

North City Centre Area Audit

This audit was carried out on October 13th 2006 by the members of the Environment Committee: Charles Chaplin, Spencer Chapman, Joyce Durrant, Janet Ede, Alec Hartley, Peter Motts, Margaret Peckham and Derek Torr.

Each year the members of the Environment Committee of the Norwich Society carry out an audit of part of the city and produce a report. For 2006, it was decided to look at the area bounded by St Crispin's Road, Bull Close Road, Magpie Road, Baker's Road and the River Wensum.



This is the most northern part of the medieval city within the city walls and forms part of Norwich-over-the-Water. In spite of major redevelopments, there are many reminders of the medieval past, and it is an important, but at present neglected, part of the city.

Currently plans are being produced for more redevelopment, and initial public consultations have taken place and a report produced by Norwich City Council.^[1] Our intention was to walk around the area, to pinpoint some of the problems, to highlight positive aspects and to put forward suggestions which could help in the proposed improvements when the next stage of consultation takes place.

We paid particular attention to housing, shopping and employment, transport, and the environment.

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS

From the perimeter roads, the site presents a depressing aspect, dominated by the great block of the now unused Sovereign House, by Gildengate House, by the multi-storey car park and by the barren acres of car parks which surround them.

Unfortunately, the scale and height of these buildings dominate the skyline from most directions and are out of proportion in what is otherwise a streetscape of domestic houses and shops. Likewise, the Magdalen Street fly-over dominates the views along Magdalen Street and the constant stream of traffic crossing it at roof level gives a restless feel to an otherwise attractive street scene. Anglia Square, which should provide a focal point for the community, fails to do this. Above all, the sheer volume of traffic using the north / south routes of Oak Street, St Augustine's and Magdalen Street pollute the atmosphere with fumes and noise, and the narrow pavements mean these streets make the life of pedestrians and shoppers difficult and stressful.



The multi-storey car park on Edward Street



Magdalen Street flyover

Exploring the streets on foot, however, it quickly becomes apparent that there is much here to recommend for preservation and enhancement, as well as many imaginative restorations and developments which have already taken place.

HOUSING

In spite of large scale demolition, there are remains of the medieval street pattern with houses and yards behind them.

This is particularly the case along Magdalen Street and St Augustine's and recent schemes have seen imaginative restoration work, such as 139 to 145 Magdalen Street and Hartley's Court, with their attractive courtyards to the rear of the main buildings, and similar schemes in St Augustines. These projects show what can be done to provide pleasant housing without sweeping everything away.



Hartley's Court



refurbished frontages on Magdalen Street

Unfortunately, there are many houses along these streets which are in a very sorry state and badly need attention before it is too late.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are represented by the streets of small terrace houses. The enhancement of Sussex Street has been successful, particularly the provision of car parking behind the terrace to the north. Likewise the pedestrianisation of the Esdelle Street area with its pleasant planting of trees and shrubs shows what can be achieved. These terrace houses are clearly popular and the majority are well cared for, and should be valued for they provide vital affordable housing within walking distance of the city centre.



St Augustine's Street - as bad as it gets

The quiet oasis of Thomas Tawell Court, which provides homes for the visually impaired is a good example of a modern development separated from the busy modern streets while the development of flats surrounded by green open space in Magdalen Close came as a pleasant surprise, likewise Talbot Square.



Esdelle Street area



modern development to the rear of Zipfel House, Magdalen Street

Again, the lack of through traffic makes for a pleasant environment though sadly some of the flats clearly need attention. Off Sussex Street, the modern development of The Lathes is also pleasant and traffic free. There has also been successful infilling, for example Zipfel House at the northern end of Magdalen Street where the traditional courtyard has been used in a modern design.

Certain general points regarding housing have emerged:

1. The importance of the medieval and Victorian legacy of housing and the need to restore and modernise where possible.
2. The need to maintain existing housing in good order.
3. The importance of the tradition of building around courtyards and small closes, and the evidence that this is equally valid in the twenty first century.

SHOPPING AND EMPLOYMENT

Traditionally this has always been an area for small specialist shops and businesses, particularly along Magdalen Street and St Augustine's where the small shops and (presumably) low rents provide suitable accommodation allowing the survival of many businesses. Unfortunately there are also many empty premises or shops which barely survive.

This is hardly surprising given the volume of motor traffic and the narrowness of the pavements. Some of the infill buildings have been out of scale and unimaginative, such as the Roy's building on Magdalen Street, and these detract from the generally attractive and harmonious architectural appearance of the streets.

Anglia Square should, and could, provide a focal point for all the small communities within this area, and also for those living outside the city walls to the north. Currently it fails because the raw unrelenting style of the architecture, together with the surrounding blocks of buildings, mean that it does not provide a welcoming shopping venue. Add to this the lack of an inviting entrance to the square - the existing gloomy tunnels can seem threatening let alone inviting. The lack of a flagship foodstore is another disincentive though the introduction of the central glass pavilion with its colourful fruit and vegetable stalls has been a recent improvement.

As well as small shops, there are also a surprising number of small, apparently thriving businesses in the area, particularly along Pitt Street and Oak Street. The presence of these businesses is to be encouraged but stricter application of planning and design controls are needed as the frontages currently are untidy and detract from the street scene.



derelict shop on Magdalen Street



Mixture of housing on Oak Street



A business on Oak Street

Points which have arisen concerning shopping and employment are:

1. Some way needs to be found to cut the volume of traffic in Magdalen Street and St Augustine's so that the pavements can be widened and the air quality improved.
2. The presence of small specialist shops and businesses should be encouraged.
3. Stricter controls should be enforced on planning applications for infill buildings so they respect the scale of surrounding buildings.
4. Ideally Anglia Square needs to be rebuilt and redefined and a new start made to give an open, attractive shopping square on a human scale with an inviting entrance and good, though not necessarily expensive, shops such as are needed on a day to day basis by the local community. Perhaps some sort of community centre could also be included to give a central meeting point.

TRAFFIC

Generally, the subject of traffic management is beyond the scope of the Environment Committee audit, but in this case, the sheer volume of traffic passing through the site has such an impact on the environment of those living and shopping locally that it must be emphasised. It is incredible that a narrow medieval street such as St Augustine's should be the main route to and from North Norfolk and the Airport. Until a northern relief road is built some measures must be taken.



closed or derelict shops on St Augustine's

If Oak Street were made one way for traffic travelling from south to north with Augustine's being one-way north to south this should allow room for some widening of the pavements in the latter street, plus a reduction in air pollution.

ENVIRONMENT

Though we have praised many aspects of the area there is no doubt that this part of the city has the reputation for undesirable elements, and a factor which surprised us was that, with the exception of Anglia Square, we saw no evidence of CCTV cameras anywhere. Surely, in the effort to improve the area better surveillance would help to improve public confidence.

We were pleasantly impressed to find the area generally clean and litter free. Among exceptions were the back lanes between Cowgate, Willis Street and Peacock Street where there was litter and unsightly bins. Similar lanes on the south side of the city have been tidied and gated providing more pleasing and safer surroundings. Mention has already been made of the commercial businesses in Oak Street and Pitt Street where a tidy up would be an improvement.

As in any modern city there was graffiti, though not excessive. One of the worst examples was inevitably the underpass under St Crispin's Road where graffiti and fly posting, added to poor lighting due to



Cowgate graffiti



St Crispin's underpass

vandalism, made using it a particularly unpleasant experience. The inevitable mindless scribbles are in evidence in places such as at the junction of Edward Street and Magpie Road, but generally do not constitute a major problem.



Anglia Square - controlled graffiti

In a class of their own are the graffiti on the hoardings on the west wall of Sovereign House on Botolph Street. They are bright, bold and energetic and brighten up what is otherwise a wasteland.

Green spaces are few and far between. The exceptions being St Augustine's Churchyard and Gildencroft, which has a good playground, and the green area around Magdalen Close. There is also a small playground beside the ring road opposite the Puppet Theatre, with fine mature trees on the north side. Surely a hedge planted along the chain fence on the side adjacent to the ring road would make it a much more pleasant place to visit and there are sufficient houses overlooking the

playground to discourage vandalism. Another small green site on Leonard Street could be pleasant but has been neglected and has no seating, the only facility being one litterbin.

This area has seen many changes and some historic landmarks have disappeared, so we would like to see these sites commemorated in some way.

We refer particularly to Stump Cross, Magdalen Gates and the site of St Paul's Church, (destroyed in the blitz). Perhaps some public sculptures or plaques could mark the sites.

We also thought more importance could be given to those parts of the City Walls which survive, for example, there is the remains of a tower off Oak Street which is hidden from view.

As we walked around we were aware of the views and vistas along the streets, so often dominated by the bulk of the red brick multi-storey car park, as in Cowgate looking west.

Similarly, the flyover intrudes on what would otherwise be a very fine view down Magdalen Street towards the Castle, accentuated by the constant movement of traffic crossing it. Would it be possible to erect some sort of light screen above the parapet, thus reducing the dominance of the structure due to the constant movement?

The building of the flyover has also created barren areas beneath and an unsightly break in the continuity of the street line. We wonder if the street frontage could be filled in and the space behind used for shops or small business, or even a skateboard park in the space to the east behind the church.

It is to be hoped that when the redevelopment takes place:

- 1. Green spaces, trees and play areas will be incorporated into the plans**
- 2. Steps will be taken to improve facilities for pedestrians, such as wider pavements and reduced air pollution, and cycle tracks into the city will be provided.**
- 3. Constant monitoring of litter, graffiti, and the introduction of more CCTV surveillance.**
- 4. Use made of the land beneath the flyover, perhaps for small business units and/or a skateboard park with the street frontage beneath the flyover being in-filled to restore the continuity of the street line.**
- 5. Some way of reducing the visual impact of the flyover on the street scene, possibly by erecting a screen above the parapets.**



Oak Street steps to the river and the remains of a City Wall tower

CONCLUSION

Finally, it must be emphasised that this is an important part of the city, both historically and potentially. The great strength is the mix of medieval houses, Victorian terraces and modern developments, many based on the traditional system of courtyards and closes. Alongside these are the small specialist shops and businesses so essential for the vitality of the community. These must be retained alongside new housing which should continue the pattern of small intimate communities in traffic free zones.

The key to the success of revitalising the area must rest firstly with the decision on the future of Anglia Square and the buildings around it. Currently these buildings and the vast car parks are out of scale with everything else and it is hard to see the area ever being improved while they dominate the area. Secondly, some solution must be found to the traffic problems of St Augustine's and Magdalen Street, and some satisfactory provision will have to be made for car parking once vacant lots are redeveloped.



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Photographs by Spencer Chapman except for those of Magdalen Street flyover by Jeremy Taylor.

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