School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape
Global Urban Research Unit
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Electronic Working Paper No 30

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND HISTORIC AREAS: A RESEARCH AGENDA

Previously published in November 1997 as Working Paper No. 63
By John Pendlebury and Tim Townshend
Department of Town and Country Planning
University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU

Contact: kim.mccartney@ncl.ac.uk

ISBN: 0 905770 61 7

THE AUTHORS

John Pendlebury and Tim Townshend.

John Pendlebury is a part-time lecturer and consultant on historic environment issues. John joined the Department in 1996 after ten years working for local and central government. Research interests focus on the conservation of the historic environment. Active projects include work on public perceptions of conservation areas, the protection of historic parks and gardens and urban open space. He is active in a variety of professional forums including the RTPI and the Northumbria Gardens Trust.

Tim Townshend is a is a lecturer in the theory and practice of conservation and urban design, specifically including environment and behaviour research, conservation policy and practice, conservation led urban regeneration and public perception of conservation policy. He too came from a practice background, including conservation-led urban regeneration work at Saltaire, whilst employed by Bradford Metropolitan Council; work which has subsequently been awarded a number of awards including Civic Trust and Europa Nostra.

PREFACE

Within the UK planning system conservation areas are the principal statutorly defined means of protecting historic areas. Areas are defined and designated at the local level, by local authorities. In the UK this is unusual as most categories of the historic environment are defined by central government, or agencies of central government. The inference that might be taken from this is that conservation areas are part of the local democratic process and that whilst decisions over conservation areas will be guided by professional planners, such guidance will be moderated by locally elected councillors, reflecting the will of local people. Is this the case, however? This paper is an initial exploration of just how democratic and representative the process of conservation area designation really is. Do the public support the widespread introduction of such designations? Does the almost blanket cover of many of our town and city centres, reflect the needs and aspirations of ordinary people? Do they understand the moral and practical implications involved?

It is worth stressing that this is a relatively under researched area. Certainly in the early 1990s there was considerable debate amongst professionals over conservation area designation with, for example, the argument being made that local authorities were over-using this designation (Morton, 1991). In the same period there were a number of landmark judgements on the interpretation of conservation area law. However, it can be argued that these sometimes fierce debates (which we will return to later) were largely around the margins of the system. By and large there is a commonly held belief that conservation is one of the least publicly contentious areas of land-use planning. For example, Larkham (1996 p109) repeats a suggestion that public support for conservation is second only to green-belts and this assertion is rarely questioned.

In our careers as practising planners and conservation officers we both found ourselves frequently being the point of contact between the public and the planning system, and in particular the protection of historic environments through the use of *'conservation areas'*. We were both struck, however, by the often apparent gulf of understanding and perception between the objectives we were trying to pursue as professionals and the feelings for places and spaces of the people we were dealing with. Maybe we were naive: when the British state's efforts at protecting historic environments are cloaked in constructs such as *'Article 4 Directions withdrawing permitted development rights under the General Development Order'* it perhaps should be no surprise that discourses are not clear and straightforward. We have become very interested in how both the public and professionals perceive these places we attach this conservation area policy device to.

The paper is intended to be the first in a series which will attempt to explore the issues outlined above and seeks to set an agenda for an area much in need of research. It is hoped will be of interest to anyone interested in the conservation of the built environment.

CONTENTS

1 WHY WE ARE DRAWN TO CONSERVE

Still relatively little is known as to why people may wish to see buildings from a past age preserved in the present day and for future generations. Various reasons why conservation is a desirable activity, ranging through practical utility, art history, sustainability, economic development and so on have been advanced (see, for example, Earl 1996). Research that has been carried out in this field about why non-specialists should have an attachment to the notion of the conservation of old buildings or other historic environments has concentrated heavily on psychological explanations, i.e. that having buildings with some apparent historical connection, real or imagined fulfil a basic human desire. Some research has attempted to measure these reactions in a quantifiable way. Larkham reviews the work of Morris, who analysed the reactions of people towards slides of buildings of different ages, concluding that mediaeval buildings were thought to be of most interest followed by classical styles; whereas contemporary buildings were generally felt to be intrusive and discordant, (Morris, 1978). Similar work has been reviewed by Hubbard. Some of this work attempted to show it was the complexity inherent in historic townscapes, as opposed to the plainness of modern buildings which people tended to favour, (Hubbard, 1993). This latter research relates to the work of Lozano, who states that the lack of visual stimuli in modern townscape leads to its general rejection since the monotony produced creates feelings of oppression and disorientation. The stimuli of historic area on the other hand provide orientation and stability, (Lozano, 1974). Other work has shown, however, that historic areas, even unremarkable ones may be important psychologically to people by providing an *'anonymous'* familiarity against which people live out their everyday lives (Smith, 1974). Much of this work in this field, however, remains unpublished and unproved.

It may well be dangerous, however to try to simplify the relationship of people and their environments to individual factors such as visual complexity, or familiarity. More theoretical work in this area has often taken a very broad approach to the subject, though this necessarily means it does not always relate easily to the conservation of the built environment. The work of David Lowenthal is perhaps best known in developing research in this field. Looking at both the US and UK he draws on a wide range of sources, from, art, literature and so on and relates these to broad social trends. His work relates the rise of interest in the past and nostalgia, to the increasing uncertainty people feel about the future. From this he develops a series of benefits that artefacts from the past endow life in the present. These are familiarity, reaffirmation, identity, guidance, enrichment and escape (Lowenthal, 1985). Whilst it is impossible to summarise this work in this paper what would appear to be particularly pertinent is the fact that historic townscape may well buffer individuals against times of upheaval and stress. Today generally people have severe misgivings about what the future holds for them and the seeming certainty of the past may well help compensate, to some extent.

Thomas (undated) argues that these needs are not necessarily universal but form a constituency. He refers to *'the conservationist position'* which sees the present as a threat to the surviving fabric of the past. This contrasts with modernist positions which see the present as threat or block to the future. He links the conservationist position with Lowenthal and *'The Past is a Foreign Country'*. Thomas makes no distinction between public attitudes to

conservation and the conservation policy process. He sees the notion of the past as a place, a place of refuge, a place to visit needing to be created or protected as an enclave or symbol in an otherwise hostile environment as *'informing a great deal of heritage conservation policy'*. Whether this is the case or not is examined in the next section.

2 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

At the turn of the century the psychological justifications for preserving ancient monuments were already being expressed. Brown's argument for the preservation of ancient monuments places much emphasis on their aesthetic quality, but also their contribution to the character of places, (Brown, 1905). He recognised, however that this view was only held by a relatively small number of interested individuals, as he stated, *'it is not so easy to make the public see the importance of preserving the older features of our towns on which the ... general physiognomy of the place so largely depends'*, (ibid. p25).

The seminal works of conservation of the 19th century, however, concentrated more directly on the didactic benefits of preserving buildings from a past age. Ruskin's famous quote from 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' asserts of ancient buildings, *'We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us'* (Ruskin, 1849, p245). Here we see two issues, a moral pronouncement over ownership and guardianship of historic buildings, but moreover, the subtext underlying this statement is that buildings are precious artefacts, i.e. the formal attestation of idea that buildings are of art historical importance rather than merely commonplace.

We see this theme developed in the work of Morris and an increasing emphasis on the didactic importance of historic buildings. In 1877 in the Manifesto written for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) Morris writes *'It is for all these buildings, therefore, of all times and styles that we plead, and call upon those who have deal with them to put Protection in the place of Restoration..... thus, and only thus can we protect our ancient buildings and hand them down instructive and venerable to those who come after us'*. Later, continuing the theme, Morris wrote (1889, cited in Earl, 1996, p3)*'These old buildings do not belong to us only; ... they have belonged to our forefathers and they will belong to our descendants unless we play them false. They are not... our property to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those that come after us'*.

Thus these early works of conservation thinking were not the products of mass public protest, but a sea-change in intellectual thinking towards historic buildings and monuments that began to occur throughout Europe in the late 18th Century. In fact the idea that the conservation of historic buildings was a noble, elite and patrician activity has been strong until the very recent past. Indeed expressions of interest in an architectural 'past' by the masses, for example the taste in mock Tudor dwellings in the 1930s has met with derision from the intellectual elite (Oliver et. al., 1981). In many ways this still holds true today, in regard to historical styles in housing and even in the seemingly harmless pleasure people take in historical theme parks, (Reas & Cosgrove, 1993).

The period when it is claimed conservation in Britain was a genuinely popular *movement* was in the 1970s, (see for example Larkham, 1996). Works such as the, *'Sack of Bath'* (Fergusson, 1973), *'Good-bye Britain'* (Aldous, 1975), *'The Rape of Britain'* (Amery, 1975) and *'The Erosion of Oxford'* (Curl, 1977) are generally quoted as epitomising this trend. Often emotively written these were detailed accounts of the disappearance and demolition of

historic buildings and familiar scenes. Returning to these works, however, it is perhaps not imprudent to question whether they really did reflect the views of the general populace. After all J S Curl was already a respected architectural historian, (a senior figure in the European Architectural Heritage Year, 1975), before he wrote *'The Erosion of Oxford'*. *'The Sack of Bath'*, contains a foreword by Lord Goodman, photographs by Lord Snowdon and even dedicated poems by Sir John Betjeman. These works may have reflected the hearts and minds of ordinary people, but they can hardly be said to have been produced by the 'man in the street'. The membership of Civic Societies, which somewhat boomed in the 1970s might be cited as evidence that conservation became truly a popular pursuit in the 1970s. Yet the membership of such societies again tends to be restricted to the educated and middle-class, as does membership of the various historical amenity societies, (Barker, 1976). There is little evidence that today membership is any wider.

There were a number of procedural manifestations of this upsurge of interest in conservation, such as the strengthening of powers relating to listed and buildings and, through the 1967 Civic Amenities Act, the introduction of conservation areas, *'areas of special architectural or historic interest'* into the legislation. The legislative context was gradually strengthened through planning acts in 1971, 1972 and 1974. In many ways the introduction of the conservation area was a great opportunity to democratise conservation, given that unlike previous designations conservation areas were to be identified in terms of locally valued environments and designated by local government. However, though no prescription was made by central government on the types of area which might be considered suitable for designation their advice emphasised that the area should be *special* (Larkham, 1996 p91). In practice, therefore, most identification and designation of conservation areas has revolved around an assessment by planning and conservation professionals 'of special architectural or historic interest', rather than being linked to wider public views and the places to which there is demonstrable public attachment.

Indeed, conservation area designation as the result of 'bottom up' pressure has been frowned upon. There was a strand of vocal criticism over a perceived over-use of conservation area designation in the early 1990s. One accusation levelled at local authorities was that in some cases they were bending too much to local opinion. A report commissioned at the time by the Royal Town Planning Institute states *'Although local groups should be able to put forward areas previously not considered by the local authority, designation should be based upon the historic value of the townscape not purely on the aspirations of those with local interests'* (Jones and Larkham, 1993, p52). Similar attitudes can be detected since the inception of conservation areas. Thomas (undated) sees a policy agenda with greater intervention by central government in the designation of conservation areas and greater standardisation occurring across this heterogeneous area of activity.

Summary

By researching current literature into the popular conservationist impulse which is so strong in the UK and, by comparing this to the literature which forms the foundation of legislative and professional practice of conservation in this country, it becomes apparent that two very different spheres of human experience are involved. Explanations as to why ordinary people

are predisposed to conservationist trends, are based on psychological explanations. People want and need to be surrounded by artefacts from the past, including the built fabric, in order to cope with the present. The psychological literature is, therefore, full of words such as, familiarity, identity and character. In this explanation, buildings from the past give people in the present a sense of location in time and place. Moreover, arguments for saving old buildings are often justified in just these terms. However, when the literature which forms the base of our philosophy of conservation (our legislation and practice) is examined, the language and sentiments are quite different. Ruskin and Morris were **not** concerned primarily with the needs of people in **their present.** Their arguments are very much based on the facts that historic buildings belong to an age that has past. In other words the importance of ancient buildings is that they are a part of history, along with all the inherent meaning in their fabric, which must be pasted down generation to generation, in as original condition as possible. In this, the needs, wants and desires of the present day are not at all important. Though the conservation system has evolved to include, for example, conservation areas, there is no clear evidence that the basic rationale of policy makers has changed.

Thus, while ordinary people attach value to buildings of the past and the retention of historic buildings is often justified for this reason, the mechanisms for conserving buildings in the UK are essentially locked into an elitist, didactic process. Therefore, the conservation system of professionals working within the legislation and guided by their own philosophy, while ostensibly fulfilling a desire of the public, is in fact driven by a totally different set of values. When apparent clashes seem to appear between the aspirations of the public and the actions of the professionals, it is not simply that the public's views are being down played, or ignored, the present system is not designed to accommodate them in the first place; they are not seen as important. Conservation professionals may argue that the general public lack the knowledge and expertise required to make decisions about the future of historic buildings and this may be true, but equally it could be argued that in a democratic system the need and desires of ordinary people should be addressed. This is not something that can be achieved by simply 'educating the public', what is needed is a complete examination of the whole philosophy of conservation.

3 PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

General public support is often asserted for conservation, thought there is little systematic evidence that this is the case. There is a certain amount of evidence from opinion polls undertaken by English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund. For example in a Gallop poll conducted for English Heritage in 1993 36% of those surveyed considered that saving Britain's historic buildings, monuments and gardens to be *'the overwhelming heritage priority'*, a percentage far in excess of heritage alternatives such as the performing arts, music or sport (English Tourist Board, 1994). Other evidence for public support can be gleaned from local authority consultations (e.g. Gateshead M.B.C. 1991) though this information is hard to access in a systematic way. It is sometimes asserted that the public would like to see *more* conservation than is currently the case. For example, in lamenting the relatively small part of our 20th century heritage which enjoys statutory protection and the way in which people become *'outraged surbanites whose neighbours are destroying their Jacobethan or mock Tudor houses with unsympathetic rendering, extensions and plastic windows'*, Julian Holder of the 20th Century Society is quoted as saying *'Government policy is lagging behind public opinion'* (Gililan, 1994). Again, there is little clear evidence for these assertions.

One type of area which may provide fertile ground for analysis is the increasing number of early to mid 20th Century suburbs that have been designated conservation areas. Whole areas of Edwardian villas and 1930s speculative semi-detached dwellings have been included. Yet these are areas in which home improvement, and keeping up if not outdoing the Jones have a whole tradition of their own. In a BBC2 Public Eye Programme, *'The Heritage Police'*, (BBC2 14/3/95), sought to show just how divided occupants of such a conservation area in north London were on the rights and wrong of alteration. Designation had 'pitted neighbour against neighbour', the programme declared and high-lighted disputes over issues such as styles of windows, an unauthorised porch and a doctor's surgery sign.

The programme sought to provide further evidence of just how divided the public can be on historic buildings by high-lighting the practice of a magazine called *'Period House and Garden'*, (one of any number of similar titles which flourished during the 1980s). In this publication members of the public were invited to send in photographs of what they considered to be unsympathetic alterations to historic buildings. The photographs appeared in a kind of 'Rogues gallery' of bad taste for public ridicule.

What this programme helped illustrate is not only that 'the public' is a heterogeneous commodity with different perceptions of, and aspirations for, the historic environment but that an individual might well hold seemingly incompatible views. For example, there may be a dichotomy between conservation and property rights. People may subscribe to a general notion of protecting the national 'heritage', but they may also believe in the adage that 'an Englishman's home is his castle'.

Disputes do not merely centre on individual buildings and the rights of their owners, however. In recent years South Keveston District Council found itself in dispute over a proposed conservation area in the village of Aslackby in Lincolnshire. Though some of the villagers favoured the proposal, the parish council were vehemently opposed. When the detail of the

case are looked at, there was clearly some misunderstanding of the legislation, in particular what restrictions it would place on new development. There was also a clear message, however, that many villagers felt the designation was only wanted by newcomers, who wanted to freeze it in time; whereas locals saw their village as an increasingly developing community which they wished to see grow.

It is also interesting to think comparatively about public perceptions of the historic environment and broader environmental issues. The 'green agenda' has certainly had a much more galvanising effect over recent times than conservation. Few equivalents of 'eco-warriors' undertaking direct action to save buildings exist. The occupation of St Francis's church in Gorton, Manchester by a group of campaigners concerned with the systematic looting and vandalism of this redundant church (Ward, 1996) is notable for its rarity at a time of dynamic activity by eco-campaigners to protect trees and so called 'natural' environments.

These debates suggest that the general public do have an interest in historic environments as evident in the membership of the National Trust and the circulation of 'period' journals. They also confirm, however, that the general public do not necessarily value buildings, or areas, in the same way that policy makers do. Furthermore they show that there is no general public consensus on the ethics of conservation, either in terms of individual buildings, or whole areas of historic structures and that any one individual may have complex and contradictory feelings about conservation.

4 CONSERVATION AND HERITAGE

If then conservation in its purest form does not always find popularity with members of the general public, then undoubtedly its commodified equivalent 'heritage' has seemingly limitless popularity. Heritage is not history, it is a very carefully selected combination of historical fact, artefacts both genuinely old and reproduced and nostalgia. Heritage can therefore be characterised as being quite different to conservation, but in the eyes of the general public it is not difficult to see how the two may become confused especially as heritage has become a ubiquitous and difficult to avoid term. Heritage themes have often been used as part of the commodification of conservation projects. Little Germany, Bradford, for example was promoted as *'An exciting area to visit....the area has a rich architectural and historical heritage with immense untapped tourist potential'* (Rudlin, undated).

Of course as Lowenthal points out it is impossible to preserve anything from the past without interpreting it with our own value judgements of today, as he puts it *'the past is largely an artefact of the present we can not help, but view it and celebrate it through present-day lenses'*, (Lowenthal, 1985). Not only this, however, but recent writers have come down on the side of heritage claiming that it has a right and proper place in society. Samuel, for example, has been equally vociferous in his attacks on what he terms the 'heritage-baiters' as those who have attacked the heritage industry itself. He accuses historians of intellectual snobbery and jealousy of the success that many heritage attractions enjoy. Backing his claims with examples of how historians have rewritten history through time, *'tying up loose ends and removing unsightly excrescences'*, further claiming that heritage attractions fit into a long line of popularised history (Samuel, 1994 p271).

While Samuel's points seem extremely valid, it is, however, impossible to escape the fact that much of what is presented to the public as 'their' history (the see how Grandma used to live approach) is being done by powerful elitist bodies. Corporations, private and public create the historical theme parks and re-creations of the heritage industry, not the general public. While it might be argued, therefore, that heritage has helped to popularise history (and thus, in turn, conservation), there is no greater public involvement in heritage 're-creations', than in conservation policy and practice, perhaps even less.

5 DEVELOPING A RESEARCH AGENDA

It was within this framework, therefore that a research agenda was set out. There seems to be a broadly held consensus that the conservation of the old and the architecturally distinguished is in some sense 'a good thing'. However, policy mechanisms aimed at protecting historic environments derive from an elite and intellectual tradition. How complimentary are people's attachments to historic areas with the policy mechanisms that have resulted, or conversely what tensions or dysfunctions result. This is the relationship we wish to investigate. The conservation policy mechanism in Britain which has the most potential for democratic participation is the conservation area. The overarching aim of research so far was first to gain a greater insight into ordinary people's views and aspirations of and for conservation areas. Second, it was considered useful to seek the views of conservation professionals on public understanding of conservation areas. The first element of this was a literature review. Table 1 sets out a representation of the literature of policy maker and public views and perceptions of conservation areas. There is a literature and debate over conservation areas in professional circles but there is an almost total absence of literature on public perceptions of conservation areas. What little literature exists is often not published and hard to access 'grey' literature, such as local authority committee reports.

Table 1: Conservation area literature

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CONSERVATION AREAS	POLICY MAKER VIEWS OF CONSERVATION AREAS
Consultations by local authorities on individual areas	Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990
Civic Society type reports/ activity	DoE/DNH Policy Planning Guidance Note 15 (central government policy)
Academic work?	English Heritage guidance
	Local authority lobbies e.g. English Historic Towns Forum
	National amenity societies e.g. Victorian Society
	Local authority policy and guidance for their area as a whole or individual conservation areas
	Professional debates
	Academic work?

The lack of literature confirmed our suspicions of the need for more work in this area. Thus far two pieces of ongoing empirical research have been undertaken:

6 *EMPIRICAL RESEARCH 1:- PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE BY PROFESSIONALS*

The first is an examination of attitudes of professionals working in the field of conservation and their opinion of the extent of public knowledge and interest in conservation area legislation and practice. There were several key questions set for this piece of research. These included:

- do the conservation professionals feel the public understand the *purpose* of the conservation area system? For example, the usual policy presumption is that the purpose of a conservation area is to allow its evolution whilst protecting the area's intrinsic character - is this understood or rather is it seen as a device to prevent all change?
- do the conservation professionals feel the public understand the detailed *practical consequences* of the system, such as the way the need for planning consent may change?
- how are LPAs responding to government guidance for a closer involvement of the public in conservation planning? Are they changing and improving the way they seek to engage with the public, and if so, with what result?
- how much impact does public involvement have on the nature of decision taking? Do local authorities make different decisions as the result of consultation?

To this end all 353 low tier District, Borough and City councils in England were sent a questionnaire. In particular the questionnaire concentrates on designations post June 1993, since advice, Conservation Area Practice, (English Heritage, 1993), followed by PPG 15, and Protecting our Heritage, (DNH, 1996) have put increased importance on public awareness and involvement in conservation areas.

223 replies (63%) have been received. The following is a very brief outline of some of the issues raised by the return which have yet to be fully analysed. Perhaps one of the most significant basic points raised by the questionnaire was to what extent did conservation professionals feel that the public living, or working in conservation area had about the purpose of conservation area designation. Looking at all authorities' replies the majority of professionals, 60%, replied in their opinion most people had only a moderate understanding of the overall purpose of designation and a significant number, 19% felt the public's understanding was poor. Moreover when asked what level of comprehension they thought the general public had about the practical implications of designation, the perceived knowledge levels were considerably lower, 53% considered the public's knowledge was moderate, while a notable 34% said knowledge levels were poor. Less than 7% felt that the public have a good understanding of the practical consequences of conservation area designation.

As stated, however, one of the purposes of the research was to find out whether increased emphasis on public involvement in conservation affects public opinions and knowledge level. Of the 223 responding authorities 134 have designated at least one conservation area since June 1993. Of these all but 3 indicated that they had undertaken some form of public consultation either prior to or post designation. If these are extracted from the total replies, it is interesting to note that responses are very similar to above. Here again 60 % of professionals felt public understanding of the overall purpose of conservation areas was moderate, while 18% felt knowledge was still poor. In terms of comprehending practical

implications the figures are actually worse than above with 62% of the view that public knowledge was moderate while, 35% felt knowledge remained poor. These figure might suggest, therefore, that in the view of the professionals charged with the task of disseminating knowledge and more importantly understanding, current public consultation exercises may be partially successful at best. There seems to be little faith amongst practitioners that the public understand what they, the professionals, are trying to achieve and even less that the public understand the legislative means for doing so.

Somewhat paradoxically, in the same sub-set of authorities 60% felt that the new designations had been well received, with only 2% feeling that there had been an overall negative reaction. Furthermore, 66% said the public consultation had led to conservation area boundary changes and 27% that consultation had led to changes of conservation area character statements and 27% to changes in policy frameworks or enhancement plans.

There is a great deal more research to be done here. For example, the authorities were asked to break down consultation in a number of different types. It will be interesting to see if there is any correlation between type of consultation used and perceived effectiveness. If there is a mismatch between psychological attachments to place and didactic processes used to conserve then there will be a need for more than simply disseminating more information. For example, public involvement may also need to embrace a wider sets of ethics and ideals attached to place. It will be also interesting to attempt to further unpack a situation where conservation professionals perceive a public positive about new conservation area designations and often playing an influential role in their detailed form, whilst at the same time having at best a moderate grasp of the purpose and consequences of conservation area designation.

Though the qualitative data provided by authorities has yet to be studied fully, a series of interesting groups of comments seems to be appearing. Broadly these are:

Primary Issues:

- Knowledge is linked to social status. Articulate, educated residents are perceived to dominate public involvement, though this does not always imply they are completely supportive. Elitism, like most discourses between 'the public' and 'the state' is clearly evident.
- Public concerns are often motivated by issues that are not seen as 'pure' conservation interests by professionals (an obvious one cited is property values) - though it is not clear yet whether these relate to psychological needs - as opposed to purely material ones!
- General members of the public find it difficult to think in conservation *area* terms, i.e. in terms of 'townscape', 'public spaces' 'groups of buildings', etc. It is not clear whether this is in part due to language problems, the use of conservation 'design speak'. If so this again may emphasise the need for different types of dialogue, not simply trying harder to educate the public.
- The type of conservation area dictates levels on public interest and knowledge. Rural villages may involve more of the community than urban areas. 'Pretty' villages stimulate much more interest than, for example, inner commercial areas. It will be important to try

and analyse how people's needs change between different types of community, socio-economic groupings and cultural background.

Secondary Issues:

- Most members of the public think conservation area legislation is far more draconian than it actually is, e.g. an embargo on future development. Moreover, they tend to view legislation as negative, rather than positive.
- There is seen to be a huge confusion between conservation areas and listed building legislation.

7 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH 2:- PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS TO CONSERVATION AREAS IN THE NORTHEAST

This piece of work is guided research undertaken by final year Diploma students (Dann et al, 1997). They examined public attitudes to conservation area designation in two conservation areas in the north-east (chosen from an initial survey of four). Some of the key questions behind this research are similar to the survey of conservation professionals and include:

- do the public understand the purpose of the conservation area?
- do the public support the concept of their conservation area?
- do the public understand the practical implications of conservation areas?

The two areas are Ashbrooke, in Sunderland and Leazes in Newcastle upon Tyne. Ashbrooke was an early designation, 1969, and at 185 acres was one of the largest urban conservation areas in the UK. Developed as a residential area in the last quarter of the 19th Century, the area's houses are noted for the heavy use of timber for casings and mouldings, a legacy of the town's shipbuilding heritage. Today there are a number of affluent owner occupied streets, but there is also a large transient population and much multiple occupation. Leazes Conservation area includes residences and businesses, but also the city's earliest purpose built park. The area was designated in 1974. At present there is a controversial proposal to build a new football stadium for Newcastle United on part of the Park and adjacent open land. Different methodologies were used to collect data in the two areas.

Again this research has recently been undertaken and more analysis of results is required. However, preliminary conclusions have suggested a series of discussion points. Within both areas people claimed a high awareness of conservation areas. In Ashbrooke, for example 81% of respondents said they had heard of the term 'conservation area', whilst in Leazes 91% of respondents stated that 'prior to the questionnaire' they were aware of the term 'conservation area'. In the case of Ashbrooke there was a clear correlation between age, length of occupation and awareness - the longer someone had been resident and the older they were the more likely they knew of conservation areas. With Leazes the researchers feel it is difficult to claim exactly what influences this extremely high percentage, though in part it seems likely to be due to the publicity surrounding the proposed football stadium. When asked specifically about the Leazes Conservation Area, 76% knew that they lived or worked in a conservation area, but if those who had learnt about it through the stadium proposal and other recent events are discounted the figure falls to 44%.

In both the areas studied respondents were extremely positive about the area they lived or worked in and its status as a conservation area. In Ashbrooke conservation of the built environment was rated of second importance of five issues in the area, after crime prevention. When asked what they liked about the area respondents scored a liking for the area's buildings highly, with some commenting that the overall layout of the streets was pleasing. However, broader, more subtle factors were also evident. Phrases like 'sense of permanence and continuity' were used and people referred to Ashbrooke, despite being close to the City Centre, as being relatively peaceful and private. In the Leazes Conservation Area when asked how they would feel if conservation area status was lost 87% of respondents indicated they would be opposed to this. Phrases like 'annoyed', 'bitter' and 'I would fight tooth and nail' were

used. Of the 13% who were not bothered about the loss of conservation area status, or who would positively welcome it, the majority were businesses. This was typical of responses to many of the questions - generally there was a higher degree of awareness and commitment to the area from residents than businesses.

In both areas respondents perceived controls and regulations as important and desirable. In Leazes, for example 62% thought that controls within conservation area were 'very important', only 1% thought they were 'pointless'. In Ashbrooke over 90% of respondents supported the protection and enhancement of the historic character of the area, along with protecting trees and open spaces. Furthermore 92% thought that the local planning authority should exercise greater control over alterations to properties in the conservation area.

However though members of the public claimed knowledge, relatively few could accurately define what a conservation area was and many gave highly inaccurate answers. Knowledge of conservation area status perhaps seems to connect with a sense of historic value that the people of the area hold, but knowledge of status does not imply an understanding of the implications of the policy mechanism. Furthermore, there was great confusion over exactly what conservation area controls were. Many respondents thought they covered many aspects of development, for example replacing windows and doors and there was total confusion between controls applicable to conservation areas as opposed to listed buildings. In Ashbrooke, for example only 2% of respondents correctly identified what property alterations required planning permission in a conservation area.

The underlying theme throughout the research is that though people support the notion of conservation areas often they have no clear understanding of the overall concept and purpose of conservation areas (though perhaps more than the professionals above think they do!). The most common divergence in these two areas were:

- believing that the objective of a conservation area is to prevent all change, and, interestingly,
- a more environmentally holistic view of what a conservation area is, embracing a variety of factors lying beyond planning powers.

Perhaps unsurprisingly there is a marked lack of understanding of the day to day practicalities of conservation area legislation. Again this research seems to highlight the lack of a generally agreed conservation ethic and a need to create more meaningful dialogues between professionals and public, and not just to 'top down' educate but to address the aspirations and desires of the general public.

8 CONCLUSIONS TO DATE.

It seems clear that historic townscapes are important to the everyday lives of ordinary people who live and work in them. In times of an uncertain future they may provide tangible evidence of stability, the surety of the past may well suggest things will come right again! The conservation of these areas, however, takes little account of how they are valued by the public as a whole. It has long been claimed that conservation is an elitist activity, carried out by an educated minority with strict codes of historical and architectural values, probably in the detailed construction and application of the conservation system with little meaning or relevance to the bulk of the general public. Though our research is very much in its preliminary stages there is little to suggest that this situation is changing to any significant degree, even with conservation's most democratic tool, the conservation area.

Though it is unrealistic to suggest that there will ever be a consensus amongst the public about what should be conserved and what may be lost, such feelings are wrapped up in highly individual, personal experience and memories. Moreover such views are likely to change dramatically between different socio-economic and cultural groups. These are challenges to be met, however, they are not arguments against the democratisation of conservation!

To date we have looked at empirical questions of whether groups of the public understand and relate to where 'the conservation system' is coming from and conversely whether professionals feel the public understand this system that they have the responsibility for operating. Next we hope to address more profound questions. How can communication between professionals and the public be improved, moving from speaking louder and slower to effective dialogue? What do different groups of the public feel conservation should encompass? What differences arise form the aspirations of different social groupings or different types of area? Is it possible in some sense to democratise conservation? If so, what would such a system look like?

Conservation is at an important point of its evolution in the UK at the moment. It is in a process of professionalisation - the Institute of Historic Building Conservation was created in April 1997. There seems to be a tremendous amount of public goodwill towards conservation currently. It is important that the new conservation profession builds on that goodwill to make an inclusive, popular vision of conservation rather than raising the drawbridge of professionalism.

9 FUTURE RESEARCH

The following research projects are either ongoing, or planned for the near future in order to further explore topics raised in this paper:

Living Histories: An attempt in one, or more, conservation areas will be made to construct living histories, the aim of which will be to define what is important about these areas from the personal experiences of those living and working within them. The research will aim to demonstrate not only how people attach values to the places in which they live, but more importantly whether these views are concurrent with professional conservation views of the area and if conservation policies protect, or undermine them.

Civic Societies: Civic societies can be argued to be part of a democratisation of the conservation process which took place in the 1970s. Whether or not this is the case there is a generally held perception that most of these societies are now operating at a low level of activity or are completely dormant. This work will examine the state of the civic society movement in the north-east of England, reviewing both past achievements, current position and examining future prospects.

Conservation in Rural Areas: Much work has been undertaken in the preparation of village character statements, for example, through work undertaken by the Countryside Commission. Within these the villagers themselves clearly define what is important and cherished in terms of their built heritage. Research will initially be undertaken to i) examine how the views of villages compare and contrast with the official view of what is important and ii) whether such democratic processes of defining the character of places might be more widely applied.

REFERENCES

Aldous, T., (1975) *Goodbye Britain?* Sidgwick and Jackson, London.

Amery, C, (1975) *The Rape of Britain*, P.Elek, London

Ashworth, G. J., & Tunbridge J E (1990) *The Tourist-Historic City*, Belhaven, London.

Barker, R., (1976) *The Local Amenity Movement*, Civic Trust, London.

BBC, (14/3/95) 'The Heritage Police', in *Public Eye*, BBC, London.

Brown, G. B., (1905) *The Care of Ancient Monuments*, Cambridge University Press, London.

Curl, J. S., (1977) *The Erosion of Oxford,* Oxford Illustrated Press, Oxford

Dann, G., Flatman, A., Graham, D., Holmes, T., Partington, J., Roche, L., Seale, M., Summerfield, J., Thompson, K., Wardle, I., Winter, R., (1997) *Public Perceptions of Conservation Areas: A Comparison of two North-East case studies.* Department of Town and Country Planning, Newcastle University, unpublished report.

Department of National Heritage, (1996) *Protecting Out Heritage: A consultation document on the built heritage of England and Wales, DNH*, London.

Earl, J., (1996) *Building Conservation Philosophy*, College of Estate Management, Reading.

English Heritage (1993) C*onservation Area Practice*, English Heritage, London.

English Tourist Board (1994) *English Heritage Monitor.* ETB, London.

Fitch, J. M., (1980) *Historical Preservation; The Curatorial Management of the Built World*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Fergusson, A., (1973) *The Sack of Bath*, Compton Russell, Wiltshire

Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (1991) *Saltwell Conservation Area Public Consultation*. Report of the Director of Planning to Planning Committee 27/11/91

Gililan, L., (1994) The burb watchers *The Independent* 12/3/94 p57

Herbert, D. T., ed. (1995) *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, Mansell, London.

Hewison, R., (1987) *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a climate of Decline*, Methuen, London.

Hubbard, P., (1993) The Value of Conservation in *Town Planning Review*, Vol. 64 (4) pp359-373

Jones, A. N. & Larkham, P. J. (1993) *The Character of Conservation Areas*, report commissioned by the Royal Town Planning Institute, London.

Larkham, P. J., (1996) *Conservation and the City*, Routledge, London

Lowenthal, D., (1981) *Our Past Before Us: why do we save it?* T. Smith, London.

Lowenthal, D., (1985) *The Past is a Foreign Country* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Lozano, E., (1974) Visual Needs in the Built Environment, *Town Planning Review*, v45 pp351-74.

Lumley, R., (1988) *The Museum Time Machine*, Routledge, London.

Morris, C. J., (1978) *Townscape images: studying meaning and classification* unpublished PhD thesis, Dept. of Geography, University of Exeter, quoted in Larkham, P J (1996)

Morris, W., (1877) *Restoration* - reprinted by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings as their manifesto, London.

Morton, D., (1991) Conservation Areas - has saturation point been reached? *The Planner* **77, 17** pp 5-8

Oliver, P., Davis, I. & Bentley, I.,. (1981) *Dunroamin: the suburban semi and its enemies*, Barrie & Jenkins, London

Reas, P. & Cosgrove, S., (1993) *Flogging a Dead Horse: Heritage Culture and its Role in Post Industrial Britain*, Cornerhouse, Manchester

Rudlin, D., (undated), *Little Germany Action, towards a strategy*, Little Germany Action, Bradford.

Ruskin, J., (1849) *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Century, London.

Samuel, R., (1994) *Theatres of Memory*, Verso, London

Smith, P. F., (1974) Familiarity breeds contentment, *The Planner* 60 pp901-4

Thomas, M. J., (undated) *'Conservation of the Urban: Issues and Politics'* Working Paper 168, School of Planning, Oxford Brookes University.

Ward, D., (1996) Listed church left to vandals *The Guardian* 30/6/96 p7

Wright, P., (1987) *On Living in an Old Country*, Verso, London.