



# Constructive Conservation Roundtable 002

Da Vinci House, 44 Saffron Hill | 7th February 2019

This note sets out the findings from the second of a series of heritage salons discussing issues relating to the historic environment organised by Polysemic and Iceni Projects' Heritage and Townscape team. The theme of this Salon was **'Wicked Witch of Planning'**, discussing the planning process and related experiences.

## SUMMARY OF ISSUES

### Documents and terminologies

Whilst design is an intuitive process, the planning system relies on several documents and terminologies, often open to interpretation and challenges. It is therefore important to understand the various terms and the thought process behind them in order to address the 'gap' between the design and planning process. It is also important to understand the 'weight' given to the various statutory, policy and guidance documents that may be used to defend/justify the client's/planning authority's perspective.

### Harm vs Benefit

The planning balance between harm and benefit is extremely nuanced. Understanding the level of significance and therefore the degree of harm is as important as understanding the various benefits a project may bring. Whilst these may be at the discretion of the relevant officers or the planning committee members, these are open to challenges and often politicised.

### Politics and Planning

The decision making process is normally, for bigger schemes, a democratic process. Professional and technical decisions do not exist in a vacuum and are driven by considering technical issues as well as local politics which may have an influence even in the case of small projects. At committee, community response as well as political 'climate' plays a crucial role in the determination of applications. This often leads to Planning Committees refusing applications against officers' recommendations. In most circumstances the application is then decided by the Planning Inspectorate which could be resource consuming for many Clients.

### Lack of technical qualifications amongst Officers

Officers are often front loaded with a lot of technical information which they may or may not have an understanding of. They rely entirely on the technical expertise of specialist officers, if available, who are often unreachable due to their own workload. Additionally, even specialist officers may not have the required technical expertise that is sometimes required on a case by case basis. For example, lack of structural and engineering understanding often leads Conservation Officers to be sceptical about works related to conversion and structural strengthening.

### Resources

Most local authorities are under severe pressures of resources and often applications are being dealt with by junior officers. Government cuts and eight week decision targets have reduced the capacity of planning authorities to deal with a large volume of applications. Junior case officers may lack the experience and authority to deal with more established officers and therefore often adopt their, sometimes conservative, point of view.

## Attendees

**Emma Lomax**  
BDP Architects

**Astrid Rehwald**  
CZWG Architects

**Joseph Cassar**  
CZWG Architects

**Louise Claeys**  
CZWG Architects

**Viviana Magnarin**  
CZWG Architects

**Andy Mytom**  
David Morley Architects

**Jennifer Juritz**  
David Morley Architects

**Mark Marshall**  
Daykin Marshall Architects

**Sam Cooper**  
E2 Architecture + Interiors

**Katie Hannah-Wright**  
F3 Architects

**Elizabeth Webster**  
Fraher Architects

**Emily Gruff**  
Gruff Architects

**Ailish Killilea**  
Iceni Projects

**Ben Pierson**  
Iceni Projects

**Edwina Coward**  
Iceni Projects

**Genevieve Arblaster-Hulley**  
Iceni Projects

**Gill Eaton**  
Iceni Projects

**Lewis Eldridge**  
Iceni Projects

**Stephen O'Fegan**  
Iceni Projects

**Tom Brooks**  
Iceni Projects

**Alex Sherratt**  
Matthew Lloyd Architects



# Constructive Conservation Roundtable 002

Da Vinci House, 44 Saffron Hill | 7th February 2019

## WHY DO THESE ISSUES ARISE?

Prevailing economic conditions since 2008 have put tremendous pressure on local government. This period has also seen substantial regulatory and policy evolution, through a change in government in 2010 and the implementation of the 'Localism' agenda and its consequent impacts on planning policy and processes. The new requirements for Local Plans and the strict timescale imposed by government has spurred the production of Core Strategies and other related Policy Documents, without the necessary updates to related local designations, guidance or evidence based documents such as conservation area appraisals, local lists etc. This has led to a) lack of clarity in what should be conserved and why; b) gap between available guidance and current scientific and technical approaches to conservation. Officers are thus confronted continuously with 'old ways of thinking' against the necessity to respond to current housing and economic issues.

Additionally, within the under current of populism, there is an ever increasing resistance amongst communities towards 'change' relaying on 'fears' rather than 'facts' to their respective democratic leaders. Thus, Councillors are often under pressure to agree with the 'popular' belief, acting emotively rather than objectively.

## SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

### Hiring the 'right' team

The main underpinning principle of heritage legislation and policy is "identifying what matters and allowing the rest to change, ideally so as to enhance the heritage asset." This requires a thorough understanding of 'significance' and 'harm' balanced against 'benefit'. The team must, therefore, include practitioners who are capable of doing so in a credible manner so that the relevant officers are able to 'trust' the evidence provided. This may also require early site visits, opening up works, and additional surveys such as structural investigations by suitably qualified conservation accredited engineers. Physical evidence of rot and decay would give enough confidence to the officer that the reasoning for a course of action is sound and not simply based on an assumption that "it is old, it must be decaying".

Additionally, the planning process is a holistic process and requires an understanding of a wide range of public issues. Appropriate specialists should be appointed accordingly who would be able to produce necessary documents to the satisfaction of planning officers and demonstrate clearly the case in support of the right form of development.

### Making it 'easier' for the planner

The Planner's role is that of making a balanced judgement whilst assessing a range of issues starting from housing, employment, traffic, parking, amenity, heritage assets, nature conservation, flood risks, drainage, sustainability, carbon credentials and any other material considerations. It is unlikely that the Officer would have specialist knowledge in so many aspects. The only way to mitigate this would be provide honest, clear and precise evidence as part of the application to better inform the Officer.

Writing a fully justified and clear case for Officers will empower them in the decision making process.

## Attendees

### Alex Spicer

Matthew Lloyd Architects

### Bert Mastaler

Matthew Lloyd Architects

### Wilson Goh

Pollard Thomas Edwards Architects

### Gavin Robinson

Shepherd Robson Architects

## Organisers

### Nairita Chakraborty

Heritage & Townscape Team,  
Iceni Projects

### Christopher Daniel

Polysemic



# Constructive Conservation Roundtable 002

Da Vinci House, 44 Saffron Hill | 7th February 2019

Admittedly, this is sometimes difficult when clients lack the understanding of the process and take a confrontational approach. Appropriate practitioners can help bring professional judgement into the process and make up for technical lack of skills in planning authorities and can seek to work collaboratively to find innovative solutions.

## Engaging the community

To overcome the scepticism in the community there is more need to involve community in the decision making process than ever before. This includes "pitching things in the right way" and developing appropriate tools to recognise that consultation and participation is a process and not just an event. An open and interactive consultation process should ideally reconcile the gap between the Client's evidence based arguments/justification and the resident's perception, leading to a more 'joined-up' approach.

**Next Salon Date: To be confirmed**