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Urban Conservation and Design

The Georgian New Town Conservation Area Character Statement

Summary

The Georgian New Town was the first substantial development to occur outside the line of Hull's Town Walls. This was in the late 18th Century. It has a rectilinear street layout dating from that period, and initial development consisted of terraces of houses built up to the street corners, except for the planned open space of Kingston Square. It is the area of the City where terraces from the late 18th and early 19th Centuries survive in the greatest numbers. Its position close to the town centre. also resulted in a substantial number of public buildings being constructed, several of which still survive. A certain amount of development, mostly of public buildings, continued throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries. The character of the area is adversely affected by inappropriate new developments and areas of open space both within and adjoining the Conservation Area.

The Origins and Development of the Area

Hull's Old Town, within the city walls, dates from early mediaeval times, and has been declared a Conservation Area in its own right. By the 18th Century, it was becoming increasingly overcrowded and some sporadic development had occurred outside the town walls. Shipping using the adjoining length of the River Hull, known as the 'Old Harbour' was also overcrowded and, as a result, in the 1770's a new dock was constructed to the north of the town, immediately outside the Town Walls, with a lock through to the River Hull. At the time of its construction (it was subsequently known as Queen's Dock) it was the largest dock in the country.

The construction of this dock encouraged development of land to the north, which was auctioned off for this purpose by the dock company. The spoil from the dock had been deposited on this land, resulting in it being on a slight ridge, which is still discernible today. Development started after about 1778 and was one of the first major built-up areas outside the Town Walls. The first road to be constructed was laid out by the Dock Surveyor and followed this ridge, being on the line of what are now known as Savile Street, George Street and Charlotte Street.

The houses along this road were the grandest to be built and had a uniformity and elegance not seen before in the City. The next houses to be built, on Dock Street, were simpler in style and were built on timber yards adjacent to the dock after the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Subsequently, there was no coherent pattern of development, although Rev. Robert Jarratt laid out Kingston Square in 1801 'in order to raise the tone of his and his neighbours' properties'. At the same time, Albion Street and Baker Street were being laid out.

Further development took place over the next half century, such as in Worship Street and Wright Street, in the form of rectilinear roads intersecting at right-angles and forming the framework for building, which was initially largely residential in character.

Housing Development

The character of the buildings in the area is a reflection of its historical development. The area contains the highest concentration of late 18th and early 19th Century terraced housing in the City. This was high quality, 3-storey with basements (something rare in Hull outside this area and period, probably because of the soil conditions and low-lying nature of the ground), gardens and associated outhouses and other ancillary buildings.

Much of this housing still survives, the most important terraces being as follows:-

17-30 Albion Street (Listed)

1-4 Baker Street (Listed)
58-94 George Street (Listed in part)
83-93 George Street (Listed)
1-9 Jarratt Street (Listed)
11-29 John Street (Listed)
1-5 Kingston Square (Listed)
1-5 Percy Street (Listed)
30-33 Percy Street
22-25 Worship Street (Listed)
6-14 Wright Street (Listed in part)
64-67 Wright Street

This was an area where most of the housing, certainly most of that surviving, was intended for the wealthy, and this is reflected in its form.

Not all houses possess all the following features, but most of them have most of the features. This central fact distinguishes the Georgian New Town from all other parts of the city.
These characteristic features are:

1. Most properties are three-storey, some also including attics with dormers or rooflights.
2. Many, notably but not exclusively those on Albion Street, Jarratt Street and George Street, have semi-basements, with a sunken light-well/yard at the front, with steps leading down to a basement door, which is often located under a flight of steps leading up from pavement level to the front door. Some (notably on Jarratt Street) have a coal store underneath the pavement and coal hole, with cast iron cover, within the pavement itself.
3. In association with the semi-basements and steps, there are numerous examples of ornate railings, some of which are original. They survived the general removal during World War II because of their age and quality and because they had a safety function in preventing falls.
4. There are particularly elaborate timber doorcases, with pilasters, entablatures and pediments. These vary in proportion and detail, but their presence indicates the importance which these properties had when they were first built.
5. A large number of these properties still have their well-proportioned 12-pane sliding sash windows, having the fine appearance which slender glazing bars provide, and the three-dimensional quality which a sliding sash recessed into the window opening gives.
6. Most ground floor front windows had internal timber shutters, many of which still survive and give a characteristic appearance from outside, when in the closed position.
7. The properties are mostly roofed in slates. They were built at a time when slate was a new and relatively expensive material compared to the local pantiles, and this is another indication of their importance. The more modest two-storey properties in John Street were clearly more cheaply constructed. They had pantiles on the rear slope with the more expensive slate limited to the more visible front slope.
8. Many of these properties had gardens at a time when more modest properties would only have a small yard. Some of the gardens still survive. Others have been built on or are in use for car parking. The largest gardens were those to the rear of properties in Albion Street. Some of these have substantial two-storey outhouses on the Baker Street frontage.

The characteristic form of development was the terrace, though each terrace may have had several builders. Ivan and Elisabeth Hall, in their definitive work 'Georgian Hull' (Sessions of York 1978) pp. 30-31, say *'if anything characterises the whole of this new town development it is the consistent refusal to build to the strict uniformity implied by a terrace… It was perhaps fortunate that Hull's builders seemed content with minor changes in architectural style, so that a change from one builder to another during the infilling of the many gaps in the various streets did not result in too great a change in the pattern of the elevations…'* This variation (within certain limits of proportion, scale and detailing) is a distinctive and positive feature of the character of the area. Only on Albion Street, perhaps because of its prominence, do the surviving properties from the initial period of development have a surface uniformity. This distinction in respect of the Albion Street properties is also a positive feature.

Public and Commercial Buildings

As a result of the location of the area in relation to the town centre, the availability of land for development and its nature from the start as being a desirable location for the wealthy to live, it was the location for the erection of public and commercial buildings, many of which are of definite quality, to serve both the resident population and those from outside.

The following public buildings (all listed) from the early phase of development remain of significance in the area:

Assembly Rooms (now the New Theatre), Kingston Square
St Charles Church, Jarratt Street
Medical School, Kingston Square (only façade now left)
Christ Church Schools, John Street

In these developments, brick still predominated, both red and yellow, with stucco for the grander public buildings.

Since the street pattern was originally laid out in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, there have been various changes. Throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, public and commercial buildings continued to be built, some, such as the Brewery, Central Library, School Board Offices and the older part of the Fire Station, for example, making a positive contribution to the character of the area, because of the quality and distinctiveness of their architecture, and there is a distinct contrast between the classical uniformity of the earlier buildings and the exuberance of this late Victorian and Edwardian period:

Hull Brewery (now The Maltings), Jarratt Street/Silvester Street (Listed)
Central Library, Albion Street (Listed)
former School Board Offices, Union Street (Listed)
former Presbyterian Church Hall, Baker Street
former Gas Board offices, Baker Street (Listed)
'Dram Shop' Public House, George Street (Listed)
former Carmichael's shop (now The Venue), George Street
Fire Station, Worship Street
Church Institute (now the Institute P.H.), Albion Street (Listed)

Other changes, particularly more recent ones, have had a more negative effect.

Uses

Originally, the Georgian New Town was a residential development and there is still a substantial number of residential properties within the Conservation Area - the only part of the City Centre which has continuing residential use of properties originally built as houses.

Land was also suitably located for the erection of public and commercial buildings ranging from churches, assembly rooms, public houses, shops, local government offices, library and industrial premises, detailed above. They are at prominent locations within the Conservation Area, such as on corners and major frontages.

The character of the area is maintained by the present uses such as professional offices (dentists, accountants, etc.), shops (small businesses rather than multiples) and leisure (pubs, clubs, cafes and theatre), which are a reflection of its continuing location on the edge of the City Centre.

Prior to its designation in 1975, new office developments have taken place within and adjacent to the Conservation Area which have largely failed to contribute positively to its character.

Negative Factors

The Conservation Area was designated, in major part, because of the positive quality to its buildings. No Conservation Area is perfect, however, and there are buildings which detract from its appearance, generally for one of three reasons:

1. Some buildings, originally attractive, have had extensions or alterations which detract form their appearance and thus affect to some extent the character of the Conservation Area as a whole. No's 25-30 Albion Street are an example.
2. Some buildings, of essentially attractive character, have fallen into a poor condition because of lack of regular maintenance or for other reasons. These can therefore be unsightly, but have the potential for renovation. The outhouse on the Baker Street frontage to the rear of 24 Albion Street is an example. — now repaired
3. Some new buildings were designed in a way which is out of character with the older buildings in the area. This is a combination of scale, form, style, materials and levels of detail. The Fire Brigade offices fronting Kingston Square are an example.

The character of the Conservation Area, which is one of the factors against which proposals for new development are judged, is not determined by the appearance of buildings falling within any of these three categories, nor was the original decision to designate it. They are mentioned in this character statement in order to make these points clear, i.e. they are not be emulated. It is rather that opportunities should be taken to improve the appearance of such buildings, and details of ways in which this might be achieved will be produced in due course.

Streetscape, Open Spaces and Townscape Quality

Following the construction of the first new road laid out along the lines of what are now Savile Street, George Street and Charlotte Street, the remainder of the Georgian New Town following what is broadly a grid pattern with streets intersecting at right-angles.

The streets vary in width according to their importance at the time they were laid out, some now performing the function of a rear access road, e.g. New Garden Street, and others being incorporated into private developments, such as Silvester Street, which runs through the former Hull Brewery (now The Maltings).

The corners still emphasise the rectilinear nature of the whole street layout, having the characteristic small radius, and, especially on site streets, the back of pavements development line of that period. The original paving material of York stone flags still survives in parts, as do the original granite kerbs.

Apart from the streets themselves, the only substantial space which formed part of the original layout is Kingston Square. This is Hull's only formal urban square which still has most of its original surrounding buildings. The square has the essential elements of built-up frontages on four sides and a landscaped area in the centre. The centre of the square is an oval surrounding by railings (reconstructed in 1988) containing formal gardens and mature trees providing an important structural element visually.

Pedestrian ways through between George Street and Dock Street (Crown Court and George's Place - otherwise known as Danby's Passage), formerly giving access to the dock precinct, still survive.

There are some closed vistas within the area which add to its visual attraction, most notably the view down Albion Street and Jarratt Street to No's 24-27 Worship Street, with their pedimented façade. In a similar way, but on a smaller scale, the Old Bakery, Union Street stops the vista down Baker Street.

There is, however, much open space, both within and immediately outside the Conservation Area, that detracts from its character. Particularly as the nature of the area was originally one of formal developments with closely built-up street corners, the presence of open space as cleared sites, car parks etc. within and adjacent to the Conservation Area is seriously detrimental to its character.

These sites may be vacant for a variety of reasons. Some sites may have been bombed during the war and no redevelopment has ever taken place. Some were the result of demolitions in association with land acquired in connection with the construction of Freetown Way, which cuts across at an angle to the overall rectilinear street pattern of the area, resulting in some awkward and difficult to develop triangular pieces of land, such as the site to the rear of properties on the north side of Wright Street, land north of Egginton Street and the current Mason Street Car Park. Others may have had buildings on them demolished pending development which never took place, and some are in temporary or permanent use for car parking. This use can bring needed benefit to the functioning of the City Centre as a whole as well as a fruitful source of income and therefore a disincentive to building development taking place, but it is in conflict with the essential character of the area.

Apart from within Kingston Square, the rectilinear nature of the street pattern means that, unless specifically and deliberately blocked or deflected, there are views out from the Conservation Area to the areas adjoining it - Freetown Way to the north and the City Centre to the south and west. Thus the view of car parks, traffic islands and other poor-quality open sites, and of contrasting buildings such as Kingston House and the Prospect Centre, is obvious right form the heart of the Conservation Area, giving a feeling of lack of enclosure and weakness to the whole area. Only in Kingston Square is the feeling of enclosure retained.

Approved by the Planning & Design Committee, 23rd October, 1996

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