

PROPOSED CONSERVATION AREA BARBICAN/GOLDEN LANE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Conservation areas are defined as areas of special architectural or historic interest whose character or appearance it is desirable to preserve or enhance.

In some conservation areas, or parts of them, the historic interest may be the most important element, over and above the architectural interest of individual buildings.

The area bordered by Old Street in the north and the dual carriageway of London Wall in the south, bordered by Goswell Road/Aldersgate Street to the west and by Whitecross Street to the east, is of outstanding historic interest in terms of its development after the Second World War.

This area, originally a labyrinth of narrow streets lined with warehouses, manufacturing premises, pubs, schools, institutions and houses, was badly damaged in the great German air-raids of December 1940 and May 1941. Many buildings were totally destroyed, while others were left as burnt-out shells.

In the wake of such devastation the area witnessed what is arguably the boldest and most concerted effort of post-war regeneration carried out in the UK. The Golden Lane Estate (1952-1957) was remarkable as a model social housing estate, although no doubt influenced by the modernist ideas of Berthold Lubetkin and others before the war. The gigantic Barbican development (1963-82), by the same architects, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, was even more daring, with its mix of uses, its raised podium deck, its tall towers and powerful Brutalist architectural language.

The quality of these two comprehensive developments has been recognised by statutory listing. However, their setting is also extremely important. The streets and buildings which surround the Barbican and Golden Lane Estates contribute enormously to understanding the context of what was there before, and to appreciating the skill and challenges faced by the architects of the Barbican and Golden Lane Estates.

To the north of the Golden Lane Estate, the narrow streets south of Old Street are lined with a mixture of repaired pre-war and new post-war buildings of modest scale, and modest architectural quality. The street names, such as Baltic, Honduras, Domingo and Timber, recall the long-vanished trades that once flourished there. There are very few buildings of any great individual merit, but these streets possess a strong character and historical interest. Together with Whitecross Street, Banner and Garrett Streets, they were added into the St Luke's Conservation Area by the London Borough of Islington in 2002. Revised Conservation Area Guidelines were adopted that same year.

The area between the Golden Lane Estate and the Barbican (Area 2 in the consultation document) has a very similar quality to that described above. Here again the pre-war street pattern survives, lined with buildings of varying architectural quality but generally in modest scale and constructed tight to the back-edge of pavement, giving a strong sense of enclosure, reinforcing the narrow width of the streets. Bridgewater Square is an important pre-war survival, protected by the London Squares Act, and the wildlife garden is the fortuitous, and now much-loved, result of an undeveloped bomb site. Most, but not all, the buildings are post-war. The Welsh Church, though not listed, is an important local landmark, and of considerable architectural merit. Other buildings, notably Tudor Rose Court by Avanti Architects (1997), were designed to respect the scale of the Golden Lane Estate opposite. It is unfortunate that Bernard Morgan House, which very closely reflected the scale and layout of Bowater House, has recently been demolished, although its replacement (whilst perhaps too tall) does redefine the pre-war building lines.

There is no doubt, whatever the assessment of individual buildings or open spaces, that this area provides an extremely important transition between the Golden Lane Estate and the Barbican, and a vital context to both, historically and in terms of its built form.

To the south of the Barbican, Area 5 in the consultation document is another area of considerable historical interest, both as a context and setting for the Barbican, but also for the buildings, structures and spaces it contains. The post-war dual carriageway of London Wall, originally dubbed Route XI, was intended to be part of a northern bypass for the central core of the City, and to be flanked by rows of office blocks. Between it and the Barbican, however, the area contains the pre-war survivals of Ironmongers' Hall (1922-5), and the post-war rebuilds of Barber-Surgeons' Hall and Salters' Hall (Basil Spence 1972-6).

Alongside these there are extraordinary fragments of Roman and Medieval defences now displayed to excellent effect in public gardens. There is no clear-cut physical boundary to the south side of the Barbican. Indeed Terry Farrell's Alban Gate redevelopment of 1992 clearly sought to integrate the southern low-rise terrace of the Barbican with the low rise residential element and the mannered re-landscaping of Monkwell Square. The gardens to the west of Barber-Surgeons' Hall continue up to the lakeside of the Barbican, undoubtedly contributing to its setting.

At the north-western end of London Wall, the Museum of London (Powell and Moya 1968 -76) is another important part of the post-war jigsaw, designed to integrate with the raised pedestrian podium and walkways of the Barbican, but also to respect and provide a view of the archaeological remains exposed in the gardens to the east. It was carefully and cunningly planned to fit around the retained Ironmongers' Hall. Although the Museum building has recently been granted a Certificate of Immunity against statutory listing, it should nevertheless be regarded as a non-designated heritage asset of considerable importance.

Conclusion

The area should be considered as whole, and as one which tells a remarkable story of post-war re-building. There is nothing unusual about conservation areas which contain contrasting elements within them (the Smithfield Conservation Area is good example of a large conservation area where the whole is greater than the sum of its contrasting parts). It makes little sense and achieves minimal additional protection to designate two separate conservation areas encompassing only the curtilages of the listed the Golden Lane Estate and the Barbican. The areas between the estates and to the south of the Barbican, together with Islington's St Luke's Conservation Area to the north, are vital to the setting of listed buildings, and are of considerable interest in their own right, containing important heritage assets. They are worthy of the protection that would be afforded by conservation area status.

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