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HARPENDEN URBAN DESIGN GROUP

The activity of the members of the Harpenden Society in the summer of last year resulted in a series of informal meetings of local architects, planners, surveyors and engineers who share the Society's concern for the successful future development of the town. Since then, this body has adopted the title of the Harpenden Urban Design Group for identity and the intention is to join with the Harpenden Society in producing positive advice affecting the range of planning matters which in turn it is hoped can be received by this Committee of the Urban District Council. In broad terms, this action is intended to represent an element of local participation in the planning of Harpenden, taking advantage of the professional advice of this number of residents who have certain expertise to offer in their various related fields.

We are confident that this action could only be to the ultimate benefit of the town and we are willing to devote time and energy in the attempt, but it can of course only be successful if the Council is willing to participate by adequate consultation and co-operation and if contacts between the parties are made sufficiently frequently for a continuing period.

It would of course be best if the Design Group had the authority and facilities to assume the position of a properly appointed planning consultant and finally deliver to the Council a fully documented Plan.

Since this is not possible, the Group must limit its activities to produce sound advice based on data produced by the Urban District Council or the County Council authorities when need be, for the local authority to consider and, according to circumstances, embody and implement through the control procedures.

It appears to us that there is a great danger of Harpenden losing its visual attractiveness through lack of a thoroughly considered and three dimensional appreciation of the changes which are currently taking place and will continue to take place during the foreseeable future. *Kundt Lark*

There are of course immediate as well as long term problems and if advice is to be offered, then these considerations must be tackled in parallel for

an immediate solution is worthless unless it can be accommodated in the long term plan, and similarly, the long term plan can be frustrated by ad hoc measures being taken in the short term. We should also differentiate between the small problems as well as large ones and again we feel that these must be approached with equal application, since the detail of a design is critical to the whole and again the opposite is also true.

The Group proposes then to look at the urban design of Harpenden in terms of the immediate and long term objectives, in the detail of certain proposals as well as overall large scale solution. This will mean the concurrent working of all our members operating in several groups on these planes with the ultimate aim of producing the framework with which the adaptations and additions to the town can be accommodated.

Although our prime concern is the visual scene, this must inevitably be based on studies incorporating as many of the related fields of planning as possible, for otherwise advice simply concerned with appearance would be of a superficial order. It is accepted that what might be thought of as the recognisable Harpenden character, however indefinable, is of considerable value and whilst we have no intention of adopting a purely preservational attitude, this underlying quality can, we feel, be more consciously developed or retrieved in areas of new growth or in places of redevelopment, and it can be safeguarded in existing situations.

David

In the first instance, we require to examine the structure of Harpenden in terms of its visual construction and the experience it provides to the people who live and move about in it. Physically, the structure will show in terms of road patterns, densities of buildings and particular landscape formations, such as the groups of trees or open spaces. The experiences of these physical conditions can be evaluated and superimposed on the physical plan to add the element of quality to the factual record. By this means, certain drawings of the town map may well then be produced showing the broad distinctions of the urban, suburban and semi-rural areas. There are areas which one will also find destitute of character and provide no experience of any magnitude. At least these parts of the town should be delineated, even if their eventual rehabilitation represents a very long term approach.

Having established these patterns of identity, any action of development may be more currently assessed in terms of whether it assists the existing structure or detracts from it, or as a further alternative, amends the structure to produce a different situation. Whatever the case, it is important to have a yardstick of this order so that the action of any form of development can be predetermined.

Secondly, in terms of greater detail, we consider that there are various areas where development should take place in relation to more carefully prepared three dimensional studies which include consideration of such image making material as the structural materials of buildings, the colour, the landscape and street furniture. It is often the street picture which is of more significance than the individual appearance of an isolated building and to illustrate this point, whilst the separate buildings of Milton Road may be adequately designed, there is no comprehensive or cohesive quality whatsoever to the redeveloped road.

*Examples
Carlton Rd
De Arènes*

Thirdly, the Central Area requires a special examination and this will involve the major problems of the A.6 road, car parking, and pedestrian areas. We are anxious to know when the County Council plan for this area will be available and in what depth the subject has been considered and finally, what policy it provides to enable the Urban District Council to evaluate future developments.

Paul Allen

These proposals constitute the bulk of the long term efforts and over a period of time, this work should result in a town plan of considerably greater benefit as a working tool than the present land use zoning techniques.

In the short term however there are continuing developments to account for and consider within the context of our present ideas rather than a detailed framework. Some of our most immediate cases, such as the proposed redevelopment of the market by Sainsburys, the alterations to the Post Office and the applications which have been received in Carlton ^{Road} Terrace, are not only important issues now, but the results of these new developments could have a most decisive effect in their respective areas for a very long time in the future.

In conclusion, having stated our main objectives, it should be apparent that our interest does not lie in the sifting of planning applications, nor the examination ^{of} ~~over~~ garage additions or individual houses on the larger estates. On the other hand, whilst centred on the larger scale, it is equally obvious that we would rely on the Council's early advice on such projects which could have a measurable effect on our studies. As we see it, joint meetings with representatives of the relevant Council Committees and officers would be the best means of exchanging information and enabling the work to proceed with confidence.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these ideas with the Council members and officers on 17th October.

JSB/RAK

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