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The struggle to protect English townscapes

From satellite dishes to plastic windows to mock architecture, Britain's conservation areas are under threat from eyesores



Classic vistas such as this one, across Exeter, can be harmed by insensitive development

Helen Davies

The battle for Wanstead Grove, a leafy suburban area 11 miles east of London, began three years ago when hoardings appeared on the corner plot of The Avenue. As rumours circulated, neighbours on the surrounding roads of semidetached and detached redbrick houses knocked on each others' doors to find out what was afoot.

It turned out that planning permission had been granted to knock down two bungalows on the site and replace them with a block of 12 flats. As the building work progressed and the flats rose ever higher, the residents grew ever more alarmed and decided that enough was enough. Over white wine and nibbles, a resistance group was formed: it may have been too late to stop this block, but they were determined to prevent any future blight by having their neighbourhood declared a conservation area.

"Something had to be done," says Helen Zammett, a retired personal assistant and chair of the residents' association for the Counties estate, in which Wanstead Grove lies. "Nobody knew how ghastly the flats would be. We felt that if such developments could be given the go-ahead, we didn't have enough protection."

Wanstead is not prime superbia, with chichi boutiques and countless gastropubs, but it is a decent, hard-working, ticking-along-nicely sort of a place. Even in the downturn, property prices are holding up — just. A six-bedroom Edwardian semi on the Counties estate is on the market for £650,000.

The fight back against the proliferation of poorly designed blocks of flats, satellite dishes, neon signs and mock-architectural alterations that are out of keeping with the neighbourhood began at the local cricket club in Nutter Lane. Homeowners squeezed in on a summer's evening in 2006 to voice their thoughts and sign a petition.

There followed what Zammett describes as a "long, drawn-out battle" with Redbridge borough council, which, she says, was "intransigent". In order to persuade the local authority that their 600-odd homes were worth preserving, the association provided in-depth historical reports and set up a website to keep everyone informed. This March, they won their battle: their part of Wanstead, which includes a Grade II-listed park with an 18th-century hall and 100 Edwardian terraces, was granted conservation-area status by the council.

It joins an estimated 9,300 other such sites in historic parts of cities, towns and villages across the country, from the stucco-fronted townhouses of Belgravia to the huddle of cottages in the fishing village of Clovelly, north Devon. An estimated 1.1m of households lie within conservation areas. Stamford, in Lincolnshire, is the oldest, established in 1967. Parts of Yeovil, in Somerset, and Felixstowe, in Suffolk, could be the next to join the list.

“Conservation areas are the element of England’s heritage all around us that touches all our lives,” says Simon Thurley, chief executive of English Heritage, the public body that, among other things, advises the government on the treatment of architecturally significant buildings. “These areas play a vital role in protecting the most important historic places in England from ill-considered change.”

All is not well within many of our conservation areas, however, according to the first nationwide census, to be published this week by English Heritage. The organisation, which earlier this year asked local authorities to fill in a questionnaire, will reveal that more than 1,300 — one in seven — are at risk because residents and/or councils are failing to maintain standards.

As an example, English Heritage cites Thetford, in Norfolk, a historic village of 15th- and 16th-century timber-framed houses and late-Victorian buildings. It has condemned alterations and extensions, changes to roofs and chimneys and the installation of satellite dishes that have “eroded the character of the area”. Vacancy and dereliction are also significant problems, it notes.

Another target to be named and shamed is Baron’s Court conservation area, in west London. In the 1860s, it was a smart place to live, and the rows of terraces attracted some well-known names. Today, the blue plaques celebrating Gandhi and Sir Geoffrey de Havilland, the aviation pioneer, are partially obscured by satellite dishes.

“Following the first world war, the area fell on hard times, and the large houses were subdivided,” says Julian Renselar, a conservation officer at Hammersmith and Fulham borough council. “We have tried to get the largest of the satellite dishes removed, but with so many flat owners each wanting their own, it is rather like trying to stem the tide.” The council may not have won the war on satellite dishes, but it has successfully imposed a ban on estate agents’ boards.

Similar battles are going on up and down the country. In Painswick, a quintessentially English town in Gloucestershire — birthplace of Thomas Twining, the tea merchant — residents are hotly debating whether allotments proposed for the Gyde House conservation area will break the rules. In the Lancashire town of Ashton, owners of the Grade II-listed homes on Wellington Street are angry with the council after workers used asphalt to replace a stone in their cobbled street that came loose. “It’s an eyesore,” says Sarah Clifford, 35. “It looks shocking. It is going to devalue my home.”

By far and away the biggest individual blight — which in turn makes the biggest dent on property values — is the use of uPVC or plastic windows instead of sash or other mock-period ones. Also high on English Heritage’s list of targets are poorly maintained roads and paving, and unsympathetic extensions. The organisation has yet to join the wheelie-bin rebellion that erupted in the pages of the tabloid press last week — but give it time.

English Heritage is releasing the results of its survey as part of a campaign offering guidance to homeowners and councils alike on measures they can take to reinvigorate the conservation areas. “There is a lot that residents can do themselves, and we will support conservation officers in their tireless work to halt decay and inappropriate change before it is too late,” Thurley says.

Is all this merely a call to arms for busybodies everywhere, a charter for the curtain-twitcher and retired civil servant to ban anyone from modernising their home or cutting down a tree?

Certainly, to residents of edgier inner-city areas forced to put up with lurid graffiti, smashed street lights or burnt-out garages, some of the things that trouble English Heritage are suburban vandalism of a fairly trivial kind. The decision to install plastic window frames rather than period replicas is generally down to a lack of money, rather than taste. (Indeed, the body has come under fire after it was revealed by The Sunday Times that it was accepting money to endorse companies that sell decorating and renovating materials. It denied there is anything wrong with such “licensing arrangements”.)

English Heritage, however, is keen to point out that any additional costs that can be incurred in meeting them are more than outweighed by the pleasure people derive from living in such an area. This pleasure appears to be reflected in property prices: three-quarters of estate agents polled in a survey

commissioned by the organisation said that a well-maintained conservation area adds to the value, with properties within them selling for more than equivalent ones outside.

Back in Wanstead, residents await a decision by planners on another proposed development of six houses and 18 flats in their neighbourhood. This time, with their conservation-area status, they are hoping to block it.

english-heritage.org.uk; countiesresidentsassociation.org.uk

What does conservation area status mean?

- Local authorities have the power to restrict alterations that might affect the key elements of a building — such as replacing sash windows with unsightly plastic ones, putting up a porch, painting it a different colour or changing distinctive doors, windows or other architectural details.
- Any extension must reflect the style, proportions, materials and details of the property — and not dominate or compete with it.
- English Heritage advises homeowners to repair rather than replace, not to remove gardens, fences, walls or hedges, and to ensure satellite dishes are unobtrusive.
- To find out which streets fall within a conservation area, visit the relevant local authority's website for a detailed map.

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