



04 Designing in Walsall: The Vision



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in Walsall:
The Vision



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and the
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Parsons House, whg development, Bentley

Designing in Walsall: The Vision

To take every viable opportunity to build on the existing characteristics of Walsall that set it aside from other places. These characteristics comprise the environs that make up the borough and the communities that inhabit them.

The borough is comprised of a complex layering of development from the mediaeval period onwards. The town centre and several district centres have origins in the Middle Ages with subsequent redevelopment during Georgian England and radical expansion during the Victorian era that followed.

Walsall was most significantly shaped by the Industrial Revolution through the construction of transport corridors such as canals and railways, and engineering operations relating to mining and other works associated with the manufacture of goods, most notably metal works, leather works and the production of locks. Whilst the town itself is a readily identifiable destination, the rest of the borough is criss-crossed by a latticework of this industrial activity and its associated residential areas, religious buildings, schools and community facilities. The indelible mark this left on Walsall is bourn out in the number of historic buildings and conservation areas that have their origins in, or devote much of their character to, this period of history.

The 20th Century, too, was a period of radical change in Walsall and the modern age struck a bold and often uncompromising blow to many areas of the borough with important historic provenance.

An urban renaissance is now well underway in Walsall, steered by drawing together the many positive aspects that survive in the borough and using the opportunities brought about by new development and investment to celebrate these many and varied aspects.

The most recognisable aspects of the borough include its landmark buildings such as St. Matthew's and the new art gallery, its many public spaces such as the Arboretum, Willenhall Market and The bridge, its canals and waterways, and its residential areas and multi-functioning streets that are diverse, exciting and serve a variety of audiences.

The vision is realised through compliance with the themes below.

Improving Connections across Walsall by:

- Connecting 'people to places' with pedestrian friendly paths
- Giving preferential treatment to the pedestrian and the cyclist

Urban Spaces must be:

- Vibrant places to meet, play and socialise
- Designed to allow urban living to 'spill out' throughout the year
- Designed so that the car is subservient to the pedestrian

Waterways will:

- Celebrate the waterways heritage of the borough by orientating development towards it and connections along it
- Reveal the unique and special opportunities presented by waterside development for the benefit of all the people of Walsall
- Have the creation of sustainable canalside communities at the heart of new development

Buildings must:

- Be designed and constructed to the highest environmental standards using materials and details to delight the senses
- Relate to the historic environment by introducing a variety of dynamic new forms as well as age old solutions

Homes must:

- Provide the very best housing to encourage sustainable living for the family now and into the future
- Be adaptable and accommodate the changing requirements of people throughout their lives

Green Landscape and Open Spaces must:

- Provide an excellent natural environment in which to play and relax
- Continue to reflect Walsall's biodiversity and native species

Skyline and Townscape must:

- Explore opportunities for new neighbourhoods, districts and quarters that embrace different scales to accommodate modern communities, business and leisure
- Sensitively respect to local heritage and historic landmarks whilst creating a dynamic interplay with them

Arts, Creativity and the Community must be:

- Embedded in our buildings, spaces and places with community involvement at its heart



Distribution Depot, Wryley and Essington Canal, Walsall

Connections

Walsall benefits from an excellent strategic location in the West Midlands and historically has been linked to neighbouring towns with a network of canals, railways and roads. This inherited infrastructure continues to play a role today, however, Walsall needs to ensure it has strong infrastructure at a local level to make all parts of the borough fully connected to one another.

The borough of Walsall comprises a town centre and a hierarchy of district and local centres which each contain shops, schools, work places and facilities for recreation and leisure. A strong network of streets and routes is needed to make Walsall a walkable, sustainable place where it is easy for people to move around within and between local neighbourhood areas, connecting communities and offering people a choice of private and public transport.

Streets as places

Traditionally street design has been dominated by concerns for the movement of vehicles. Today we recognise that through good design the street can become a useable space, a place for pedestrian activity and community interaction. Developers must embrace Walsall's aspiration to enliven our streets and provide an environment that people enjoy, which is appropriate for a variety of activities whilst remaining safe. Innovative schemes need not be expensive and can add value; creating an interplay between the use of a building and the public realm attracting custom, surveillance and further investment.

When designing, this aspiration should be met whilst prioritising road users in the following order of importance:

- Pedestrians
- Cyclists
- Public transport
- Commercial access
- Private vehicles

Other connections

Waterways, disused railways, cycle routes and footpaths also play a vital role in securing critical connections between places and these too must be considered fully within development proposals if the sequential preference for sustainable modes of transport, set out above, is to be realised fully. Many of these connections are of historic value and contribute to the landscape and townscape of the borough and connecting them into new development makes them sustainable as well as adding value to the development.

Key Issues

Designers and developers should have in mind the following questions to guide the design process in Walsall:

- Who will be using the street and how?
- What are the potential activities, movement patterns, level of usage and the needs of possible users including children and/or people with disabilities?
- How can we make these uses happen in the order of the user hierarchy?
- How can traffic be calmed without 'over-engineering' the built environment?
- How can street clutter, including elements such as excessive signage and the physical dominance of vehicles, be reduced?
- Will materials/layout provide visual clues alerting drivers to their surroundings and safeguarding pedestrians?
- Will routes through new developments avoid the creation of dead ends that hinder movement for all, especially pedestrians?

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Objective – Legibility

Design and Access Statements:

- Section on access

Building for Life:

- Chapter on streets, parking and pedestrianisation



Darwall Street, Walsall

Urban Spaces

The town and district centres within the borough have developed and evolved over many centuries and in order to accommodate the various commercial and leisure activities, urban spaces were an important component of the townscape. Civic squares, incidental open spaces, widened streets and market places were the focus of community activity and commerce. As community's change, economic activity continues to restructure and our concept of leisure and quality time progresses. These spaces (and new ones) too must also change, but sympathetically so that the scenes of place, historic significance and setting is retained.

The market place in Willenhall has functioned as the main meeting place since its origins as an agricultural market town and today still celebrates the holding of a market around its clock tower. Other urban spaces have evolved over time such as Leicester Street, where careful pedestrianisation has linked up the apron in front of the town hall to make a civic place to hold a number of activities, including those of a more civic dimension.

Urban spaces are typically hard spaces, that being paved, but this does not mean that they cannot benefit from vibrant planting and soft landscaping and employ trees for shelter. Such spaces depend on buildings, connections and good townscape principles discussed elsewhere in this document to be successful.

Urban spaces must serve a purpose otherwise they fall foul of becoming unviable, underused and the subject of crime, however, if well conceived they can boast uptake of adjacent premises and assist in the bringing together different uses through a shared multi-functional space.

Key Issues

Development across Walsall borough will be expected to contribute to a varied network of open spaces including:

- Existing urban spaces should be supported by viable activity for as much of the day as possible. Natural surveillance is important and allows for such spaces to be used around the clock.
- The formation of new urban spaces should be function orientated, being delivered in a way that secures important links or areas for activity in connection with building uses or transport hubs and civic and cultural destinations.
- Careful consideration shall be given to the position of access points into urban spaces from surrounding buildings and streets to ensure that the best connections and routes are achieved.
- Robust materials that are typical to the boroughs pallet of building materials shall be used and these shall be applied to surfacing and street furniture in a way that discourages vandalism and antisocial behaviour.
- The design of urban spaces should be simple and functional, informed by the surrounding structures, buildings and access points and not distracting from the wider built heritage of an area.
- Urban spaces should be designed with the needs of all users in mind, such as children or the elderly.
- Positive micro climates must be designed in, particularly in urban areas where there may be pressure for collections of tall buildings.

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Objective – Quality of the public realm
- Aspects of development form – layout: Urban structure, and layout: Urban grain

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on use, layout, landscaping, appearance and access

Building for Life:

- Chapter on design and construction



Falsall Locks

Waterways

Walsall has an extensive network of canals due to its prominence as an industrial centre within the 18th and 19th centuries. The borough also incorporates some key watercourses such as the Ford Brook and River Tame. Waterways are now recognised as important assets that can be used to provide not only links, but, destinations in the heart of a bustling urban area as well as in rural places.

New public realm and development along Walsall's waterside must explore how to sensitively and attractively exploit the special opportunities afforded by these locations. One of the borough's conservation areas is designated around the town centre section of the Birmingham Canal (including the Walsall Branch) and this has attracted new and innovative development; illustrating how heritage and bold new development can be symbiotic.

Key Issues

Development in Walsall, where it is adjacent to the waterway(s) should:

- Be of a height and massing appropriate to the width of the waterway and to its surrounding context
- Reflect Walsall's industrial canal heritage where possible in a sensitive and contemporary way through design
- Safeguard and enhance the existing heritage assets of the waterways
- Encourage increased use of waterways infrastructure for the benefit of local communities, including enhancements of routes and activity on the water where appropriate
- Utilise the potential for water-related public art that can engage the community
- Be positioned to maximise views of the waterway and allow public access both to and along the waterway with pedestrian routes located along the water's edge and vehicular or service routes and car parking located away from the water's edge

- Mitigate the development's impact on the landscape and biodiversity value of the waterway and its setting
- Provide effective surveillance of public routes through the location of windows and doors
- Take into account the need for any flood risk management measures required by the Environment Agency, Council or Canal & Rivers Trust.

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Objectives – legibility and character

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on use and access

Building for Life:

- Chapter on character

Building in Context

- Case study 6

Wildlife corridor





New Art Gallery, Walsall

Buildings

Walsall has a magnificent inheritance of fine architecture ranging from classical Georgian villas and Victorian gothic chambers, to Arts and Crafts suburbs, Festival of Britain flats and industrial workshops. This rich vocabulary of architecture forms the pattern of development to date, but we must continue to build new buildings that fit our modern aspirations and requirements to leave our own legacy behind.

Post war optimism saw a reaction against historic buildings in favour of what was experimentation in using modern materials and design that employed poor glazing and roofing systems, poor access, low surveillance and a leaning towards juxtaposition that disassociated buildings from their environment.

Today Walsall seeks buildings that are designed to last, that contribute toward delight and excitement in the townscape and provide its occupants with good living, working, social and learning environments. The criteria for achieving good design in the built environment are now well established in architectural and design practice and are set out in national guidance.

Walsall will seek to ensure that new development upholds these criteria to raise the image and urban quality of the Borough for the long term. Sustainable buildings that are robust, durable, fit for purpose and designed to adapt to changes in society, economy, technology and climate change will be an investment in Walsall's future.

The historic buildings, structures and landscape (collectively known as heritage assets) will continue to require careful consideration when being developed in isolation or in connection with their general maintenance and repair. Historic buildings need to be included in redevelopment plans and not excluded. Any development should consider the harm to their appearance caused by poor design and materials, signage, difficult to maintain rainwater goods, roof details and upper floor areas that a difficult to access for maintenance.

Key Issues

- Identify the value in existing building, both in terms of the embodied energy in the building material, but also the characteristics that existing buildings from all ages can contribute to the future regeneration of the borough. Imaginative reuse can retain qualities that are now difficult to achieve and unviable, such as carved stone and hand made ceramics.

- Respect massing, scale and rhythm of adjacent buildings. These factors are significant particularly where infill development is undertaken in well established residential areas
- Avoid the overdevelopment of a site by building to an excessive height or scale compared with its neighbours
- Avoid pastiche, particularly in conservation areas, as the result is often poor quality imitation that are unconvincing and fails to sensitively capture the true proportions, construction, detailing and special qualities of the original
- Use materials that are sympathetic to their context acknowledging the significant traditional pallet of materials within a locality
- Create built detail that relates to human scale and which provides visual interest to elevations
- Explore and demonstrate opportunities for incorporating public art within the overall design
- Select materials that are appropriate in terms of quality, robustness, maintenance and ability to weather attractively in an urban environment
- Development layout must take into account the opportunity to improve local micro climate and mitigate the effects of solar gain. The benefits of natural light and ventilation should be should be built on wherever possible and should consider orientation, organisation of uses, embodied energy, water recycling, integrated renewable energy technology and integrated insulation
- Incorporate Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), unless it would be impractical to do so, to reduce the risk of flooding and improve water quality.

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Aspects of development form – Scale: Height, Scale: Massing, Appearance: Details, and Appearance: Materials

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on use, amount, scale, landscaping, and appearance

Building for Life:

- Chapter on design and construction

Building in Context

- Case study 7, 10 and 14



Homes

Large areas of the borough are predominantly residential neighbourhoods. Historically these areas were diverse and comprised districts of grand villas along tree lined avenues, whilst others were formed around grid irons of terrace housing.

Whilst over recent years residential development has come a long way to break down social barriers and create communities that have the full spectrum of the social, economic and cultural range within them, this has been at the cost of blander design. Housing estates across the country are becoming the same and the subtly variations that made places distinguishable is now lost.

New housing in Walsall should avoid pastiche and poor replication of historic design and deliver high quality modern design which in turn will better respect the wider context.

Residential development across Walsall must contribute to the establishment and maintenance of sustainable communities by understanding and addressing the specific housing and related issues that Walsall faces.

To fulfil this vision Walsall Council and its partners require that developers provide:

- The reuse of vacant and derelict buildings for homes where buildings remain fit for purpose and contribute positively towards local character. Such buildings can meet the sustainability agenda, whilst also retaining local identity
- A range of affordable and appropriately sized properties to cater for all ages, abilities, sizes of households and types of tenure
- Homes that are adaptable and provided with good storage provision, including integral bin stores with easy access to the public highway
- Private amenity space attached to all residential units, including flats, with appropriately sized garden spaces for family housing
- Well designed and located external spaces to allow children to play safely and encourage community interaction
- Homes that are well connected to local facilities and their surroundings
- All units presented for affordable housing must demonstrate that they comply with the Walsall Lifetime Homes standards (in preparation) and Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 or above, or the national requirement at the time of submitting a proposal for planning permission, unless acceptable justification can be provided through the Design & Access statement

- Homes with usable garden spaces that are multi functional – be it for recreation, relaxing, or growing food and flowers.

Key Issues

- The entire design process must be underpinned by the principles of environmentally friendly and sustainable design
- Plot sizes and built density will relate to their local context. Exploitation of large building plots in residential areas for inappropriately scaled infill will not be permitted
- Privacy and aspect distances between dwellings must ensure that all occupants have a satisfactory level of amenity, whilst reflecting the existing and emerging character of the area. This will normally mean designing developments that, as a minimum, meet the guidelines contained in Appendix D of Designing Walsall. However, greater distances may be applicable where it is in the interest of protecting the character of an area. It may also be possible in exceptional circumstances to achieve shorter distances through creative design or in order to protect an area's character although this must be explained and justified through the design and access statement to the Council's satisfaction
- Ground floor activity and natural surveillance will be maximised and blank walls or solid external security shutters avoided
- There will be a clear definition and separation between the private and public realm and building frontages will be designed to overlook the public realm
- Common building lines along road frontages must be maintained with buildings having a clear relationship with their neighbours

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Aspects of development form – Density and mix, and Layout: Urban grain

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on use, amount, layout, scale, landscaping, and appearance

Building for Life:

- Chapter on Environment and community

Building in Context:

- Case study 2 & 13



Al-Faruq Mosque at sunrise

Skyline

The silhouette of many landmark buildings contributes positively to the sense of identity of Walsall. These include buildings such as St. Matthew's and the Council House. The location, form and grouping of buildings is important in mapping out communities, activity and focal points and continuing this dialogue across the townscape is important as the borough continues to develop. This has already been achieved in the town centre with the development of the Walsall Art Gallery which acts as a market to counter St. Matthew's at the opposite end of the high street.

It is not only civic buildings and new places of worship that can address these principles, residential communities and new commercial ventures must contribute to this evolving heritage too.

Key Issues

Tall buildings are classed as tall in relation to their surrounding neighbours rather than being of a specified height and as such the appropriateness of a tall building will depend on its relationship to its local context:

- Where a number of tall buildings are proposed to be concentrated together or will be seen collectively from a distance, the resulting skyline must avoid presenting a monolithic appearance and instead exploit the potential of a varied profile and silhouette to produce interesting and distinctive skylines as the viewpoint changes
- Tall buildings must be capable of being appreciated as a landmark skyline feature and also as buildings within the street context at close inspection. Architectural detailing and materials should reflect this aspiration
- The relationship of any tall building to its immediate surroundings at street level must be carefully considered to ensure that any proposed development is not overbearing
- Tall buildings have a significant impact upon shadowing and micro climate. The design process must mitigate the potential for unacceptable levels of wind turbulence and loss of sunlight in order to maintain long term appearance and desirability for occupants and users

- High quality, long life, low maintenance materials must be specified
- Consideration should be given to lighting the building as a landmark, particularly where it is located along one of the borough's key strategic corridors
- Consideration should be given to incorporating sustainable features, such as green roofs, into the development of tall buildings.
- The Highways Agency should be engaged with at an early stage where proposals impact upon the strategic road network corridor or skyline.
- The profile of buildings (taking into consideration their scale, form and application of materials and plant as well as their height) must be considered in conjunction with topography and orientation.

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Aspects of development form – Scale: Height

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on scale and appearance

Building for Life:

- Chapter on Character

Building in Context

- Case study 12

New Art Gallery, Walsall





Residential Apartments, Marsh Street

Townscape

Townscape is the complex relationship between buildings and the spaces between them. The complex mix of urban and suburban areas across the borough is diverse and no one townscape is dominant. Whilst some townscapes are defined by the repetitive linear nature of development, others celebrate the abstract or organic arrangement of buildings, or the layering and grouping of buildings that change with the topography and orientation. Hierarchy and juxtaposition are important components of townscape and can result in vibrant and/or harmonious streetscape.

Key Issues

New development needs to be familiar with the townscape merits of an area and what may well have been damaged or lost, or never constructed to secure a harmony between existing and new structures:

- Where consistency is dominant in an area, street or block, only under very special circumstances should the height of the building be significantly higher or lower;
- The historic solution for stepping building up a hill should be noted and reflected in new development, with particular attention being paid to floor alignments and roof arrangements;
- New development should replicate the existing building form on surrounding plots, if this is found to offer good townscape merits. The rhythm of terraces building or semi-detached villas, commercial chambers or retail units has a collective value beyond the individual premises;
- Building lines are not fixed, but reflect the hierarchy of a street, the predominant types of uses and the focus on particular structure. Where a building line exists this should normally be respected unless an opportunity presents itself to create a landmark or redirect development along a new route or vista; and

- The use of bays across a façade to plot individual occupancy along a street, the positioning of a turret, tower or campanile to mark a corner and the angle of façade to redirect a road are subtly elements of townscape language that should be recognised in Design and Access Statements and translated in contemporary form into new development so as not to disrupt the existing language of the historic townscape of Walsall.

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Aspects of development form – Density and mix, Layout: Urban structure, and Layout: Urban grain

Building for Life:

- Chapter on Character

Building in Context

- Case study

Walsall Skyline towards St Matthew's





Green Landscape and Open Space

Over one third of the borough of Walsall is Green Belt with a significant amount of rural landscape and formal parks and gardens throughout the town and district centres, including the famous Victorian Arboretum in Walsall town centre and the proposed Black Country “Urban Park” which is being developed through the Black Country Environmental Infrastructure Guidance.

Although Walsall is well known for its industrial heritage, for most of its history industry and mining have co-existed with farming. Remnants of the heathlands, woodlands, wetlands and hay meadows which once separated the industrial settlements still survive. Industry also created new landscapes of canals, spoil heaps and wetlands and these areas are now important havens for plants and animals which once flourished across the wider Black Country. Many of these sites are visually attractive places where people enjoy contact with wildlife close to their homes. It is vitally important that design takes into account locally distinctive ecology and landscape to ensure that the best sites are protected and new sites created and improved to provide a landscape of the highest quality for everyone to enjoy

Key Issues

The key issues of Conserving Walsall’s Natural Environment SPD relating to design can be summarised as:

- Local ecology must be seen as part of the character of a site and impact studies must inform the design process right from the start with creative and effective mitigation measures being designed in
- Opportunities to enhance local distinctiveness and design quality should be maximised where open spaces and landscape can be integrated into new development
- Promote the planting of native plants and trees using stock of local provenance wherever possible
- Preserve and enhance sensitive and important areas such as conservation areas and sites affecting tree preservation orders
- New development must take account of and respond to the biodiversity and geodiversity of the site and its surroundings

Design Guide References:

By Design:

- Aspects of development form – Landscape

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on use, layout, landscape and access

Building for Life:

- Chapter on Environment and community

Horse riding over Barr Beacon





Historic and Contemporary Spires, Bradford Place

Arts, Creativity and the Community

Creativity within the built environment is evident throughout Walsall from Victorian designers' decorations and ornaments visible on buildings across the borough, to civic spaces containing statues of historical figures and contemporary community driven pieces of public art.

Artistic creativity adds a lively and memorable dimension to Walsall's environment enhancing sense of place, civic pride and local distinctiveness. Walsall's most successful public art commissions have involved community engagement right throughout the process from the very beginning with the result being socially connected and proud communities where people take pride and a sense of ownership over their neighbourhood and the built environment in which they live their daily lives.

Art is the most successful way of engaging communities with their past and present heritage and create a living dimension threading past people, places and events to modern enterprise and communities. Interpretation of heritage through boards and signs are often ignored, damaged and vandalised, where as art is adopted by the community and becomes a way finder through a townscape and a valuable reference point to a new development.

To build on these success stories Walsall Council encourages developments to include high quality public realm improvements and public art where appropriate, as outlined in Policy DW9 of this document.

Key Issues

- Buildings, spaces, places and landscapes can all be potential locations for public art and public art can take the form of a vast array of media:
- Public art will have community consultation and engagement at its core
- Artists and local community groups will form a central part of the design team throughout the public art process on such projects
- Where possible the character of the borough and its people should provide an inspiration behind the design concept
- Public art should champion local distinctiveness and be specific to the locality in which it sits
- Public art will be encouraged to be functional as well as decorative
- The quality, finish, durability and maintenance will be key considerations when designing and creating public art

Design Guidance References:

By Design:

- Aspects of development form – Appearance: Details

Design and Access Statements:

- Sections on appearance

Building for Life:

- Chapter on Environment and community

The Brownhills Miner

