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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Where bombs failed, greed threatens to ravage our cathedral cities

Charles Clover Published: 8 February 2015



Memories of the war and shame over what planners did after it have protected our cathedral cities for decades. The centres of York, Bath and Norwich triumphantly retain their historic feel despite being targeted in the 1942 Baedeker raids, launched by Hitler in retaliation for Bomber Command's attack on Lübeck, which burnt to the ground.

Even Exeter has not had the nerve to repeat anything as philistine as its demolition of Bedford Circus, one of the finest pieces of Georgian town planning in England, which was damaged in a heavy Luftwaffe raid but survived.

Salisbury and Lincoln — their great cathedrals and distinctive individual buildings — mercifully slept on. The medieval cathedral cities have been the sacred groves of our town and country planning system.

Until now. There have been rumblings for a long time in Winchester, the ancient capital and birthplace of England, about a terrible new development. It is hard to believe that a prosperous tourist city, and choice dormitory city for London professionals, could contemplate a development that would damage the character that draws 5.5m visitors a year. This development is the embodiment of a trend spreading out from London to all Britain's cathedral cities: it is known as town cramming.

The threat becomes clear when you realise that the developer of five acres known as Silver Hill in Winchester's city centre is the one whose scheme to demolish parts of London's Smithfield market was described as "wholly unacceptable" and thrown out by a planning inspector. His judgment was endorsed by Eric Pickles, the communities secretary, and the decision has revalued heritage in the planning system for years to come. The developer is Henderson Global Investors; its chief executive, the aptly named Andrew Formica.

The issue with Silver Hill is not so much what is to be demolished — a tired shopping centre, an antique market and a bus station — but what is to be built in its place. It is huge and stylistically bland. All five acres have been designed by a single architectural firm, Allies & Morrison — and it shows.

The development drives a bulldozer through the planning brief for the area adopted by Winchester city council in 2003. This said that heights of buildings in the city centre should be three and occasionally four storeys, and that individual buildings should be commissioned from different architects to reflect the diverse character of the ancient city. What are planned are street elevations of

six and seven storeys, just north of the cathedral.

The plans show flat roofs and two-storey shop windows, seen nowhere else in the city. Their vast retail spaces, conceived long before the internet shopping revolution, threaten to emasculate Winchester's thriving high street, reputedly the oldest in northern Europe.

It is what Robert Adam, a leading traditional architect whose office is in Winchester, calls "anywhere architecture", for it could have been built in Basingstoke, Southampton or Milwaukee. Two thousand people demonstrated outside the council buildings in November to say that the birthplace of England deserves better. That is the largest protest over a city-centre redevelopment I can recall.

The globalised greed and insensitivity that Henderson's Silver Hill scheme represents should have met its match long ago in proper scrutiny by local planning officers. Why didn't it? I submit that it is because Winchester city council is a co-developer. It stands to gain from the £165m scheme and, despite strong local opposition, the Conservative-controlled council cannot muster the will to turn down a scheme it inherited from its Liberal Democrat predecessors. The council actually hosts propaganda for the scheme on its website at taxpayers' expense.

All praise, then, to a Tory councillor, Kim Gottlieb, himself a developer, who has initiated a judicial review. Apparently, when the council dropped plans for affordable housing and a bus station, the scheme became essentially a new development proposal that should have been put out to tender again.

Good luck to him. The verdict is due this week. If he fails, it will be up to Pickles. He has warned Winchester that it cannot approve the scheme without reference to him — usually the prelude to calling in the scheme for a public inquiry.

Thus Silver Hill has become a national issue. We do not want institutional greed and anonymous developments taking over our cathedral cities. And when this ghastly scheme bites the dust, we need to think about appointing independent scrutineers when councils are themselves developers, for money so evidently corrupts their judgment.

charles.clover@sunday-times.co.uk

11 comments



Charles Clover

6 people listening



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Damian Plant

2 days ago

A visit to Coventry should be compulsory for all Town Planners to see what poor planning decisions since 1945 have wrought on a once historical city left devastated by Hitler's Luftwaffe

1 Recommend [Reply](#)

Peter Bolt

2 days ago



I love the phrase " anywhere architecture " .

It should be compulsory included on every Towns Coat of Arms to which it applies.

1  Recommend Reply



Miss Rebecca Stubbs

2 days ago

Well said. Quite apart from the undesirability of the architecture, the council's use of its website to rubbish the efforts of the many who object to the proposal (and the way the artistic impressions deployed in its favour have messed with both perspective and the position of the sun to attempt to hide the height and narrowness of the roads which will result) is disturbing.

1  Recommend Reply



Steve Hill

2 days ago

I will not prejudge the outcome of the judicial review.

I will say it is up to the people of Winchester to decide, through their elected representatives, whether they want their community to - quite legally - benefit to the tune of £165 million, or whether they would prefer to pay that much more in council tax.

There is no evidence that the democratic process is not working here, even if you don't personally like the result.

1  Recommend Reply



David Bailey

2 days ago

Your comment makes it sound like Winchester City Council and hence its residents will benefit financially to the tune of £165m. The article states that this is the value of the development, not the amount that the Council or city residents will gain from it. We will gain little financially and we will be burdened with a most overbearing and disastrous piece of ugly development.

7     Recommend Reply



Steve Hill

2 days ago

@David Bailey Then you need to vote out your council and especially the members of the planning committee. 2014 turnout in Winchester was 43%...

I'm wholly in favour of good quality development rather than drab, but the problem fundamentally seems to be a disconnect in the democratic process. There is no effective penalty for making bad decisions.

2   Recommend Reply

Steve Young

2 days ago

@Steve Hill @David Bailey Read the article again Steve ... the



development has CHANGED from the initial planning to a monstrosity. No one is arguing about the need for a development, the Brooks is a 60s mistake and the rest of the area is badly in need of work ... but this change is a disaster.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)



Tim Banks

2 days ago

@Steve Hill - £165m gain vs council tax?

Exactly. A miserable and narrow choice which has produced miserable and narrow architectural plans.

As Charles Clover eloquently shows, democracy is not merely the casting of votes in systems which can fall into a state of disrepair, but the exercise of peaceful, creative persuasion.

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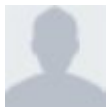


Robert Cannon

2 days ago

Why is Charles Clover paid to be a columnist on this newspaper? The man is anti-urban to the core. Apart from expecting us urban dwellers to subsidise even more already heavily subsidised farmers, he now complains about urban development in cities (after all, the traditional definition of city is an urban settlement that has a cathedral). Maybe if there was more development on greenfield sites there wouldn't be a need to cram such high densities into city centres. But that's the choice - urban sprawl or urban density. Paris is a historic city that has much much higher urban densities than English cities and the same is true of practically every French city, yet I have never heard anyone suggest that French cities preserve their historic characters less well than English ones, quite the contrary in fact.

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IAN GIRVAN

2 days ago

@Robert Cannon As an example of missing the point, this takes some beating. Clover is not arguing against urban development as such, but against all that is ugly, shoddy and rootless, particularly in our historic city centres, of which the proposed Winchester development is an example. Perhaps Cannon thinks that Smithfield should have been knocked down and that it was a good idea to demolish Exeter's Bedford Circus. If he really is on the side of "globalised greed and insensitivity" he should come out with it and tell us..

4  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)



Arthur A Simpson

2 days ago

@Robert Cannon

Because he's a good writer and knows what he's writing about. A good example to follow.

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