

The 'spirit of living continuity'? Revisiting the urban vision, methodologies and influence of the *Studies in Conservation*

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Abstract

The late-1960s witnessed sustained debate about the prevailing direction of policy towards the existing built environment. Against that background, an initiative launched in 1966 saw small teams of consultants commissioned to prepare analytic and advisory reports on Bath, Chester, Chichester and York. Their reports were belatedly published between February and May 1969. They were intended not just to provide specific information about four cathedral cities but also collectively to act as pilot studies able to indicate more generally the options available to policy-makers. In this paper, we make use of oral testimony, archive sources and contemporary commentaries to identify the origins and purpose of this initiative, discuss the intrinsic visions offered for the different cities, and comment on the methodologies proposed for achieving conservation. The final section provides historiographic commentary on the significance of the *Studies in Conservation* half-a-century after their publication.

Keywords: conservation, pilot studies, architect-planners, Bath, Chester, Chichester, York, continuity, modernity

Introduction

In 2011 Sir Donald Insall recalled his involvement in a pioneering study that Chester Corporation and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG) had jointly sponsored in the mid-1960s. As reported in *Chester: A Study in Conservation* (DIA, 1968), his team had rejected simple dichotomies between tradition and modernity, rehabilitation and renewal, and culture and commerce when contemplating the future of the city centre. Rather, they advocated accepting a measure of planned change to accommodate modernity alongside an approach to heritage that was motivated by a 'spirit of living continuity... [that also] retained the sense of place'.¹

Their findings complemented and sometimes challenged the interpretations offered by three other teams, commissioned as part of the same initiative (see Table 1). Respectively dealing with Bath (CBP, 1968), Chichester (Burrows, 1968) and York (Esher,

¹ Interview between Donald Insall and John R. Gold, 21 July 2011.

1968), their reports provided parallel analyses of how to conserve the cores of cities in ways that retained architectural and visual integrity while securing their economic future. Although initially known as the ‘four historic town studies’, it was recognised that similar problems were found elsewhere in places that had also experienced:

‘poor maintenance and partial decay of the historic building stock; widespread disuse and accelerating dilapidation of the formerly residential upper floors of commercial properties; all-pervasive traffic—with consequent congestion and conflict between vehicles, buildings and people; low architectural design standards in the construction of new buildings; and low levels of investment in the urban environment as a whole’ (Rodwell, 2007, 39).

That common ground meant that the four *Studies in Conservation* (henceforth *Studies*) might usefully act as pilot investigations, able to identify shared problems and provide opportunities to ‘test and fine-tune methods and forms of intervention’ (Siravo, 2015, 165).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Half-a-century later, these reports have largely slipped from view, at best reduced to the status of an unexceptional expression of the opposition to modernist-inspired urban renewal that crystallised in the late-1960s. However, such judgments bear the imprint of hindsight. Looked at another way, the *Studies* can also be interpreted as being *within* and congruent with the prevailing thinking of the day. This paper takes stock of these interpretations. Drawing on archival sources, oral history² and contemporary commentary as well as the lessons of previous research (Gold, 2004, 2007; Pendlebury, 2005, 2006), we offer the first comprehensive overview of the origins, contents and significance of the *Studies*. The first of this paper’s four sections sketches the rationale of the original initiative and outlines its progress through to the *Studies*’ belated publication in early 1969. The next part surveys their main features, commenting on the methodologies and instruments proposed for achieving conservation. The third part discusses the local and national reception of the reports and their aftermath. The final section comments on the intrinsic visions proffered in relation to the wider climate of ideas that had shaped thinking about urban conservation in the late-1960s.

From Origins to Publication

Frequently regarded as an outgrowth of preservationism and as expressing anti-modernity (e.g. Sandbrook, 2006, 447), the development of British urban conservation reflected the changing material circumstances and climate of ideas of the three decades after 1945 (see Hunter, 1996; Jokilehto, 1999, 291-328; Glendinning, 2013, 63-137). Previously,

² All oral historical materials referred to in this paper were collected from in-depth life history interviews undertaken by John R. Gold. Examining ‘Architectural modernism and Urban Transformation’, the respondents were primarily individuals who worked in public and private architectural practices in Great Britain between 1928 and 1990. The interviews were recorded and transcribed on the basis of a format that is outlined and discussed in Gold (1997, 10-12).

conservation policy only existed as a thin thread, despite such early landmarks such as the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877), the passage of the Ancient Monuments Acts (1882 *et seq*) and the explicit references to buildings of architectural or historic importance made in Planning Acts from 1909 to 1932. Certainly, before 1940 there was neither a national system of listing buildings nor Ministerial guidance for policy implementation (Kennet, 1972).

Signs of changing attitudes, however, gradually appeared. For instance, while mainly inspired by thoughts of modernisation, the wave of ‘advisory’ city plans produced in the 1940s often displayed sensitivity to conservation of historic or special areas as well as buildings (Larkham, 2003; Pendlebury, 2003, 2004, 2009). In legislative terms, the 1944 and 1947 Town and Country Planning Acts imposed statutory responsibility for listing buildings. This reinforced conservation’s position as an integral if minor part of the planning system, as well as directing planners’ attention to the planning of existing towns and cities rather than being principally concerned with the layout of new developments (Pendlebury and Strange, 2011).

That said, conservation neither ranked ‘very high among the many post-war demands on government resources’ nor featured ‘prominently among the responsibilities of the fledgling Ministry of Town and Country Planning’ and senior civil servants, such as the Evelyn Sharp, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, remained hostile (Delafons, 1997, 62). Rather, the mainstream pursuit of ‘modernist urbanism’—conceived as ‘a by-word for rational enterprises seeking to remake the city in the name of universal, geometric and pure concepts of urban order’ (Pinder, 2005, 181)—seemingly limited retention to just the most illustrious elements of the past. The pursuit of comprehensive redevelopment, concentrated particularly in a period from the passage of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act through to the late-1960s, justified ‘large-scale demolitions and wholesale change’ in urban form and circulation systems (Larkham, 2014, 107), with little concern about the potential ‘wastage of the investment of previous societies’ (Larkham, 1996, 5). The prevailing view saw the past as posing problems of obsolescence and regarded conservation as unremunerative or burdensome rather than offering opportunities (Andreae, 1996, 140). Even when groups of researchers and practitioners met specifically to discuss concerns about the future of the historic built environment, they could display remarkable equanimity about needing to accommodate change (Ward, 1968).

Yet few stood out against conservation even if it lacked priority. As Delafons (1997, 75) noted: ‘Property owners and developers could readily dismiss conservationist pressure, but conservation as an objective of public policy was generally taken for granted.’ Indeed when the prospect of full-scale reconstruction at last materialised, conservation remained—at least conceptually—a recognised option available within strategies for city redevelopment. When producing its first draft statement in November 1959, for example, a MHLG working group followed earlier US policy guidance by stating that ‘urban renewal’ should have three components: “reconstruction” (replacing outworn areas with new ones),

“rehabilitation” (bringing declining areas up to modern standards) and “conservation” (preventing satisfactory areas from deteriorating).’³

In the event, the progress of British urban renewal followed North America in practice as well as theory (Gold, 2013). Just as the 1954 US Housing Act and its successors had incorporated provisions for the much cheaper options of rehabilitation and conservation but primarily released a tidal wave of schemes for downtown shopping and commercial centres (Teaford, 1990), so too did British guidelines accommodate a range of possibilities but mostly unleashed wholesale reconstruction. The influential *Town Centres: Approach to Renewal*, for instance, only discussed ‘continuity’ after first exploring ‘congestion’, ‘constriction’ and ‘obsolescence’ (MHLG/MoT, 1962, 2). There was little opposition to that underlying mind-set. With only isolated exceptions (e.g. Denby, 1963; Power, 1965; Nairn, 1966; Taylor, 1967), outright statements of disillusionment with the lived experience of city renewal were rare in mid-1960s Britain. Moreover the MHLG, the Ministry most likely to be made responsible for conservation, appeared otherwise preoccupied given the incoming Wilson government’s manifesto commitments about housing, rent and leasehold reform, local government reorganisation, and planning and environment issues.

It was therefore surprising when the new Minister of Housing, Richard Crossman, not only proved to have a hitherto undetected appreciation of conservation’s potential value within a broad approach to planning but also seemed willing to prioritise it. Two of his first actions as Minister were to reverse the erosion of the staff that inspected listed buildings and to transfer grants for building restoration to the MHLG from the Ministry of Works (Kennet, 1972, 50). In March 1965, he met the Ministry’s Townscape Group, noting that they were:

‘working on a new policy document which suggested that preservation of ancient buildings should be concerned not merely with individual listed buildings but also with groups or streets or small areas of towns. ...I spent some time trying to persuade Dame Evelyn [Sharp] and J.D. Jones [respectively the Permanent and Deputy Permanent Secretary] that this idea is of great importance and that we should legislate on it’ (Crossman, 1975, 176).

John Delafons, Crossman's Principal Private Secretary, observed that the Minister also contributed by making useful connections between erstwhile quasi-independent sections of the Ministry: ‘In this process, he first discovered the bit of the Architect's Department that was working on townscape and then he found the Historic Buildings section, which he managed to bring together.’⁴

A conference on historic buildings that the MHLG organised at Churchill College, Cambridge on 8-9 January 1966 fashioned a new initiative. Drawing 40 participants from academic and government circles, it recommended establishing pilot experiments in four

³ P.L. Joseph, ‘Urban renewal’, Memorandum 10135/146/1/2, November 1959, TNA (The National Archives, Kew, London), file HLG 136/39.

⁴ Interview between John Delafons and John R. Gold, 3 July 2003.

historic towns 'where we not only list individual buildings but plan the preservation of the historic core' (Crossman, 1975, 427). Bath was quickly chosen, given that Colin Buchanan already had a team undertaking transport planning projects there.⁵ By contrast, the identity of the other towns and consultants remained open for discussion. A memorandum in April 1966 listed the study towns and suitable consultants, all of whom were architect-planners. It read: 'Buchanan (Bath), Donald Insall (Warwick), Miss [Elizabeth] Chesterton (Kings Lynn) and possibly Lord Esher (York)'. For the first time, a possible fifth case study was mentioned, although its location was 'still undecided'.⁶

The final list proved somewhat different. The projects relied on central and local governments providing equal funding, but the latter did not necessarily welcome consultants scrutinising their affairs, especially when having to meet half the costs. For example, while the Cambridge conference strongly favoured Warwick for a pilot study, a euphemistic 'lack of enthusiasm from the local people' saw selection of 'another town where we could rely on better co-operation from the planning authority'.⁷ Its replacement was Chester, to which Insall was re-assigned in mid-April 1966, a city about which his practice had no specific knowledge other than having undertaken a previous report for the Georgian Group on traffic problems.⁸ Esher gained York primarily through his links with Crossman, with the latter citing Esher's book *Landscape in Distress* (Brett, 1965)⁹ as formatively influencing the Cambridge conference's agenda. Nevertheless, the York study encountered opposition from the City Council and only proceeded when the local Civic Trust agreed to meet the city's share of the costs. Consultants, named as Hancock and Economic Associates, were initially considered for Chichester, but the city opted 'for safety's sake' (Kennet, 1972, 91) to appoint the County Planning Officer, George Burrows, to head the team. The five *Studies* later again became four when Norfolk County Council, having recently commissioned a planning study of King's Lynn's historic core (Chesterton with Manasseh, 1964), felt disinclined to pay the same consultant to produce another report for a larger but overlapping area of that town.

This outcome, however, was as yet unknown when the initiative was formally launched on 13 May 1966. In a speech made in Bath, Crossman recognised the need to reconcile the conflicting interests of developers and preservationists 'among whom a "cold war" has been raging in many cities'.¹⁰ To that end, he announced the selection of Bath, Chester, Chichester, King's Lynn and York for pilot studies to examine how conservation policies might be 'sensibly implemented' and 'how town centre redevelopment in historic towns can be combined with the preservation of ancient buildings'.¹¹ To be jointly funded

⁵ Buchanan accepted further work with alacrity. Letter from Jacqueline Hope-Wallace to J.D. Jones, 'Historic Towns', 8 February 1966. TNA, HLG 126/1251.

⁶ Letter from S.C.G Wilkinson to G.W. Moseley, 11 April 1966. TNA 151/17.

⁷ Letter from W. Lloyd Davies to P.F. Clifton, 9 January 1967. TNA 151/17.

⁸ Interview between Sir Donald Insall and John R. Gold, London, 21 July 2011.

⁹ Lord Esher inherited his title in 1963. Previously he was known as Lionel Brett, but was sometimes still referred to by this name after inheriting his title.

¹⁰ These quotations come from: Staff Reporter, 'How to preserve old towns: five chosen for pilot studies', *The Times*, 14 May 1966, p.10.

¹¹ *ibid*

by the MHLG and the relevant local authorities, the *Studies* would focus on whole areas rather than individual buildings and promised to ground conservation of the urban fabric in a considered, even scientific, approach. Typical of an age deferential to the expert, Crossman confirmed that independent consultants would:

‘descend with their microscopes upon a defined section of each of the five towns. Inside these "conservation areas" they will identify house by house what should be kept; what it is practical to keep; how it can best be done in economic, financial and physical terms; and what factors should govern change in these areas.’

Their findings, from places with a wide geographical spread, would provide a 'good cross-section on which to base a general policy for other similar places'.¹²

Overall management for the development of the plans was assigned, alongside other duties, to a Preservation Policy Group, established in June 1966. Chaired by Lord Kennet and comprising influential nominees from local government, academia and the Ministry (*ibid*, 71-2), its remit included examining the consultants' draft reports, receiving the final versions, considering the results, discussing wider implications and seeing 'what changes were desirable in legal, financial and administrative arrangements.'¹³ The consultants themselves met sporadically, notably to address details left unresolved when the project was announced.¹⁴ These included fee levels, frameworks for auditing and questions about responsibility for the final publications. The original timetable optimistically entertained hopes that the reports would be ready by autumn 1966,¹⁵ but the required work took a further 18 months to complete. Prolonged negotiations took place with the Treasury over production costs. Although high-quality production standards were thought desirable to capture wider interest, the Treasury constantly tried to downgrade the final publications to technical documents for which '[p]retty pictures are certainly not in mind'. That particular battle was resolved in favour of higher quality products, but at a price—£7 per volume—that might have stymied the desired public distribution and debate.¹⁶ Finally, an industrial dispute at the printers delayed matters further. Hence, although the four reports bear a 1968 publication date, they actually appeared between February 1969 (for York) and May 1969 (Chester).

Plans

Broadly common terms of reference were created for the plans (see Kennet, 1972, 69-71), with a primary aim 'to preserve and enhance the architectural and historic character of the

¹² *ibid*

¹³ V.D. Lipman 'Preservation Policy Group Report', Department of the Environment, 1 January 1971, TNA 151/17; also interview between Sir Donald Insall and John R. Gold, London, 21 July 2011.

¹⁴ For example, see Minutes of Meeting on Conservation of Historic Towns, 3 January 1967. TNA 151/17.

¹⁵ Staff Reporter, *op cit*.

¹⁶ In York the local newspaper (*York Evening Press*) also published a cheaper summary document for 7s 6d (Potts *et al*, 1969).

area in order to maintain its life and assist in securing its economic buoyancy'. Thus, as Table 1 shows, each *Study* had an agreed areal focus incorporated into its terms of reference, which varied significantly in the degree to which they encompassed the historic urban core, most generously with Chester and with Chichester being particularly limited.

Chester

The areal focus for Chester, comprised the historic core within and exterior to the city walls, with an eastward extension along the River Dee. It was an area long recognised as needing urgent attention (e.g. Greenwood, 1945). The area's falling population had left many redundant churches, the city centre was deserted at night, and there was generally scant regard for the Chester's Georgian or Victorian heritage as opposed to its 'medieval' elements (Anon, 2003). A consultant's report (Grenfell Baines, 1965) had recently proposed urban renewal for the central area to resolve traffic congestion and stimulate economic development, but gave 'no special consideration to the problems of the decaying historic fabric' (de Figueiredo and Morris, 2012, 51).

To address this gap, the study team sought to develop a methodology for conservation. This began by examining Chester in its regional context and identifying pressures for change. Preliminary surveys of building, traffic and movement, services and land use produced base maps, which were overlain on Ordnance Survey sheets. Thirteen sub-areas were recognised. Ten, comprising about 85 per cent of the city centre, were selected for detailed study. The remaining three, being of lesser interest, only received outline reports. Most areas already had recognisable names but invented ones, such as 'Bridgeway', were given to any that lacked place identity.¹⁷ Two analyses followed: a building-by-building survey that supplied standardised information about architectural quality, condition, ownership and use; and a Cullenesque townscape appraisal (c.f. Cullen, 1961) that yielded visual and contextual impressions of aspect and perspective. A five-point scale categorised the results, ranging from 'anchor buildings' of exceptional merit to buildings that had 'no intrinsic merit but are important by virtue of their position' (DIA, 1968, 232-3).

The detailed recommendations for conservation at sub-area level were incorporated into an overall 15-year action plan, with costings supplied for three quinquennial stages (DIA, 1968, 232-3). The first stage prioritised urgent repair for 142 buildings, with a further 229 to be tackled over the next two stages. Release of City Corporation land, purchase of decaying properties, home improvement grants, establishment of a housing association and funds raised from a local rating charge could all help bring people back to the central area. The 'restoration of old buildings could enhance both their own value and that of the whole city centre' (Anon, 2003), with increasing rateable values defraying costs in the medium-term. Should local powers prove insufficient to address these needs, the report recommended establishing a national body, possibly called the Historic Towns Commission, to supply overview and direction.

Chichester

¹⁷ Interview between Sir Donald Insall and John R. Gold, London, 21 July 2011.

Despite dealing with the most diminutive of the four cities, the Chichester team also chose to focus on the smallest study area. While their counterparts essentially scrutinised areas within the medieval city walls, the Chichester team concentrated on a portion of the city's south-east quadrant measuring just 18 acres (7 hectares). The reason stated was that this was sufficient to sample three key environments: a shopping district (South Street); the Pallants (offices and residential area, described as a 'town within a city'); and a small patch of open space. However, another possible explanation stemmed from the Council having recently completed a highly controversial clearance of streets of terraced housing at Somerstown to the north, close to the Festival Theatre. By contrast, the area chosen for the *Study* would arouse little protest since no major changes were proposed aside from putting in rear servicing.¹⁸

Produced in-house by a joint team from West Sussex County Council's planning, architecture, surveying and valuer's departments in collaboration with the City Engineer and Surveyor, the Chichester study worked within the grain of the town's existing planning documents.¹⁹ Its analysis was primarily visual and architectural. 'Almost all' buildings were sketched individually, with officers logging details of construction, building condition, planning and any features of note on standardised response sheets (Burrows, 1968, 80). Buildings were ranked according to structural quality and aesthetic quality. Valuations made from available statistics supplied the basis for an economic overview, although no full cost-benefit analysis was attempted.

The key findings centred on 'signs, shopfronts and infill schemes' (Andreae, 1996, 140), with little reference to social purpose. Arguing that conservation be grounded in a comprehensive plan that 'guided change and preservation', the authors recommended that planning should eliminate 'inappropriate' uses, tackle underuse of land (especially empty upper floors), and encourage limited mixed use (e.g. offices in residential areas). Aesthetic control was emphasised. New buildings needed to be 'sympathetic' in proportions, detailing and materials, but generally in 'the idiom of the day', only resorting to period styles when seeking to preserve townscape. Separating pedestrian and vehicular routes was essential; parking spaces were permissible if supplied sensitively. Traffic signs and street markings should be unobtrusive. The most radical feature, consistent with the ethos of urban renewal, was to recommend use of compulsory purchase orders to push through planning objectives, arguing that:

'New legislation is needed to enable the implementing authority either to purchase without dispossessing the occupiers or to carry out compulsorily necessary works of improvement....Fragmentation of ownership is a major impediment to the implementation of a comprehensive conservation scheme.' (Burrows, 1968, 10.29)

Bath

¹⁸ Interview between John Templeton and John R. Gold, 3 December 2017.

¹⁹ Namely, the Statutory Plan, the Town Centre Map, and a supporting report entitled *Chichester—Preservation and Progress* (Burrows, 1966)

The authors of *Bath: A Study in Conservation* (CBP, 1968, 8) readily admitted the debt owed to their earlier work, now re-labelled the *Bath Planning Study* (CBP, 1965). The latter recommended ways of alleviating traffic that protected the medieval core and the more celebrated elements of the Georgian town such as the Circus and Royal Crescent, but advocated comprehensive redevelopment of extensive areas south and west of the city centre and for more limited areas elsewhere. Its proposals included vertical segregation of traffic and pedestrians, a cross-route (the 'Cut Route') in a twenty-foot cutting close to some Georgian set-piece developments, and new multi-storey car-parks.

The project focused on the central core, described as having a 'medieval layout with Georgian buildings' (CBP, 1968, 11). The approach was again primarily visual, arguing that: 'in Bath as a whole the façades are very much more important than the interiors' (*ibid*, 13). Existing listing of buildings was deemed to under-represent group value and the role of buildings as part of visual compositions. Significantly, the area covered by the *Study* excluded the Georgian expansion for which Bath is internationally renowned. That omission arguably permitted greater ambivalence towards the selected area, with recommendations that even countenanced removal from listing of altered works by the elder John Wood, a key architect of the Georgian expansion.

The availability of pre-existing data meant that Bath required less new survey work than the other *Studies*. Details of floor-by-floor use of existing buildings, plotted on plans made available by the City Planning Office, disclosed that most basements and top floors were empty. Analyses of the internal arrangements of buildings showed that housing and offices failed to meet relevant minimum space standards. Other visual analyses identified building age, condition, accessibility, layout and external environment. The team mapped their findings using predetermined categories to identify sub-areas differentiated according to architectural and historical significance. These were respectively labelled as being of 'highest importance', 'secondary importance', 'little importance', and 'little importance needing large scale renewal' (*ibid*, 21). The first category merited strict preservation, but elsewhere change was possible. For the second, 'large-scale renewal cannot be ruled out' (*ibid*, 47), even though the aim was to retain the best buildings and conserve the general character. For the third, amounting to roughly 40 per cent of the total area, 'acceptance of change' (*ibid*, 48) was a by-word for clearance policy.

Overall, two key issues were identified: finding new uses for historic buildings and addressing traffic problems. The former was considered difficult but achievable, particularly by converting upper floors and vacant buildings to supply accommodation for University students. For the latter, the report simply carried the traffic proposals of the earlier study 'a stage further' (CBP, 1968, 6) arguing that, while traffic management could contribute, major new road construction was needed. The Cut Route, now in a 550-metre tunnel rather than a cutting, was again recommended, despite requiring demolition of historically significant buildings. In Old Bond Street, for instance, that would mean rebuilding to re-establish the overall composition, but for Queen Street it was felt that rebuilding only needed to create the general character. Unless necessary for completing a unified composition, it was strongly recommended that new build should not be neo-Georgian.

York

Any approach to studying conservation in York inevitably absorbed longstanding concerns about traffic, the physical deterioration of listed buildings and problems arising from insensitive development (Adshead *et al.*, 1948). The terms of reference for the *York Study*, however, only reflected part of that equation. Esher's practice (Brett and Pollen) were asked to make proposals for safeguarding the city centre's commercial viability, eliminating physical decay, removing inappropriate land-uses, and ensuring the highest architectural standards for new building (Esher, 1968, 41). Recommendations about the city's wider traffic problems lay outside that remit.

The survey divided the walled city into distinct eight sectors, of which four were identified for closer townscape, land use and economic analyses. Three were clustered around York Minster: Swinegate described as 'a congested central commercial area in need of selective piecemeal redevelopment'; Petergate, '[a] typical group of beautiful York houses in need of conversion to ensure their preservation'; and Aldwark, '[a] derelict hinterland containing many historic buildings and in need of comprehensive redevelopment'. Micklegate, the fourth area, was a 'historic street suffering from blight due to backland encroachment' (*ibid*, 89) that lay across the River Ouse in the southern sector. As Esher remarked, these areas were chosen less for being microcosms of the city than as representing its essence: 'One's heart and one's enthusiasm really went into the Minster area and Micklegate, which had a quality of its own with a very good main street.'²⁰

The survey stage required detailed examination of all floors of buildings, the state-of-repair of backlands, street frontages and façades, and the changing uses of the areas throughout the day and night. Analysis involved collating and mapping data at both city-wide scale and for the study areas, with use of sieve mapping to see what should and 'what should not be there'.²¹ So-called 'non-conforming uses' were deemed particularly important given the presence of almost 2.5 million square feet of industrial floor space scattered throughout the historic core. The report proposed conservation areas²² for more than half of the walled city, with recommendations for adequate financial assistance to protect all buildings of significant architectural or townscape value. New buildings, including car parks, housing and other buildings 'of appropriate form' (Esher, 1968, 179), should be encouraged wherever suitable, emphasising that 'the essence of conservation is continuing economic use, and that the great majority of the best secular architecture of York was built for living in and is still eminently liveable, given the right environment' (*ibid*, 47). The report proposed relocating industries that were noxious or generated significant traffic.

Somewhat ambiguously, the *Study* advocated the animated vitality of mixed land-use yet also favoured clearance of elements considered undesirable. To elaborate, it recommended drawing residents back to the city centre, with extra accommodation coming from conversions and from using empty space in upper storeys of retail premises which, as

²⁰ Interview between Lord Esher and John R. Gold, 8 May 2003.

²¹ Interview with between Harry Teggins and John R. Gold, 21 May 2003.

²² Conservation areas were introduced by the Civic Amenities Act 1967 and are further discussed below.

for Bath, might be occupied by university students. At the same time, it supported use of comprehensive redevelopment to regenerate land then occupied by 'low-grade' industrial use, albeit without wholesale clearance of workshops and warehouses and on a more modest scale than proposed for parts of Bath. Redundant churches could be regenerated as new business premises or for community purposes. Making things (more) liveable also required tackling through-traffic, servicing and parking. Four peripheral multi-storey car parks, two within the Walls and two outside, would alleviate on-street parking. Restricted access to sections of the road network, including partial or complete pedestrianisation, would ease the battleground between pedestrians and traffic and improve environmental quality, whilst still permitting adequate servicing. Alleyways, an intrinsic part of the medieval city but since blocked by backland developments, might be reopened as pedestrian thoroughfares.

Forecasts compiled by Nathaniel Lichfield costed the proposed improvements at £2.1 million if tackled as 'coordinated action' (Esher, 1968, 248). Although rising property and rateable values might partly offset the outlay, York's ratepayers and the owners of historic buildings directly benefitting from conservation work would bear the brunt of expenditure. The likely burden could be ameliorated, however, if the Government provided its anticipated grant of 50 per cent of costs and if the Council introduced a local sales levy—measures that could spread the cost of conserving York's heritage to the wider community, visitors and the national economy.

Reception and aftermath

On completion, the *Studies* were formally presented to the Preservation Policy Group, which assimilated its findings in its First Annual Report and drew on them to recommend changes in legislation. After making a proposal to co-fund local conservation improvement schemes through an Exchequer grant 'to meet fifty per cent of the deficiency of their operation', a continuing commitment to working with the four towns was suggested whereby new pilot schemes to work out details 'should be carried immediately in advance of legislation, in Bath, Chester, Chichester and York' (Kennet, 1972, 95). The report as a whole was accepted by the Government on 20 May 1970, but the general election the following month led to a change in government. At the start of 1971, Peter Walker, the Conservative Government's Secretary of State for the Environment, provided policy guidance that, under the guise of giving 'local authorities greater financial freedom and responsibility' (*ibid*, 99), effectively abandoned thoughts of committing central government funds to local conservation schemes. While the suggestion of pilot implementation studies remained, these never systematically materialised, albeit that Insall and Esher continued to work in Chester and York respectively (see below). Consequently, the continuing influence that the four towns might have had as testing grounds for new national legislation and, possibly, for the development of conservation practice was ended.

Locally, the *Studies* received contrasting receptions. Chester witnessed the most positive response, where it is argued that Insall's report 'was a watershed in the history of conservation in the city' (Anon, 2003), with many recommendations put into immediate effect as part of an energetic and consolidated conservation programme (Insall, 2018). These included creation in 1969 of a 200-acre conservation area (covering the city within

the walls, the race course, and a section of the river frontage) and acceptance of three of the thirteen study areas for a phased programme of action. Plans for Bridgegate, the first to be tackled, were approved in 1973 and completed in 1980. Insall and Associates were appointed as conservation consultants to the council in 1970 and remained in that role until 1977 (*ibid*).

In York, Esher's report was well received by the general public and local press, but with greater reluctance by the local authority whose apparent unwillingness to embrace Esher's recommendations was castigated as 'ill informed, misleading and tendentious' (Anon, 1969, 409). Admittedly the Council took the *Study* seriously enough to request detailed responses from its Chief Officers and from its Planning and Development Committee, but critics argued that was simply a prelude to using the all-officer report to dismember the *Study in Conservation* 'sentence by sentence, line by line' (Richards, 1970, 342). Even so, most of the proposals were accepted and the *Study* continued to provide a benchmark for significant planning cases into the twenty-first century (Shannon, 1996; Pendlebury, 2005). Esher's firm was subsequently engaged to help develop plans for Aldwark, with the replacement of low-grade industrial and commercial uses by new housing within the walls. The Council, however, initially remained unmoved on inner ring road proposals, with which it pressed ahead against bitter opposition from new amenity groups emboldened in their vehemency by the Esher report (Cummin, 1973). In the event, the road proposals were ultimately defeated at Public Inquiry (Lichfield and Proudlove, 1976). When visiting the city in the mid-1970s, Aldous (1976) noted the advent of more conservation-friendly policies including first attempts at pedestrianisation. Although clearly not the only factor involved, he credited the change in policy to the *Study's* lasting influence, alongside City Council reforms, actions by the local Civic Trust and grant assistance.

Burrows' report for Chichester also received mixed reactions. The *Architects' Journal* immediately hailed it as a triumph of common sense (Editors, 1969) but locally there was a groundswell of dissatisfaction (Rooth, 2015, 29). For its part, the city's Town Planning and Buildings Committee recorded broad agreement with the *Study's* recommendations in October 1969, preparing a programme of implementation 'as far as was consistent with the Town Map, availability of funding and... the necessary powers' (Green, 2015, 78). Yet the modest nature of the *Study's* remit and resulting proposals excluded full examination of broader questions, such as issues involving road construction and pedestrianisation policies. These were resolved in the early 1970s in line with the Town Map without challenge from the findings of the *Study*. Yet a former member of the study team noted that it was never clear why only a small sector of the city had been examined and that the *Study* 'was plagued by past planning proposals' (Rooth, 2015, 29). Tellingly Eric Banks, the city's recently-retired Town Clerk who recommended Chichester for a case study to the Cambridge Conference, ruefully reflected that 'if he had known the outcome, he would never have done so.'²³

The initially favourable reaction in Bath to well-rehearsed elements of the *Study*, such as the construction of the road tunnel, quickly soured in the face of a powerful backlash that turned Bath into a *cause célèbre* for historic town conservation in the early 1970s (e.g. see Fergusson, 1973; Aldous, 1975). Critics attacked the idea that the less-

²³ Interview between John Templeton and John R. Gold, 3 December 2017.

celebrated buildings of Georgian Bath were unimportant: 'Every attack on a minor Georgian building is an attack on the architectural unity of Bath' (Anon, 1973, 280). Bath's significance, they argued, lay in its totality as an artefact, principally fashioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rather than as architectural set-pieces *per se*. As such, the scathing remarks were not necessarily aimed at Buchanan. Fergusson (1973), for example, primarily castigated the local authority and some of its other architectural advisors. He argued not only that Buchanan was hamstrung by the briefs that he received from the city and by the pre-existing Development Plan but also that some of his recommendations had been ignored. Nevertheless, little of Buchanan's modernising approach survived with, for example, the final abandonment of the tunnel proposals in 1976.

Beyond the localities, the professional press grew restless about the perceived lack of progress towards implementation, with J.M. Richards (1970, 341) arguing that 'the impetus has been lost'. He also regretted the original choice of towns. York, Chester and Bath had predictably thrown up the same problems: 'decaying upper storeys above shops, traffic congestion and conflict, low design standards of new buildings and insufficient money directed towards the specific needs of old, worn and charming buildings' (*ibid*, 341). The failure to proceed with the King's Lynn study had robbed the initiative of the opportunity to consider something different in the shape of the town needing to respond to sudden growth caused by having to accommodate London's overspill under a Town Development agreement (*ibid*). A review by Peter Hall (1969, 872) highlighted further similarities in the problems that the *Studies* addressed:

'All the teams are interested in what the Germans call *Städtebau*, and what we have to call (for lack of a better word) civic design.... The stress is on the physical facts about cities, not nearly so much on the social and economic forces behind them'

Hall's preference would have been for a range of teams emphasising variously legal issues, development and finance and social and economic pressures, although much of his discussion focused upon the economics of implementation. Roy Worskett, whose earlier landmark text on conservation (Worskett, 1969) had appeared too recently to include the *Studies*, made amends with lengthy discussion of progress on three of the plans as part of European Architectural Heritage Year activities (Worskett, 1975). He felt that the *Studies* had insufficiently addressed the conflictual relationship between commerce and conservation, which remained unresolved. Chester was regarded as having achieved most, with political backing, a local property tax levy, retention of Insall as consultant, appointment to the staff of a specialist conservation officer and completion of a ring road, relieving pressure on the central area. Significant strides forward had also been made in the pilot project at Bridgegate, co-financed by the City Council and the government. For Bath, Worskett expressed great hesitancy but detected positive signs in the City Council's approach, with a move towards rehabilitation rather than redevelopment²⁴. For York, he criticised lack of progress and took issue with some of Esher's prescriptions, including the separation of land-uses arising from removing small scale industry and commercial activity

²⁴ It should be pointed out that Worskett was City Architect and Planner Officer in Bath from 1974 to 1980.

from the centre and a tendency to over-tidy and prettify.

Discussion

When comparing the *Studies*, Larkham and Jones (1993, 19) suggested that: 'Some of the idiosyncrasies of the four reports were partly the results of the interests and expertise of the consultants commissioned to undertake them.' While substantially true, it is also important to recognise that the life histories of the *Studies* were played out against a background in which professional ideology and practice remained dominated by the tenets of modernist urbanism. As noted previously, there were few indications in 1966 or even by 1968 that modernist urbanism would be as quickly and decisively challenged as indeed occurred. The teams of consultants looking at the four towns therefore had little reason to suppose anything other than that their proposals would have to stand up to scrutiny in a world in which modern building methods, multi-level circulation systems and powers for comprehensive redevelopment were the accepted norms.

This is clearly revealed in the texts of the four reports. For Chester, this requirement primarily meant showing, in the face of potential scepticism that conservation was financially viable, represented 'applied commonsense', and that 'it was possible to house even indisputably modern uses in ways that were in harmony with what was around them.' As such, it was important to express arguments 'patiently and pedagogically'²⁵ in ways that might not have been needed a decade later. Moreover, to varying degrees, the other reports retained some of the language and even the rhetoric of modernist urbanism. For instance, Buchanan's proposals for Bath were framed in a manner that chimed with his earlier works on traffic planning and expressed the full canon of pedestrian-vehicular segregation, pedestrianisation and wholesale renewal. Though the significance of place was clearly articulated and preservation was a key objective, it was a highly selective approach principally based around architectural quality and picturesque effect. New build, as already noted, would only replicate period styles when essential to retain the sense of place. Less regarded buildings and spaces, especially if labelled 'outworn and ugly' (CBP, 1968, 23), were readily dismissed as expendable. Preservation was intended to sit alongside massive transformation and this was seen as compatible with sustaining the historic character of the city. Given its limited aims, the report for Chichester offered less, but still retained its already declared preferences for ring roads, gyratories and comprehensive development areas where applicable. Although arguing for mixed land use as a way of animating the city centre, as noted above Esher's report also revealed a modernist sensibility about land use separation. City centre living was to be brought back, but at the expense of light industrial and commercial activities which would be displaced by compulsory purchase. Beyond this, there were also glimpses of fascination with modern technology, with suggestions for remote parcel collection and electric vehicles both to bring shoppers in from the multi-storey car-parks and to make deliveries during the day. The York study also offered the most ostensibly brutalist design on offer in its proposal for a car-park spanning Piccadilly on the south side of the centre – a structure with an accidented front-section and its western section ending in a spiral ramp described as 'echoing the form of Clifford's Tower (on the Castle mound) across the water' (Esher, 1968, 187).

²⁵ Interview between Sir Donald Insall and John R. Gold, 21 July 2011.

Yet the process of injecting a measure of conservation into urban planning involved more than just finding small corners in which cherished heritage could be accommodated or contriving versions of modern design that might blend sympathetically with traditional built forms. The relationship between conservation and mainstream modernism had long been more complex and pluralistic than often recognised and transcended the idea that the rise of conservation was merely a natural and necessary reaction to the progressive collapse of modernist orthodoxy. In the first place, as Glendinning (2013, 200) suggested, the conservation and modern movements actually had:

‘as much in common as in conflict. Both were structured around an internal narrative of progress, one springing organically from the past, the other breaking from it. And they shared a strong belief in the separation and clear expression of new and old architecture, stylistically and spatially.’

Secondly, many exponents of modernist urbanism cherished elements of past architectures and town planning schemes that they saw as antecedents of their own interests. Georgian architecture and townscapes, well represented in all the study towns, were notably favoured in this respect (Pendlebury, 2009, 22). Thirdly, by the mid-1960s, the architectural avant-garde had started to identify conservation as an important part of making cities more liveable, notwithstanding their beliefs in social progress through adopting new building technologies and ways of constructing the city (Powers, 2004, 10). In doing so, they subscribed to a growing sense in the 1960s that the new architecture should reflect social relationships—about how people associated and how they wanted to live—which contributed also to the plurality of thinking that had come to characterise late modernist urbanism (Gold, 2007).

This reappraisal partly bore the hallmarks of what came to be known as the ‘heart of the city’ debate (Sert and Tyrwhitt, 1952; see also Gruen, 1964; Whyte, 2003; Marchi, 2018). Despite the zeal with which modernist urbanism was applied at municipal level, there remained very little consensus about how to create modern city centres that could fulfil the same roles as their traditional equivalents. This revolved less around what such places should look like than what mix of functions they should serve, how they might become centres of social life, and how they might be endowed with symbolic qualities to foster civic loyalty and attachment.

It was a subject indeed that had taxed two of the consultants involved in the *Studies in Conservation* in their previous works. In *Mixed Blessing*, Colin Buchanan (1958) had ruminated on the nature and implications of the transport revolution facing British cities, concluding with recognition of the ‘terrible price’ that the ‘new mobility’ might exact. He added: ‘It is not traffic movement but civilized town life that is at stake’ (*ibid*, 210). Moreover despite its reputation as being the most potent statement favouring large-scale reconstruction to bring Britain’s cities into the ‘motor age’ (Gunn, 2015, vi), Buchanan’s *Traffic in Towns* (MoT, 1963) also recognised the problem of historic towns, arguing that: ‘it is not a question of retaining a few old buildings, but of conserving, in the face of the onslaught of motor traffic, a major part of the heritage of the English-speaking world, of which this country is the guardian’ (*ibid*, 197).

At a similar time, Esher had served as Chairman of the Society for the Promotion of Urban Renewal (SPUR), a pressure group composed of modern architects and planners that, between 1958 and 1963, sought to influence the reconstruction programme under the banner of urban renewal (Gold, 2012). It strongly supported approaches that would make cities more liveable by, *inter alia*, reasserting core urban values, accepting higher population densities, and latterly attempting to balance clearance-based comprehensive redevelopment by promoting rehabilitation and conservation. Notably, the rehabilitation and conservation route was deemed suitable for smaller towns where some of SPUR's other preoccupations, such as intraurban decentralisation and multilevel circulation systems, were less applicable.

In many respects, parts of the York *Study* read like an extension of that work. All the reports, in one way or another, discussed the question of making better use of the existing built environment (finding users for empty upper floors or redundant buildings, clearing unsuitable uses and providing sympathetic infill), but the York report made the firmest connection between conservation and the social condition of what referred to as the 'heart' of the city (Esher, 1968, 208). It was noted that 'the main object of the exercise' was not 'conservation', which was 'already in full operation within the walled city',²⁶ but rather 'to make the walled city liveable again... [and] the great majority of the best civic architecture of York was built for living in and is still eminently liveable, given the right environment' (Esher, 1968, 47). The goal was to raise increase the night-time residential population from 3,500 at the time of the study to around 6,000, with 'the prospect of further gains as urban renewal proceeds' (*ibid*). Animation, particularly outside office hours, would return with an increased permanent population, coupled with accommodating cohorts of university students in central city accommodation. With removal of at least part of the industry from the centre might also come the reverse commuting that was one of SPUR's more innovative goals, where people commute to newly relocated plant in the suburbs but return home to the city centre in the evening. Taken together, there was certainly a resonance here with the ideas that SPUR had formulated at the start of the decade and, at least by extension, with the social priorities of modernist avant-garde thought in the mid-1960s.

Conclusion

It is interesting that 13 May 1966, the date of Crossman's speech at Bath, coincided with the day when Duncan Sandys drew first place in the annual ballot for the right to introduce a private member's Bill into the British House of Commons. The 1967 Civic Amenities Act, which Sandys then sponsored, would become *the* most important single item of legislation that 'extended consideration from individual buildings to the consideration of entire areas' and created 'the beginnings of effective urban conservation *per se* in Britain' (Larkham, 1996, 42). By contrast, the *Studies in Conservation* were part of an initiative that fell short of original aspirations. The aim of establishing provisions for urban conservation on a researched and funded basis faded into the background, thwarted by delays in production and publication, Ministerial reshuffles, a change of Government and, ultimately, a failure to deliver resources.

²⁶ Interview between Lord Esher and John R. Gold, , 8 May 2003.

Yet if the established historiography routinely assigns the *Studies* to a minor role in the narrative of British conservation planning, there remains more to the 1966 initiative and its outcomes than 'a sad history of politicking outwitting able planners' (Richards, 1970, 341). With hindsight, the details of their preparation, publication and reception provide a useful barometer of the state of thinking about conservation policy as it existed in late-1960s Britain. In the first place, there is a sense of a world immediately before a watershed. The consultants engaged were essentially architect-planners and arguably their reports hark back to an age when the relationship between planning and architecture was far closer and mutually supportive; where the architectural eye was combined with training in 'analysis of traffic, shopping, commerce, civic activities, land use, conflicts of land use, pollution and land use'.²⁷ Secondly, as was noted above, despite the abiding impressions of the opposition between a monolithic modern movement and a conservation movement with anti-modernist and preservationist credentials that would grow from the early-1970s onwards, the reports' findings reveal a different picture. Despite the dominance of modernist urbanism, the consultants at that time operated in world where there was a discernible sense of plurality; one in which the establishment of 'living continuity' might assist the abiding problem of the 'heart of the city'.

The fiftieth anniversary of the reports' publication also provides an opportunity to consider whether their suggested provisions can in any way be legitimately regarded as offering precursors of tenets of contemporary urbanism. In Donald Insall's view, the *Studies* were an exemplar of 'conservation as positive action' (Insall, 2017, 17), helping to fuel a growing movement that 'was conscious of place and recognised that its positive features could be priceless assets'.²⁸ Beyond that, re-reading the *Studies* reveals a surprisingly close fit with the priorities of contemporary initiatives. In looking for potential new strategies, methodologies and instruments for achieving conservation, the reports collectively explored various avenues that included reanimating the city through increasing residential density and reintroducing mixed land use, raising environmental quality through exclusion of unnecessary traffic, improving pedestrian mobility, redeveloping brownfield sites and reinvigorating the local economy. It was the spirit of urban sustainability, albeit without the current terminologies or rhetoric. For these reasons if no other, the *Studies in Conservation* deserve greater recognition than merely as a footnote in the history of British urban conservation.

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²⁷ Interview between Harry Teggins and John R. Gold, 21 May 2003

²⁸ Interview between Donald Insall and John R. Gold, 21 July 2011.

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TABLE 1 The *Studies in Conservation* (1968)

| Town (+ 1961 pop) | Authors | Areal focus | Conservation Strategy |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Bath (80,901) | Colin Buchanan and Partners | 'medieval core of the central area' (18 hectares) | Traffic engineering (tunnel and through route); strict preservation combined with aggressive use of comprehensive redevelopment. Accommodation of urban renewal strategies. |
| Chester (59,268) | Donald Insall and Associates | 'historic centre of Chester' (83 hectares) | Mixed development; conservation as a viable development option; rejection of clean sweep but acceptance of modernity |
| Chichester (20,124) | George S. Burrows | SE Quadrant (7 hectares) | Acceptance of existing renewal strategy; aesthetic control; potential use of compulsory purchase to achieve conservation objectives |
| York (104,392) | Lionel Esher (Brett and Pollen) | 'historic core' (80 hectares) | Traffic management (peripheral car parks, pedestrianisation). Liveability and densification. |