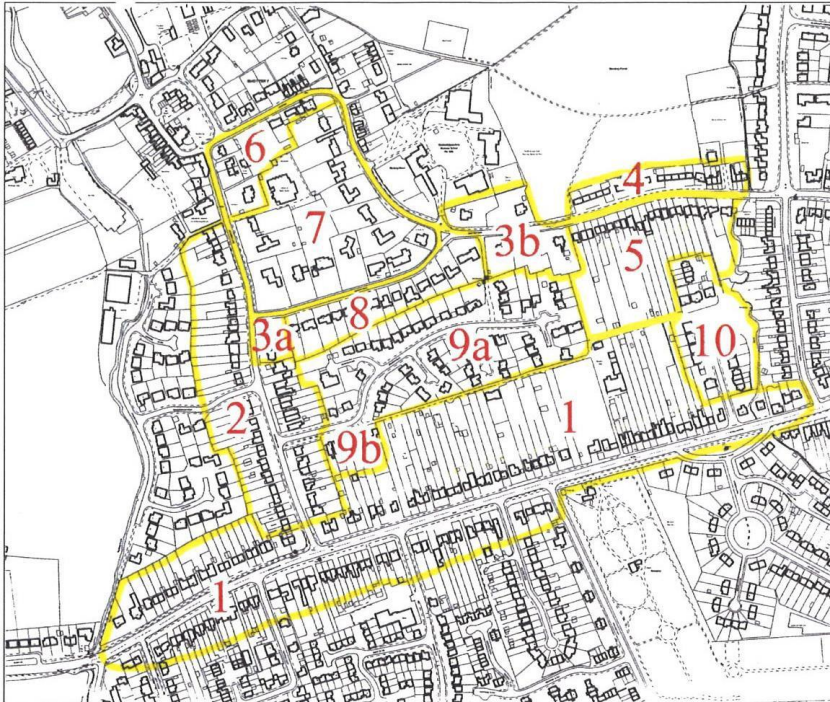


Fig. 3 The Evesham Road area, showing division into sub-areas each of identifiable and distinct quality (*Source Larkham et al., 2005*)

It is worth examining the Evesham Road area to note the variety contained within some of the specified areas. While the character of the main approach roads to the town-centre 'honeypot', which normally attracts over 4 million visitors each year, was a key motivation, other 'backland' areas were included and some road frontages excluded.

TABLE 1

BOX 1

### **3.2 Adopting the policy: 2005**

The report was discussed by Stratford's Avon Area Community Committee on 24 March 2005. PJL presented the report and responded to elected members' questions. He highlighted the proposals for extending the conservation area boundary, and the suggestion that separate, smaller area designations would enable management policy to seem more focused. The overall reception of the study was very positive; "members found these suggestions illuminating" and requested that officers arrange further training to allow them to be discussed in greater depth. The committee agreed to support the proposals as a basis for public consultation (SoADC, 2005a).

A 4-week public consultation exercise was held in April and May 2005. Public responses were overwhelmingly positive, with one exception. A lawyer, resident in Tiddington Road, wrote to the Council threatening legal action on the basis that including his property within the conservation area would breach his human rights because of the additional restrictions that would bring. The Council's response highlighted its statutory duty to review conservation area boundaries, and nothing more was heard.

Following the positive consultation response, officers repackaged the report and it was formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) on 25 July 2005 (SoADC, 2005b). In then-current planning terms, SPGs were usually detailed documents, often guidance, supporting the approved Development Plan – in this case, the Stratford upon Avon Local Plan which was being produced at the time. An SPG document supporting an approved Development Plan, both of which had been through public consultation processes, carried considerable weight in the English planning system: it was a “material consideration” in making decisions on whether or not to approve planning applications, for example.

Two small extensions were made to the existing town conservation area; the then Conservation Officer considering that extension was more effective (and, perhaps, faster) than designating the separate smaller areas recommended by the report (Fig. 4). The report's suggested small extension in Evesham Road was not accepted.

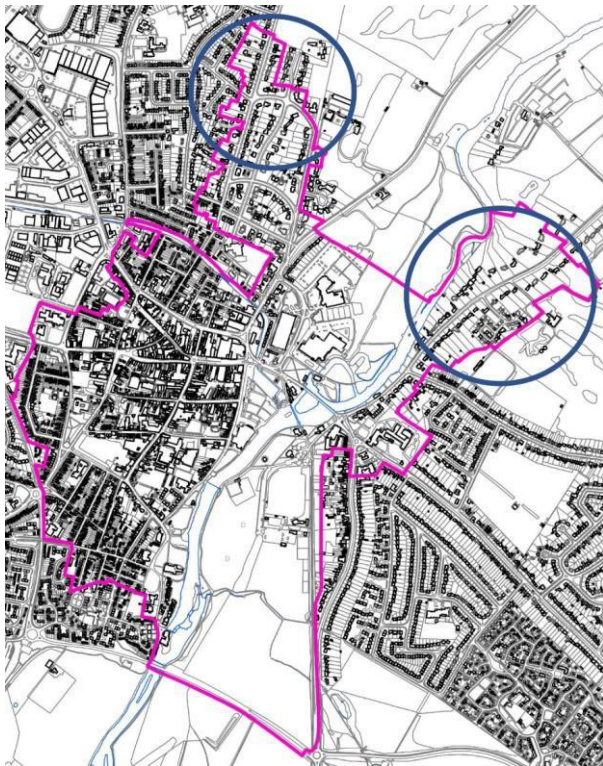


Figure 4 The Stratford conservation area in 2020, with the approved extensions based on the 2005 report highlighted (*Source* amended from <https://www.stratford.gov.uk/planning-building/conservation-areas-h-z.cfm>)

### **3.3 Reviewing the policy: 2020**

In 2020 this book offered the opportunity to review the 2005 report and the supplementary planning guidance, to reflect both on the process of the research and on the impact of the policy. Inevitably, the political and legal contexts of planning had changed since 2005. In terms of planning law, the original survey coincided with the implementation of the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, which abolished Local Plans and Structure Plans, replacing them with Local Development Frameworks consisting of a series of policy documents ('local development documents'). The 2015 Localism Act tilted the ethos of planning firmly to a more local level (although in practice this has been limited, contradictory and problematic: Tait and Inch, 2016). The National Planning Policy Framework (DCLG, 2012, regularly revised) replaced previous policy guidance, and emphasised the importance of sustainable development: if a proposal could be demonstrated to be sustainable, there was a presumption in favour of granting planning permission. In fact, paragraph 7 redefined the purpose of the planning system: it is "to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development". However, 'character' and 'quality' are emphasised even outside designated conservation areas: paragraph 130 states that "permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, taking into account any local design standards or style guides in plans or supplementary planning documents".

More importantly for small-scale developments, the concept of 'permitted development' – normally small-scale development for which there is no need to apply for planning permission – was broadened significantly during this period, most recently by the 2015 Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order. This was done "to support growth in the economy" including the building industry, and amongst other rights it extended the current right for larger householder rear extensions (DCLG, 2015). The explanatory memorandum makes no comments about the possible impact of area character or appearance. The continued extension of permitted development rights does have impacts on built environments and communities, and could be seen as undermining planning (Clifford *et al.*, 2019, chapter 1).

The reforms introduced by the Labour government (1997-2010) intended to widen the remit of planning. However other governance processes and priorities, including corporatism, outsourcing (owing largely to the financial crisis) and managerialism reduced discretion at the local scale (Gunn and Vigar, 2012). The subsequent coalition and Conservative reforms sought to support a market-led approach and to reduce central direction in favour of local discretion; although this clearly collided with the reality of retaining strong central direction and privileging developer interests (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2019).

In Stratford, the Local Plan review was completed in 2006, and its documentation mentioned the 2005 report, although only in passing as it applied to only a small area of the District (SoADC, 2006). The Core Strategy was adopted in 2016, containing policies on the historic environment and on design and distinctiveness. The Core Strategy is the key compulsory local development document, and every other local development document is built on its principles. It should be location specific rather than site specific (UK Government, 2004). The Neighbourhood Development Plan was submitted in April 2017, subject to consultation, and at a referendum in November 2018 91% of voters supported it: it was formally approved on 17 December 2018 (SoADC, 2018).

The updating of local planning documents following both national legislation and local policy changes meant that the 2005 Supplementary Planning Guidance became less directly relevant to the formalised and quasi-judicial process of making decisions on planning



applications as subsequent documentation was published. The emerging neighbourhood Development Plan had largely replaced specific mention of the SPG by 2014. As late as 2019 the SPG was still mentioned with other superseded documents in planning officer reports: common phrasing includes “The [SPG] is a material planning consideration but, as it was adopted prior to the adoption of the Core Strategy and implementation of the NPPF [it] has limited weight in the current planning assessment” and “While no longer having the status of a Supplementary Planning Document, it [the 2005 SPG] still contains substantial and relevant guidance on design” (see, for example, application 16/04057/FUL). Nevertheless the SPG, and other relevant design-related documentation, clearly influenced the wording of policies in the Core Strategy and Neighbourhood Development Plan, and were still being mentioned in 2019 by planning inspectors at appeal cases.<sup>1</sup> Core Strategy policies influenced by the SPG include Policy CS.9: “all forms of development should improve the quality of the public realm and enhance the sense of place, reflecting the character and distinctiveness of the locality” and Policy CS.15 which seeks “to ensure that the scale of development is appropriate to its surroundings, and the design should be related to and readily integrated into the existing form of the settlement, and should not have a harmful impact on the setting of the settlement”.

A more practical issue with reviewing the 2004-5 study is the change of personnel (in the local authority and university) and the loss of documentation. Moving house, office and even campus, with a reduction of storage space at each move, led to the only surviving documents being the draft report, the published SPG, and a file of the original photographic survey.

### *3.3.1 Visual inspection*

The circumstances of early 2020, when this chapter was written, precluded repeating the detailed plot-by-plot inspection of the original survey, and instead Google Streetview images were reviewed to explore, as far as was possible, the extent of any further changes to the key features of windows and front gardens. The images were taken between mid-2019 and early-2020. There was little change in these features, under 5% per street. Some uPVC windows existing in 2004-5 had been replaced by ‘second generation’ uPVC, some of which were in the current fashionable dark grey colour. This lack of change could be caused by the majority of desired changes having been completed by the date of the original survey; the worsened economic circumstances of much of the intervening periods having significantly reduced the pressure or the financial ability to make changes; or the effectiveness of the suggested policies.

Given the extent of changes, in some streets in particular, in 2004-5 the first possibility is most likely. The second is certainly possible, although the costs of these types of change could be relatively low. The third is possible, certainly in the years immediately after the acceptance of these policies and the surrounding publicity; although as most of these changes would have been ‘permitted development’, the local authority would have had no influence in these decisions.

### *3.3.2 Planning applications and appeals*

A detailed study was undertaken of two of the streets for the full years 2006-2019. Tiddington Road was selected as part of this area was included in the extended conservation area, and the large plots and properties are some of the most desirable in the town – indeed in urban Warwickshire – and so may have been subject to more development pressure than elsewhere. No applications for tree work, street telecommunications etc were reviewed. The number of applications, and the series of proposals for some sites, supports

this suggestion. Evesham Road was reviewed as this was a more 'ordinary' area, with some of the main road plots being particularly deep and thus potentially vulnerable to character-changing development, and the area character was complex resulting in the identification of numerous sub-areas in 2004-5. The north side of Evesham Road (area 1), and areas 2, 3a, 7, 8, 9a and 9b (see Figure 3) were studied.

A total of 129 applications (including appeals) were made for Tiddington Road, of which 72.1% were granted; and 113 for Evesham Road, of which 84.1% were granted (Tables 1 and 2). This can be compared to the national average, which has remained consistently between 87% and 89% between 2010 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> There is more pressure for new development on Tiddington Road, with its larger plots and much higher-value property; and more for extensions in Evesham Road. The refusal rates being higher than the national average is likely to reflect the more intense pressure for development in a desirable location – not just Tiddington Road but the whole town. The LPA's determination to manage development, to secure appropriate development in appropriate locations, is demonstrated by chains of applications including application rejected, appeal, appeal dismissed, application granted, then applications to vary the conditions of the planning permission. An example would be the chain of five applications and an appeal for the demolition of 78 Tiddington Road and construction of a replacement dwelling, between 2016 and 2019. Nevertheless, as is the case nationally, the vast majority of applications are granted. Even within the extended conservation area, it hardly seems as if the planning system acts to slow the development process, as has been a repeated political allegation throughout this period (for example Heath, 2020).

TABLE 1

TABLE 2

There are still applications for infill development, although a suitable design on some of the larger plots would not damage the area character. One such plot subdivision on Banbury Road was approved with very little debate, and work on site clearance is under way (June 2020) (application 17/03020/FUL). The very large plots fronting Evesham Road are vulnerable to development: there is a rear alleyway access, and the area was even identified in the local development plan for possible development; but the intention was that it would be a larger unified scheme, and individual infill proposals have been successfully resisted. For example, application 14/01907/FUL proposed five houses on the tails of five plots fronting Evesham Road, with access along the rear alleyway. The application was refused, with the planning officer noting that the proposal did not relate well to the 'defining character' of the area as identified by the SPG. However in June 2020 one site was advertised for sale and the agent's board stated "about half an acre (0.2 ha), potential development, poss[ible] strategic access strip" (Fig. X).



Fig. X Site on Evesham Road advertised for sale in 2020 as possible access to facilitate large-scale backland development (Source P.J. Larkham, 2020)

The architectural styles along most of the streets studied vary considerably, although inter-war (and, in Avenue Road area, Edwardian) styled predominate. Nevertheless the SPG noted that high quality modern design might be appropriate for replacement dwellings in preference to historicist pastiche. Neighbours often disagreed, protesting that such a development “would set a precedent for ‘ultra-modern’ development which would result in severe loss of heritage” [along Tiddington Road] and “‘ultra-modern’ design would not be sustainable” (application 16/00066/FUL). However this is not a convincing argument in such non-uniform areas; and the 2005 report and SPG prefigured paragraph 127 of the 2012 NPPF which stated that developments should be “sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change”.

Both application and appeal decisions for new development have specifically mentioned the SPG. In responding to application 08/00822/FUL the conservation officer mentioned the SPG comments about “the importance of the varied scale and style of the buildings that prevents visual monotony” and therefore objected to the proposed grouping of three similar houses. The appeal decision for application 16/02445/FUL rested on only two factors: the impact of the new development on its neighbour, and on the character and appearance of Tiddington Road. In deciding on the latter factor the Inspector explicitly mentioned the SPG, finding that the proposed new building would “be dominant and visually intrusive within the streetscene ...[and] erode the gaps to the side of the plot. Therefore failing to reflect the character and distinctiveness of the locality”. Applicants, too, have used the SPG, as in the Design and Access Statement for application 14/03488/FUL, which quoted it extensively. One applicant even complained at appeal that the planning officer had not specifically referred to the Evesham Road character study, but the Inspector found that an unreasonable argument as “it is implicitly referred to by virtue of its adoption as part of the Design Guide” (appeal relating to application 12/00891/FUL).

More common than wholly new construction is the substantial modification of existing houses. There are several examples of houses that have received very sizeable extensions, often accompanied by external insulation cladding and rendering. While this is partly driven by recent standards for insulation and energy costs, such changes usually occur when a property is purchased. The changes certainly affect the character and appearance of the buildings concerned especially as the small-scale architectural detail is often obscured. They are also often associated with changes to front gardens and property boundaries, although the example shown in Fig. X in 2005 and 2020 would still be categorised the same, although visibly very different (hedge boundary; garden with part driveway and part grass). Even these substantial changes to individual buildings have not been sufficient over 14 years to alter the overall character of these areas, since they remain dominated by individual houses on individual plots.



Fig. X House on corner of Banbury Road and Dale Avenue, 2005 and 2020. Large extension and rendering, replacement of hedge, drive and grass (Source A. Birkhamshaw, 2005; P.J. Larkham, 2020)

The online LPA planning documentation (accessible at <https://apps.stratford.gov.uk/eplanning/>) suggests that rear extensions, not visible from the main road frontage, are paid relatively little attention if it can be demonstrated that they do not block light from the neighbours' windows. Much more attention is paid to visible side and front extensions especially if the solid-void-solid pattern of buildings and spaces is disrupted. The joining-up of previously separate houses to form terraces has been identified in other studies of suburban form and conservation (Larkham, 1999b, pp. 364-5; Whitehand and Carr, 2001, pp. 173-5). There is relatively little evidence of pressure for this in Stratford, even in the areas of smaller semi-detached houses studies (Alcester Road). In part this may be because a number of such developments occurred before the commissioning of this research (Fig. X). However, a number of properties have been extended so close to the property boundary that there is no space for maintenance access: while this is legal, it will cause long-term problems. English Heritage (since 2016, Historic England) did comment on several applications in Tiddington Road that "to be more in keeping with the scale and nature of the development of the conservation area, the new building needs to occupy a smaller footprint" (for example application 16/00066/FUL).



Fig. X. Extension of semi-detached pair on Banbury Road: two-bay extension to no. 62 (right) in 1991; extension to no. 64 (left) granted 2010 (*Source* A. Birkhamshaw, 2005)

Following wide debate, in 2008 the impermeable surfacing of gardens was removed from permitted development and so needed planning permission; but only one such application was submitted in these areas (15/00896/FUL, 153 Evesham Road). This was approved with no objection or discussion. Several other applications sought dropped kerbs for vehicular access over the pavement, all of which were approved with no discussion of the motivation, ie for parking on the front garden.

One of the 2005 report's recommendations was that, as some of the fields along approach roads into the town became developed, the dominant rural character should be protected by retaining the tall hedge lines. In some places this has been done successfully. However the continued policy of targeting new residential development in Stratford itself: 3,500 new homes are planned between 2011 and 2031, of which some 2,400 had been built by 2018 (SoADC, 2018) has direct and indirect character-changing impacts, as do the associated new retail facilities and large residential care homes being developed. The 'approach roads' covered in the 2005 report now no longer start at the urban edge: the town is expanding, and its overall character is changing.

#### 4. Conclusions

This review of the 2005 report demonstrates that, for more than a decade, it was clearly useful in local decision-making at the level of planning applications, and decisions based upon its findings and recommended policies have been upheld at national level when



challenged through the planning appeal mechanism. It led directly to the extension of the central conservation area on a robust, evidence-led basis; and confirmation that the majority of the areas examined, although pleasant and contributing to the town's character, were not of sufficient special interest to merit designation. The concern for character and the policy tool of character areas have influenced subsequent policy.

However, it should not be expected that a small-scale consultancy report would have substantial and enduring impact on planning policy. In the English planning system over the past two decades, the social and environmental context has changed significantly; national and local policies, and the underlying legislation, have changed; case law and precedent have changed; and the decision-makers themselves have changed. In the quasi-judicial and adversarial planning system, only the most recent documentation carries significant weight in decision-making. The 2005 SPG has been superseded.

SoADC was unusual at the turn of the century in its interest and investment in urban morphological advice, resulting in the District Design Guidance (SoADC, 2001) and the 2005 report and its supplementary planning guidance (SoADC, 2005b). Yet urban morphological ideas have underpinned both the theory and practice of urban design and conservation for several decades prior to this, with urban morphology notably being 'one of the things an urban designer ought to know' (Moudon, 1992). Stratford went for academic expertise, rather than relying on home-grown ideas of in-house staff; consultants were popular in the 1990s (Mitchell, 1995). This could relate to the 'fragmentary planning' depending on private-sector provision of knowledge and skills that LPAs do not possess or cannot afford (Parker *et al.*, 2018). This expenditure was reduced dramatically during the economic downturn (Waheed Nazir, Director of Inclusive Growth, Birmingham City Council, pers. comm.), but LPAs remain in a position of critical dependency with private sector consultants (Wargent *et al.*, 2020).

Our experience with this work has also spurred further exploration of how character areas are drawn: whether there is any distinction between boundaries drawn by inspection and by measurement of characteristics such as plot dimensions (Larkham and Morton, 2011). This emphasised that a morphologically-trained 'by eye' inspection can identify boundaries as clearly as by detailed plot measurement; but the Stratford experience demonstrates the potential divergence between such morphologically-informed boundaries and those delineated by political or other reasoning.

A major finding from this work – both the original study and this assessment 15 years later, is that even 'ordinary' areas – in this case principally interwar suburbs – have definable character. That character can be identified through detailed morphological study, which can readily subdivide streets into character areas (analogous to morphological regions: Oliveira and Yaygin, 2020). This resonates with the long-standing academic interest in 'ordinary' areas (Jackson, 1984; Groth and Bressi, 1997) and that there is immense variety even within common building types such as the semi-detached house (see the Alcester and Loxley Road areas; and Jensen, 2007). The same analysis can underpin decisions on whether the character is sufficiently 'special' to merit additional consideration such as conservation area designation. Morphological character can inform planning and management policy and can be worded sufficiently robustly to withstand challenge at local and national levels in an adversarial planning system. Even when superseded by more recent documentation, unless area character changes massively such studies will have a long-term impact. Even on this small scale, therefore, the interaction between academic urban morphology and planning policy can generate public and professional acceptance and benefit.

## Note

1. In the English planning system, if a planning application is rejected by the LPA the applicant has the right of appeal to the Secretary of State. Planning appeals are managed by the Planning Inspectorate, and an independent adjudicator ('planning inspector') makes a recommendation to the Secretary of State.
2. Planning application statistics for England are compiled by the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government (and its predecessors), from 2010 available at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-application-statistics](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-application-statistics). They were presented slightly differently pre-2010. They count planning appeals separately, whereas appeals are included in the Stratford analysis to give a better overview of decision-making.

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