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Protecting the past and planning the future: conservation planning and urban change in historic city centres.

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of conservation policy from the late-1960s to the present on the commercial core of the city of Worcester in the U.K. Using data from local authority planning records, it examines the complex relationship between conservation policy and other development concerns through a focus on the outcomes of planning negotiations manifest in the changing nature, location and architectural style of major development proposals. Detailed consideration of major development proposals from the late-1980s onwards reveals the way in which the 'heritage map' of area and asset designation influenced the nature and location of development. Using insights from Conzenian urban morphological approaches to the assessment of townscape character, the paper reflects on the extent to which understanding of the existing urban form and character of the area informed these development proposals and outcomes.

Keyword: Conservation areas, city centres, townscape character, Conzenian approaches

Introduction

For over fifty years substantive parts of the centres of many British towns and cities have been designated as conservation areas. Conservation areas, introduced by the 1967 Civic Amenities Act, are defined as 'Areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance' and designation provides Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) with additional planning controls, including control over the demolition of unlisted buildings. In the half century since their introduction, the number and range of conservation areas has grown and currently within England alone there are approximately 9,902 areas (Historic England 2020). Despite this growth there has been little systematic appraisal of the cumulative impact of changes over time within conservation areas, with concern that areas are increasingly at risk of incremental erosion of their special character (Civic Voice 2018). Whilst problems of lack of appraisal of change exist for most conservation areas, they are particularly acute for those areas amongst the earliest phase of designations, where detailed assessments of area character, on which to base decision-making, are often lacking (Larkham and Jones 1993).

To date, detailed analysis of change in specific conservation areas has largely been the preserve of academic research, such as work undertaken by members of the Urban Morphology Research Group at the University of Birmingham (see for example Larkham, 1990; Vilgrasa and Larkham 1995; Barrett, 1996, Bienstman, 2007; Whitehand, 2009). This paper sits within this tradition of urban morphological study and seeks to

assess the impact of change within one early-designated conservation area, the historic core of the city of Worcester in the UK, through analysis of the changing nature, location and architectural style of major development proposals as evidenced by examination of the planning records held by the local LPA. The paper reviews previous work on central Worcester undertaken by Vilagrasa and Larkham (1995) as a foundation for discussion of more recent change from 1987 to 2019 within the conservation area. In the absence of an approved character appraisal document for the area, the paper draws on urban characterisation work undertaken in the Conzenian tradition to offer an assessment of the impact of this change on the character of the conservation area and to reflect on the future challenges for management.

Background

Conservation planning and urban change in the UK

Between the 1940s and 1990s urban conservation became more central to the British planning system, with large parts of the commercial cores of cities being covered by heritage designations and local planning policy evolving to embrace conservation agendas (Pendlebury and Strange 2011). However, mainstreaming of conservation concerns into planning practice challenged many of the traditional philosophies and practices of historic building conservation. These challenges to conservation thinking have been evident in both the historic ‘jewel’ cities that pioneered conservation protection and also in so called ‘core’ cities, larger industrial cities that have more recently embraced conservation of their industrial-era urban heritage (Pendlebury and Strange 2011). For jewel cities the need has been to balance successful conservation of assets with management of the development pressures resulting from their economic use for tourism in a sustainable way (Strange 1997; 1999). Within core cities, the focus has been on the use of heritage assets in regeneration strategies, particularly those in economically marginal areas on the edge of the city centre (Pendlebury 2002, Madgin 2010). As Pendlebury and Strange (2011) have noted, within these cities the idea of a ‘*heritage map*’ of protected assets has been influential in shaping the evolution of their city centres, restricting development in some areas, focussing heritage-based regeneration schemes and pushing other forms of investment to those locations without designated assets. Whilst listed building assets have largely been sacrosanct in redevelopment, although sometimes heavily altered such as through the use of façadism, the key battles have been over the loss of non-listed assets and over threats to character through intensive tall building development (Pendlebury and Strange 2011). Currently, a key agenda for the development of conservation practice, not just in the UK but also internationally, is the need to balance heritage protection with sustainable urban development and the continued vitality of urban centres in a holistic way, considering the wider historic landscape beyond a focus on individual buildings and adopting a more nuanced and informed understanding of the relational complexity of urban form and of embedded cultural value (Rodwell 2018, Roders and Banderin 2019).

Conservation planning and urban morphology

Despite the need to develop a more integrated and holistic approach to managing historic urban landscapes, conservation practice remains largely ignorant of the considerable body of work which has explored how the form taken by the urban landscape is connected to the historical grain of the city, and how detailed analysis and representation of change over time can be employed in management of historic urban landscapes (Whitehand and Gu 2010; Thomas 2018). A key contribution to the theory and methodology for conservation and management of historical urban landscapes comes from the work M. R. G. Conzen, particularly his historico-geographical approach to the analysis of townscape (Whitehand and Gu 2010; Birkhamshaw and Whitehand 2012).

In a series of papers Conzen (1966, 1975, 1988) set out a theoretical basis for townscape conservation utilising concepts and ideas for the study of urban form from his previous research on English towns. Central to Conzen's approach was his conception of the townscape as dynamic and as an historical phenomenon, where the urban landscape encapsulates the history of a society in a particular locale, or the '*objectivation of the spirit*' of the society (Conzen 1975). The objectivation of the spirit becomes the spirit of place, or *genius loci* (Conzen, 1975 p.82), providing an important environmental experience for the individual at a practical, aesthetic and intellectual level. This *genius loci* is particularly strong in those townscapes that demonstrate historical longevity and continuity, or historicity (Conzen, 1975 p.82).

For Conzen (1975), the task for conservation management was the illumination and maintenance of this local historicity, which critically varied in its nature and intensity in the townscape, providing the basis for the identification of urban landscape units (or morphological regions or townscape units in Conzen's terminology) and hence a framework within which conservation priorities could be determined (Conzen, 1975; 1988). Within complex urban centres, a multi-tier hierarchy of townscape units may be recognized where key phases in the development of the town plan are generally the basis of the principal, first order units of the hierarchy, whilst the lowest-order units, or morphotopes, reflect incremental minor plot changes or variations the form of buildings (Conzen, 1988; Barrett 1996; Birkhamshaw and Whitehand 2012). In the application of this methodology to assessment of boundaries for conservation character areas comparing those identified by LPAs to those townscape units identified by Conzenian analysis, the boundaries rarely match illustrating the 'gap' between urban morphological and professional planning approaches (Larkham, 1990; Barrett, 1996, Bienstman, 2007; Whitehand, 2009).

Data sources and study area.

The use of planning application records to monitor change

The source of data for the detailed study of change within the conservation area is the planning application records held by LPAs. All but very minor development proposals require planning permission under the 1947 and subsequent Town and Country Planning Acts. The LPA holds records of all such applications which are

publicly accessible, and which are increasingly managed and accessed through online digital platforms. These records constitute a useful resource for the detailed study of built environment change in the form of a comprehensive record of changes applied for, including details of applicants and agents involved, details of the nature of development proposed and the outcome of the LPA decision-making on the application. Files can also include architectural drawings, supporting application reports and information, consultation correspondence and other data.

The possibilities and problems of using LPA planning records have been well documented (Larkham, 1988). One of the principal problems is double or multiple counting which can produce an inflated measure of development pressure. This can be a particular concern when looking at development in conservation areas with many listed buildings, with separate applications for listed building consent duplicating full planning applications for the same development (Barrett 1993). Within this study, this issue of inflation is mitigated by separating out these different application types which are recorded separately within LPA records. Additionally, multiple change applications have not been disaggregated into component parts, which can also inflate figures, and each application is recorded under only one category code. Analysis concentrates on those applications defined as major changes, which includes demolition and new building, major rebuilding schemes, extensions to existing buildings, extensive refurbishment of buildings and significant internal alteration to buildings. The categorisation used follows that employed in previous studies of townscape change using development control data (Larkham 1986, Barrett 1993, 1996). Major applications, whilst lower in number to minor changes (such as signage), have the greatest visible impact upon townscape character. It should also be noted that applications that are approved are not always necessarily developed, so change recorded by application records will not always translate directly to development on the ground.

The Historic City Conservation Area, Worcester

The central core of Worcester was designated as 'The Historic City Conservation Area' in 1969. It covers the intra-mural area contained within the line of the city's Medieval walls, and some parts of its Medieval extra-mural suburbs, and contains a significant number of the city's listed buildings (Figure 1, in appendix). Whilst the city's Medieval street pattern, parts of the city wall, some Medieval churches and 16th and 17th century timber-framed buildings are still visible in the core, the area's built fabric is dominated by a mix of later Georgian, Victorian and Modern architecture. As with many early area designations, the conservation area has undergone some boundary changes, with the most recent in 2000 involving the inclusion of more land to the north of the centre. However, like many early conservation area designations it remains without a detailed character appraisal document to underpin management.

Whilst no formal appraisal document exists, research has been undertaken which could underpin the production of such a document. An historic townscape characterisation of the city centre of Worcester was undertaken as part of the Worcester Urban Archaeological Strategy project which identified nineteen

character areas within the intra-mural area (Baker, Dinn and Payne 2004) (Figure 2 in appendix). The methodology for this historic townscape characterisation combined research reconstructing the Medieval plan of the city employing Conzenian plan analysis approaches (Baker and Holt 2004) with the descriptive approaches of rural Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) (Baker, Dinn and Payne 2004). Conzenian town plan analysis techniques were utilised to define plan units, identifying the framework of medieval streets and plots and the degree to which different historical periods contributed to aspects of the present townscape. HLC approaches added to this analysis by considering the buildings within the framework of streets and plots, alongside identification of different areas of distinct functional character. Whilst not a hierarchy of townscape units involving the amalgamation of morphological units for the three form complexes as envisaged by Conzen (1988), it does provide a basis from within urban morphology to assess the impact of change on the character of the conservation area in the absence of a full character appraisal document.

Results and Discussion

From comprehensive redevelopment to conservation

Vilgrasa and Larkham's (1995) study of central Worcester, utilising information from planning records, covers the twenty-year period before and after the designation of central Worcester as a conservation area in 1969, charting the rise and fall of Modernism over this period. In the 1960s building boom, large-scale retail-led redevelopment schemes transformed multiple plots within key parts of the historic core (Figure 3), and whilst not mapped in their study the impact of these schemes in transforming plot series is evident in the urban characterisation study as the light blue shaded units (10 and 11) (Figure 2 appendix). Designation of the conservation area is seen as an important catalyst in shifting the stance of the LPA from a rather contradictory position of both approving and refusing Modern development in the city centre towards a clearer anti-Modernist stance. Key planning officers were influential in renegotiating development proposals to promote the use of historical contextual styles and promoted listed building refurbishment through the use of grant funding (Figure 3). This transition parallels that evident in other similar historic centres studied, such as Bristol (Barrett 1996) and Chester (Mageean 1999).

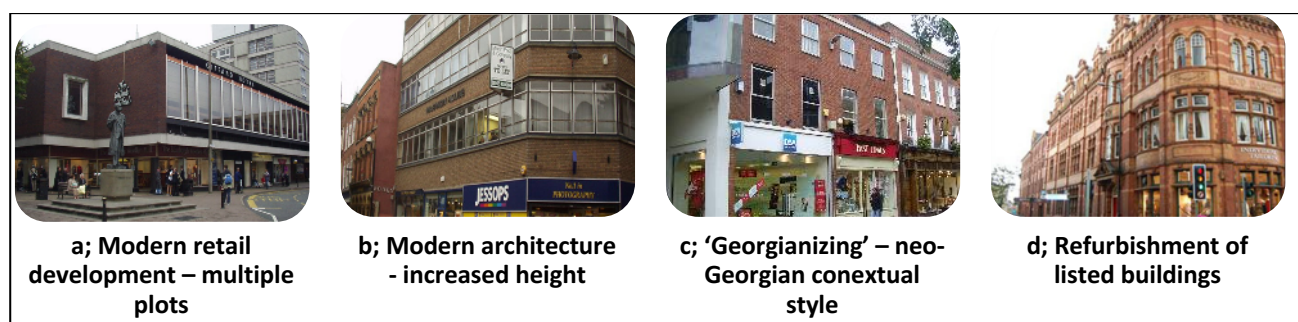


Figure 3: Examples of Modern 1960s retail-led developments (a & b) and later contextual style schemes (c) and listed building refurbishment (d).

Conservation as mainstream planning practice?

The current research extends Vilagrasa and Larkham's study by considering the impact of development trends in the period since 1987 within the current boundaries of the Historic City Conservation Area. Figure 4 displays the changing volume major development applied for through the development management process for the period 1987 to 2019¹.

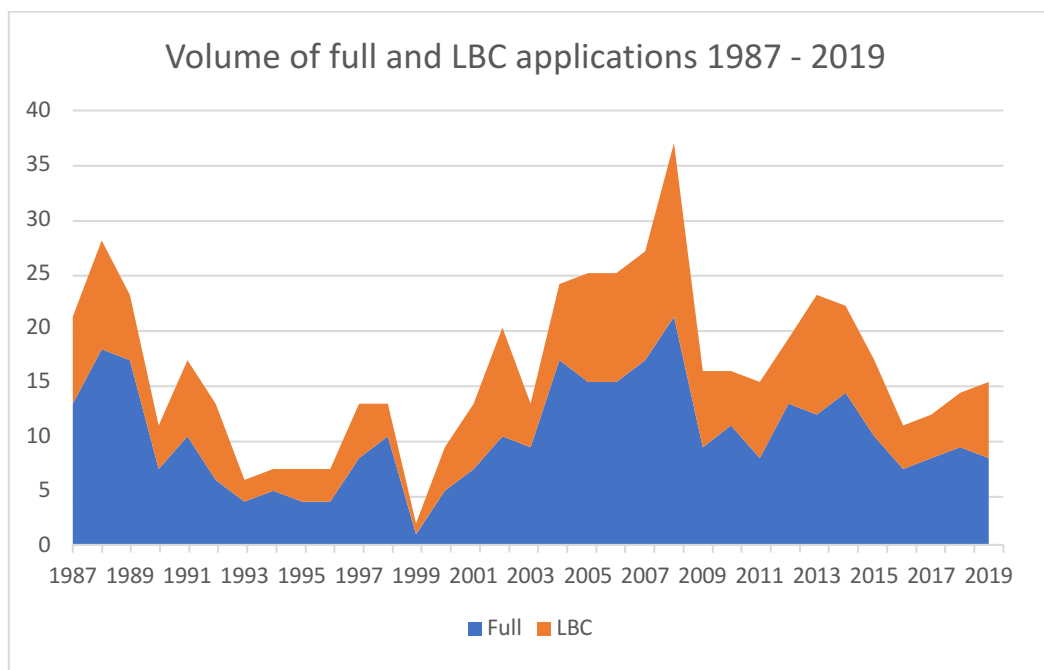


Figure 4: Volume of full and LBC applications 1987-2019 in the Historic City Conservation Area.

The overall pattern of applications broadly follows wider commercial property development cycles in the UK over the period, with a commercial property development boom in the late-1980s followed by a slump in the 1990s (Jadevicius and Huston 2017), and a rising number of applications in the early 2000s followed by a slump after the 2008 global financial crash and a muted recovery thereafter, albeit with LBC applications experiencing less of a decline than general planning applications (Historic England 2020). Therefore, conservation controls did not necessarily block wider commercial development trends, but rather guided these to unfold in specific ways and within particular locations, where the '*heritage map*' of heritage asset designations (Pendlebury and Strange 2011) provided the framework within which wider development trends were negotiated.

¹ As noted previously, in identifying full permission and LBC applications separately there will be some duplication of applications for development to the same building or site, so it important to interpret overall trends in volume rather than the actual numbers of applications per se. Equally, not all approved schemes were eventually built, with a small number superseded by revised schemes or not started at all.

Analysis of the type of major change applied for over this period provides further insight into the influence of the *heritage map* in shaping change in the core of Worcester. Figure 5 indicates that new building and demolition applications (albeit almost all involving more recent unlisted and minor buildings to the rear of plots) were evident in the building booms of the late-1980s and the early 2000s, with more limited new building evident in development slumps. Similarly, extensions to existing buildings, either to the rear or to the roofscape, were also prominent during these periods of relative upturns in development volume.

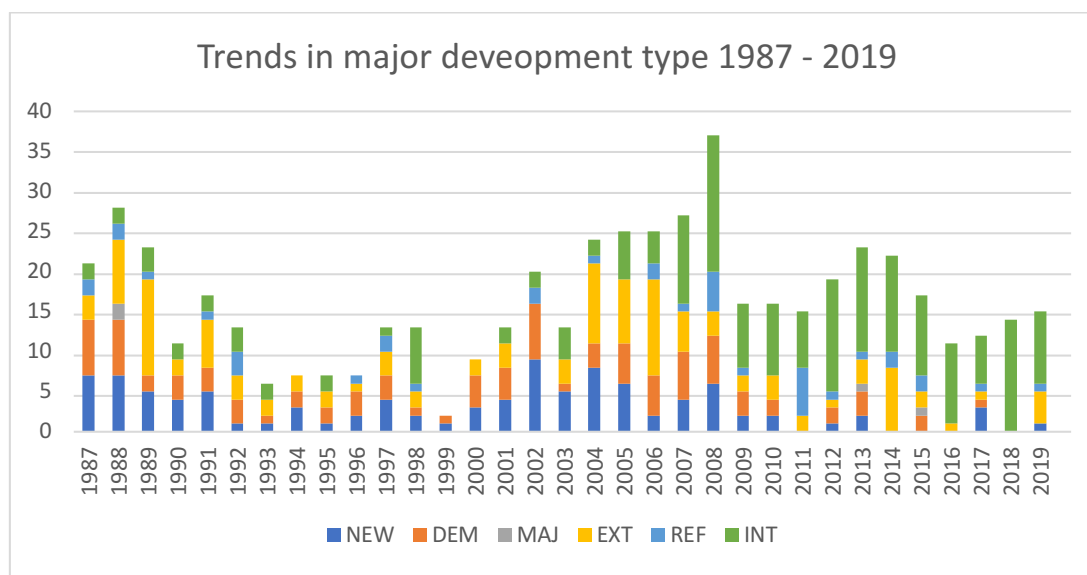


Figure 5: Trends in major development type 1987-2019 in the Historic City Conservation Area.

Both these trends highlight the heritage constraints within the historic city core with many protected listed buildings (see Figure 1) and few open development sites. Proposals for major redevelopment behind retained façades were rare during the period, with the controversial practice of *façadism* largely rejected as a solution, linked to the extensive listing of pre-19th century fabric. Two proposals appeared in the late 1980s, and then no such proposals were received again until 2013 and 2015 for redevelopment behind the retained façade of an unlisted Victorian factory building (Figure 5). The other key trend of note is the increasing volume of applications for significant internal alterations, particularly for the period from 2007 onwards, largely relating to the conversion of the upper floors of buildings into housing. This was driven both by broader housing trends, with restrictions on new housebuilding on edge of city greenfield sites increasing the demand for, and economic return on, flats in the city centre, and also in the specific case of Worcester by demand for student accommodation associated with the expansion of the University of Worcester following its attainment of full university status in 2005.

What is particularly interesting in terms of how development pressures were mediated through the frame of the *heritage map* is how this influenced the location and style of new building in the period from 1987 to

2019. Figure 6 (in appendix) highlights the location and style of development associated with the boom of the late 1980s into the 1990s, showing how the *heritage map* of building listing and historic streetscapes encouraged the 'cloaking' of modern development or its deflection to industrial fringe sites beyond the intra-mural core. Modern commercial development was increasingly 'masked' through the 'de-modernising' of earlier retail developments, utilisation of backland sites behind retained historic buildings, or through the adoption of standardised Post-Modern historicist architectural styles that became the new 'conservation-area-architecture' in common with many other cities during this period (Larkham 1996, Mageean, 1999). Only one scheme during this period utilised Late-Modern architecture, the City Arcade, a controversial replacement for a Modernist 1950s shopping arcade on the High Street. More extensive commercial redevelopment proposals for housing and a major supermarket were deflected to the inner fringe belt to the north of the line of the city wall (Figure 6). It is important to note that this area was outside of the conservation boundary until 2000, and was not covered by the urban characterisation study, highlighting the deficiencies in early boundary designation that cut across townscape units of related character and the lack of reference to the character and historicity of the area in decision-making.

In the 2000s (Figure 7 in appendix) significant retail-led development virtually ceased within the conservation area, with much of this deflected further beyond the core to older industrial areas on the edge of the historic city. In this period new building was largely of small residential and institutional developments, again utilising backland areas or the few remaining small vacant sites within the intra-mural area, with limited impact on the character of the conservation area. Interestingly, some of these schemes sought to adopt more Late-Modern styling as LPA officers sought to encourage a move away from the default of 'conservation-area-architecture' and promote more innovation in schemes, albeit still largely within the height and building materials 'palette' of the core (Figure 7). The most significant area of redevelopment was again beyond the edge of the intra-mural area to the south of the conservation area with the redevelopment of the former Royal Worcester Porcelain manufacturing site (Figure 7). Again, without detailed assessment of character to inform development, design of the scheme was driven by the developer's conception of contextual canalside heritage buildings, seemingly lacking any reference to the Worcester vernacular or the morphology of this former industrial area. As in the northern extra-mural area, lack of any appraisal of the evolution and character of this area led to gentrification of the area with loss of the area's deeper industrial heritage meaning.

The impact of the economic crash of 2008 on development is clear with a significant reduction in the number of new building applications (Figure 8 in appendix), paralleling trends in conservation planning in other larger European cities (Pendlebury et al 2020). In this age of austerity, many local administrations have actively adopted neo-liberal agendas to encourage diversification in regeneration and investment, challenging earlier ideas and practices in conservation (Pendlebury et al 2020). This has been partly evident in a smaller city such as Worcester, with recent new build developments primarily driven by local educational institution

expansion or culture-led commercial schemes. The University of Worcester has increasingly been an important driver for change, with the most significant new build development in recent years being the joint university and public library, 'The Hive', an iconic building that could be described as a flagship regeneration development (Figure 8). The building emphasises sustainability and references to character within the design draw on a wider Worcestershire context rather than the *genius loci* of the specific site within the historic city. Other recent developments (figure 8) hint at the current challenges to conservation practice within the age of austerity, with a return to façadism in the recent redevelopment of another part of the former Royal Porcelain works, where a proposed culture-led redevelopment was significantly amended to include less fabric retention and more market housing to fund viable redevelopment. Additionally, pressures for tall buildings have emerged in the core, with proposals for a large block of student flats opposite the Hive development. In approving the scheme, the LPA's emphasis seems to have been clearly on economic growth, with no reference to the wider character context of the conservation area or the place of the development within the morphological evolution of the historic city.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to examine the impact of development from the late-1960s to the present within Worcester's Historic City Conservation Area. As an example of an early designated conservation area, it has experienced the impacts of the full range of 'turns' in urban conservation practice as this has sought to negotiate its place within the wider development agendas for cities over this period. Focus on development trends from late-1980s onwards has shown how conservation has become increasingly complexly emmeshed with economic development patterns. Analysis of trends in the type of development being undertaken, and the location of new building, demonstrates that the concept of a '*heritage map*' of historic asset designation (Pendlebury and Strange 2011) exerts a strong influence on the development trajectory within historic centres, largely deflecting major commercial development schemes to the industrial fringes of these areas. In this respect, Worcester's Historic City Conservation Area has experienced the challenges of both a 'jewel' and a 'core' historic city (Pendlebury and Strange 2011). Within the intra-mural Medieval historic core ('the jewel') listed assets have largely been sacrosanct in development proposals and the challenge has been one of balancing their protection with their sustainable utilisation within a growing tourism and leisure sector and as a location for residential development, largely achieved through hidden development in backlands and extensions and conversions to existing buildings. In the industrial extra-mural areas to the north and south of the historic centre ('the core'), the largely unlisted status of many buildings and their relatively late inclusion within the conservation area boundary has led to more extensive redevelopment which has paid scant regard to the deeper character of these areas. Like many early-designated conservation areas, the preservation and enhancement of the character of the Historic City has been hindered by the absence of a full character appraisal of the area and a legacy of earlier deficiencies in boundary delimitation. Whilst some detailed townscape analysis within the Conzenian tradition has been undertaken for the historic core, like

many other detailed academic studies, it has yet to find its way into conservation policy and practice within the city. Decision-making has continued to remain largely focussed on traditional approaches to managing historic urban areas, focussed on individual listed building assets, rather than a wider conception of the historic urban landscape. As we emerge from the pandemic with recent funding secured for city centre regeneration, the forthcoming development upturn could be destined to repeat mistakes of the past without better understanding of the deeper historicity of all parts of Worcester's historic core.

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APPENDIX:

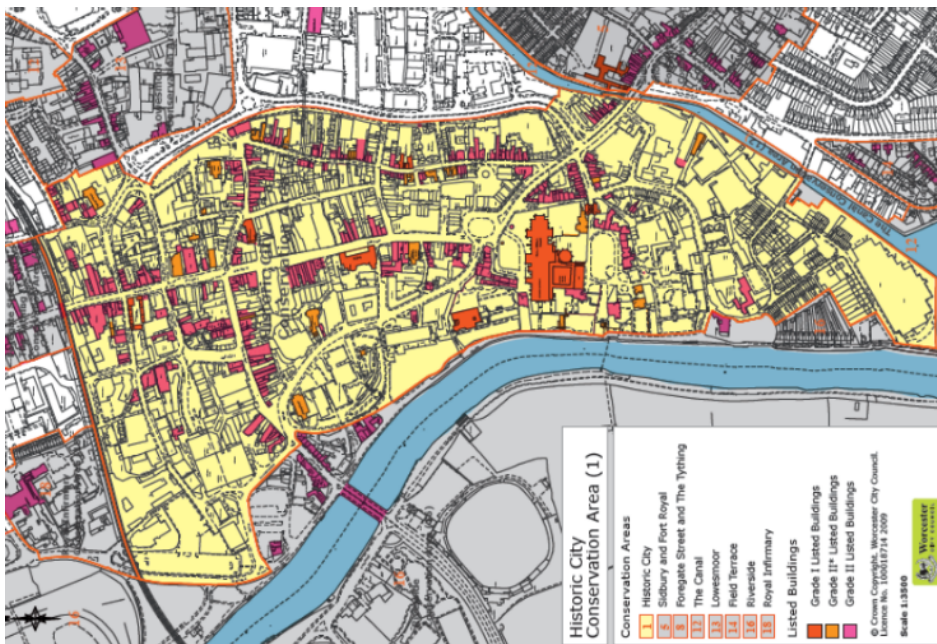


Figure 1: The Historic City Conservation Area, Worcester showing the boundary of the conservation area and the listed buildings within the area (Source, Worcester City Council).

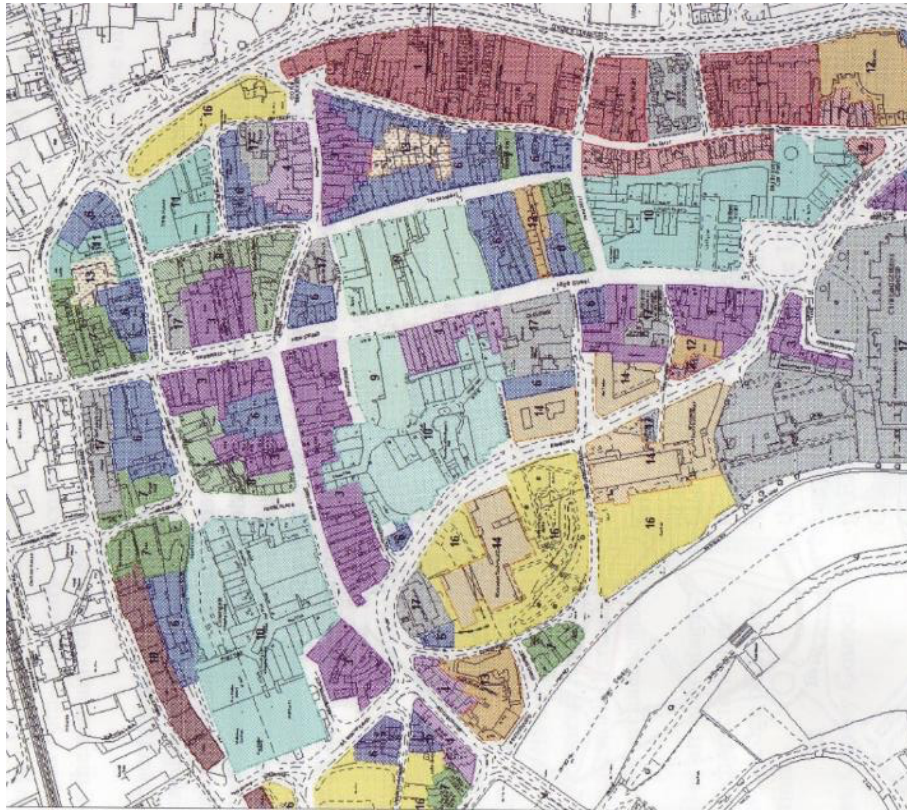


Figure 2: Historic townscape characterisation of central Worcester showing designated areas (Source: Baker, Dinn and Payne 2004)

Figure 6: The location of new build development proposals 1987-1997: the 'heritage map' of backland development and concealed modernity (Source: author)



a; 'De-moderising' – neo-vernacular



b; Concealing modernity



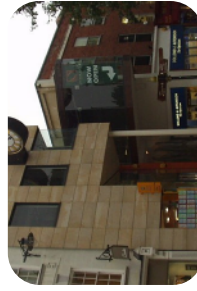
c; Concealing modernity



d; Backland development



e; 'Conservation-area-architecture'



f; Rare late-Modern

Figure 7: The location of new build development proposals 1998-2007: the 'heritage map' of change at extra-mural edges and 'hidden' late-Modernism (Source: author)



a; Character change – north of the city wall



b; Character change – Royal Porcelain site



c; Heritage compromises – Royal Porcelain site



d; 'Hidden' late-Modern



e; 'Hidden' late-Modern



f; 'Hidden' late-Modern

Figure 8: The location of new build development proposals 2008 – 2019: conservation in the 'age of austerity' (Source: author, and University of Worcester image a and Worcester News image d)



b; Education-led – Kings School Arts Building



a; 'Flagship' university development – The Hive



d; Proposals for tall buildings



c; Façadism returns