Reconciling History with Modernity: 1940s Plans for Durham and Warwick

John Pendlebury

Global Urban Research Unit (incorporating CREUE),
School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape,
University of Newcastle,
Newcastle upon Tyne,
NE1 7RU.

+44 (0) 191 222 6810
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Abstract

During the 1940s a series of remarkable and radical planning documents were produced for many British cities, generally now collectively referred to as ‘reconstruction plans’. Universally these sought to introduce a highly interventionist, comprehensive planning, often with strong elements of ‘clean sweep’ reconstruction. This article considers two such plans, for the historic cities of Durham and Warwick. It examines how they sought to reconcile the desire to achieve functional modern places with historic character, in a period of growing consciousness of the historic qualities of place. The paper concludes by briefly considering the legacy of these plans on ideas about planning historic towns and cities.
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Introduction

Probably in no time in British history can there have been so much widespread enthusiasm for the concept of radically rebuilding and replanning familiar towns and cities than in the 1940s, though in practice far less planned change was effected than in other decades such as the 1960s. Stemming from the impetus for comprehensive planning developing but frustrated during the 1930s, the case for planning was given great impetus by the devastation wrought on a number of towns and cities by German bombing and by an apparent willingness from the government to legislate for and to resource comprehensive planning (see e.g. Cullingworth, 1975). It was perhaps in these early war years that planning was a truly popular cause, where a book on town planning could be a best seller (Sharp, 1940). The mood of the time led many towns and cities of different sorts to want plans for their future development. These plans often focused on the re-development of central areas. This in itself was a radical shift; the preoccupation of planners and planning system in the 1930s had been primarily with controlling the form of urban expansion.

Plans were produced internally or commissioned from consultants. In addition to officially sanctioned plans, private bodies developed their own
proposals. In the case of London this included such diverse bodies as the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) Group and the Royal Academy. Urban areas across the country including major commercial centres, small mill towns and cathedral cities undertook plans. Not surprisingly badly war damaged cities usually commissioned plans but many were produced for settlements untouched by bombing. These ranged from modestly produced working documents to lavish plans produced by a number of key national consultants and published by such as the Architectural Press.

Collectively the plans are known for their uncompromising vision and self-belief in creating better, more functional places. Existing British cities were held not to be working efficiently. The key priorities were seen to be the need to improve access and circulation (for both people and traffic), to separate incompatible land-uses and to provide better quality housing for the urban poor (Abercrombie, 1943; Tiratsoo, 2000b). Though there was often a detailed and sophisticated analysis of the development of a place, older fabric was frequently characterised as redundant and with the exception of key architectural monuments often intended to be removed wholesale (Larkham, 1997). Radical restructuring of urban form was often proposed and in bomb damaged cities there was little of the tendency to recreate historic street patterns and building forms found in some (but by no means all) continental cities (Diefendorf, 1990; Ward, 2002). These plans were rarely modernist in a strict sense, but “they revealed an edgeway penetration of modernist ideas about design and society” (Gold, 1997; 165). The approach to re-planning was firmly in the tradition of physical planning.
and design dominant in the period, whereby the key task of the planner was to produce a plan that was essentially an end-point masterplan of future urban form and organisation (Taylor, 1998).

**The Historic City**

The inter-war period between 1919 and 1939 saw a significant development in the demand for the protection and preservation of both historic buildings and the countryside and pressures for this to be achieved through effective state intervention. Earlier advocacy of preservation had derived from a nineteenth century Arts and Crafts tradition, led by talismanic figures such as John Ruskin and William Morris. Arts and Crafts Movement based preservation represented an anti-modern impulse, albeit within the framework of a modern society and grounded in modern historicity. However, the inter-war period saw a shift in the nature of preservation activity. The preservationist cause was increasingly linked with the advocacy of modern architecture and town planning. Planning would be the means of providing a rational, ordered town and countryside and also be the means to achieve preservation goals.

Though some recognition of preservation issues was made in the 1923 Housing Etc. Act. and the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act they led to no action at a national level (Delafons, 1997; Saint, 1996). However, there also began to develop an increasing amount of activity at a local level. For
example, in 1921 Oxford Town Council began to draw up a town planning scheme and from an early stage the proposals sought to safeguard the character of the city, which led to the preservation clauses being inserted in the 1923 Act (Cocks, 1998; Sheail, 1981). In 1922 the Stratford upon Avon Preservation Committee formed in response to a potentially damaging factory proposal and commissioned a report from Patrick Abercrombie on the future planning of Stratford to present to the Corporation (Abercrombie & Abercrombie, 1923). Preservation issues form a major part of the report. Local control over interventions in historic cities was increasingly pursued through Local Acts of Parliament. For example, in Bath local legislation was introduced in 1925 (Lambert, 2000), subsequently leading to the Bath Corporation Act of 1937 which brought some control over the facades of 1,251 buildings (Abercrombie, Owens, & Mealand, 1945).

Thus, slowly and incrementally the state at local level began to exert more control over changes to the historic fabric of cities. The advocates of such control were often closely intertwined with a progressive modernity which was seeking major physical and social changes to the fabric of British society. A major concern in the period for those concerned with urban preservation was the destruction of Georgian architecture (Stamp, 1996). Georgian architecture was celebrated for its ‘urbaneness’, i.e. its restraint in comparison to the perceived excesses of the Victorian period, and as an inspiration for a modern model of building (see e.g. Sharp, 1940). These urban qualities and architectural simplicity linked with the values of the emerging Modern Movement in architecture. In the early years of the
Georgian Group, formed in 1937, there was a significant overlap of membership with the radical MARS Group (which had been founded in 1933) (Stamp, 1996). Internationally the discussions of the international grouping of modern architects, CIAM, included the need to preserve historic buildings. This was evident at their famous fourth Congress in 1933, later written up by Le Corbusier as the Athens Charter (Gold, 1997).

The Reconstruction Plans for Durham and Warwick.

Thus the radical re-planning urge that found expression in the war-time and post-war reconstruction plans was accompanied by an increasing awareness of the historic qualities of at least some towns and cities and some periods of architectural history. The focus of this paper is upon how the historic nature of two relatively small historic cities, Durham and Warwick, was conceptualised and what the practical consequences the proposals would have had if implemented. These were cities where their significance as historic cities would have been impossible to ignore and neither had experienced wartime damage. They therefore make interesting examples; the push for reconstruction was neither driven by bomb damage nor by the sort of concentration of problems of infrastructure and of urban conditions frequently found in larger settlements. The plans for Durham and Warwick were essentially about creating a vision of place that combined modernity and heritage. The principal focus of the paper is upon the plans themselves,
though some brief context is given on their authors and how the plans were received.

The plans for Durham (Sharp, 1945a) and Warwick (Abercrombie & Nickson, 1949) were produced by arguably the two key planning consultants of the period, Thomas Sharp and Patrick Abercrombie respectively. These two were certainly the consultants most commissioned to undertake reconstruction plans; Sharp is documented as undertaking ten and Abercrombie eight. The next most commissioned planner, William Davidge, undertook five commissions (Larkham & Lilley, 2001). Abercrombie’s London plans were the most famous of the period and both Sharp and Abercrombie had much experience of working in a historic context. Sharp’s commissions included Oxford, Salisbury, Chichester and Exeter whilst Abercrombie worked on plans for Bath and Edinburgh, as well as earlier plans such as that for Stratford upon Avon referred to above. Abercrombie had also been active in the preservation movement, specifically on countryside preservation. Thus the plans considered in this paper represent work of the two foremost planners of the time, both of whom had much experience, and sympathy for, historic towns.

‘Cathedral City; a Plan for Durham by Thomas Sharp’

Sharp was born in Bishop Auckland, County Durham and must have known the city of Durham from an early age. However, his professional contact
with the City developed when he became Regional Planning Assistant to the North East Durham Joint Planning Committee in the mid 1930s. He established himself as a significant figure in the planning profession through a series of polemical writings (e.g. Sharp, 1932, 1936). These set out some of Sharp’s enduring attitudes and in particular his loathing of the then dominant planning ideology of Garden Cities and of the suburban progeny that had subsequently been spawned. Instead he advocated the rediscovery of an English urbanism that had reached its height in the post-Renaissance English country town. This understanding of how to make towns had been lost, he believed, during the nineteenth century. His attitude towards cities with a medieval form was more complex; in his early writings he could be scathing about what he perceived to be their disorder, but later he celebrated their picturesque qualities (Lilley, 1999). By the time of the Durham plan he wrote about a romantic character and beauty “which no other city in these islands can boast” (Sharp, 1945a; 13).

As part of his writings during the 1930s Sharp commentated on planning issues in Durham (Sharp, 1937). At this stage two issues vexed him in particular. First, was the proposal for a new road to take traffic out of the constrained historic peninsula. The historic city lies on a steeply sloping site in a loop of the River Wear. Sharp saw the need for the road but argued that the County Council’s elevated proposal would be disastrous on aesthetic and technical grounds (see figure 1). He proposed an alternative ground level route. The other issue was the identified need to clear a third of the housing stock in Durham as unfit. Again, Sharp had no problem with this
principle; what he deplored was that this was being contemplated in the absence of any comprehensive plan for the City.

The Second World War, as far as Sharp was concerned, brought both a useful pause to reconsider issues such as the bypass and the opportunity to more directly influence Durham’s development as he was commissioned to undertake a plan for the City Council in 1943. More or less coterminous with this commission he was battling against the City Council and the whole north-east nexus of County Council, unions, electricity generating company and the University against a massive power station proposal (Sharp, 1945b). This would have been located close to the city centre at Kepier. The application was refused by the central government Minister responsible.

As part of his commission Sharp was directly asked to have “particular reference to the historical and architectural character of the city and to the appropriate treatment of areas which have been or are likely to be cleared of buildings” (Sharp, 1945a; 8). It was a handsomely produced plan heavily focused on the master-planning of physical form, albeit in outline and for implementation over an extended period. Sharp’s appreciation of Durham was largely based upon its visual qualities. Not surprisingly the Cathedral and to some degree the castle are central to this, though there is generally a developing appreciation of the “‘picturesque’ and ‘medieval’ flavour of the city” (Sharp, 1945a; 15) especially in terms of the roofscape and of the foil that domestic scaled building gave to the major monuments. Sharp also emphasised the historic and visual importance of the cathedral as part of
emphasising the significance of Durham. Alongside a romantic engraving of the city he stated “Every Cathedral city was designed to be a perpetual memorial to the history, continuity, struggle and, in part anyway, the triumph of the Christian Faith, on which European civilisation is largely founded. So heightened is this function at Durham by nature of the tremendous setting that the question of its mutilation becomes a matter of moment not merely to Durham or Britain but to Christendom” (Sharp, 1945a; 88-89, see figure 2). Sharp thus prefigured the World Heritage Site status that Durham was later to receive, mobilising the concept in order to resist local pressure for developments such as the power station proposal.

His proposals for preservation were naturally focused on the Peninsula containing the Cathedral, Castle and heart of the University and commercial centre, though a map of buildings of historic interest included buildings across the City such as a concentration on the north side of Old Elvet, an historic street to the north-east of the peninsula. The setting of the Cathedral and Castle were given extensive discussion. The setting was said to be formed by five elements. Three were the riverbanks, the College to the south of the Cathedral and Palace Green between the Cathedral and Castle. The other two elements, the Bailey, the street that runs the length of the Peninsula and Owengate (see figure 3), the short street that links the Bailey with Palace Green might have been considered to be less obvious. The domestic Georgian character of the Bailey was regarded as a valuable foil to the “massive dignity of the Cathedral” (Sharp, 1945a; 53). Ascending from the Bailey, Owengate “climbs steeply up to Palace Green, with a glimpse of
the Cathedral at its head. Then, at the top of the rise, at the head of the curve, the confined view having thus far excited one’s feelings of mystery and expectation, the street suddenly opens out into Palace Green, broad, spacious, elevated, with a wide expanse of sky: and there, suddenly, dramatically, the whole fine length of the Cathedral is displayed to the immediate view. It is as exciting a piece of town planning as occurs anywhere in the kingdom” (Sharp, 1945a; 54). Thus, the Owengate approach to the Cathedral is not an accidental piece of townscape charm, but given further validation as a consciously planned composition.

Sharp also saw merit in the wider peninsular. For example, the Market Place was held to have a sturdy character worthy of maintaining, although no individual buildings were considered to have any particular distinction. Beyond the peninsula he saw the need for extensive rebuilding, whilst acknowledging that some of the buildings to be cleared had architectural merit. His intention of clearing the upper part of Claypath, the historic approach to Durham from the north, and leaving it as open space seems particularly unsympathetic and lacking in understanding of historic form to modern sensibilities. His rationale was to open up views of the Cathedral a monumental approach common in other plans of the period. It is, however, an unusual approach for Sharp, though in other plans he did propose new controlled views of cathedrals (Sharp 1946, 1949).

In terms of the wider proposals in the plan a key element was his alternative to the County Council inner relief road that had been on the books since
1931. He produced an extensive critique of this elevated proposal in terms of its impact on the character of Durham, saying of his alternative that “it will belong” (Sharp, 1945a; 41, Sharp's emphasis). Also important was the suggested limitation in population growth of Durham of 4,500 from 18,500 to 23,000. He saw the appropriate function of Durham as being as an administrative, shopping, educational, residential and tourist centre.

Sharp’s plans more than most planning documents display an individual and distinct ‘voice’. They were, however, the product of a team (Larkham, 1997; Lilley & Larkham, 2000). Key in Sharp’s case was the use of the well known architectural illustrator A C Webb, who was employed on all his major reconstruction plans (see figure 4). In commissioning Webb Sharp never wholly successfully overcame a key dilemma in presenting his proposals. New buildings were to be ‘of their time’ but not prescribed in detailed terms in the plan, this was a later job for individual architects. He gives general guidance only, for example, in the case of Durham he regarded roofscape as being vital. However, Webb’s perspectives, key to selling the message of the plan, had to include a representation of the new buildings. The solution tended to be to represent them as barely articulated massings, which inevitably compared unfavourably with the richness of the existing scene. This point was made in an otherwise extremely positive contemporary review (Reilly, 1945) and by others since (Stansfield, 1981).

Sharp, who had been living in County Durham, subsequently moved to Oxford. Nevertheless he stayed intimately involved in Durham matters for
nearly twenty years, being retained as a consultant by the City Council. The new road eventually constructed broadly followed Sharp’s line, though Sharp was deeply unhappy with the detailed scheme (Gazzard, 1969). He successfully fought off moves by the University to demolish one of the key buildings on the Owengate approach to the cathedral that he felt so strongly about, and to a sixteen storey tower proposed by the Post Office, which he identified as the final nail in his coffin of working in Durham (Sharp, 1968).


Patrick Abercrombie was the most well known planner of his generation. He was a major figure in the profession from the time of his appointment as Professor in Civic Design at the University of Liverpool in 1915. The reconstruction plans were late in his career, he was 60 in 1939. He was responsible for the most well known plan of all of the period, for Greater London (Abercrombie, 1945) and for plans of other historic cities such as Bath and Edinburgh (Abercrombie et al., 1945; Abercrombie & Plumstead, 1949). Though probably better known in the inter-war period for his work at a strategic level, amongst the wide range of planning documents that he produced was a plan for Stratford upon Avon, discussed above (Abercrombie & Abercrombie, 1923). Much of Abercrombie’s inter-war strategic work was in rural areas experiencing urban pressures and he
became one of the leading lights of the inter-war countryside preservation movement, his actions leading directly to the founding of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (Dix, 1981). He sought the preservation of a planned and ordered countryside, again celebrating the works of the eighteenth century such as enclosure and the landscape park (Abercrombie, 1943).

Sharp’s plan for Durham was one of his seminal works, but Abercrombie’s plan for Warwick can probably best be considered one of his more minor commissions, for example, it was only mentioned in passing in Dix’s account of Abercrombie’s career (Dix, 1981). Like many of Abercrombie’s plans it was produced collaboratively. Like Durham, it was quite tightly focused on the future evolution of urban form. It was begun in 1945 (though not published until 1949). It started with a warm appreciation of the Borough’s history and its architectural qualities as a whole, not just the major monuments, though this was not systematically related to the subsequent proposals. This was followed by an analysis of the conditions then prevailing in Warwick, supported by a substantive base of statistical information. The core of the town was held to have an architectural unity of scale and simplicity within which detailed architectural variety of period and materials abound and “the town has many amenities and characteristics which are worthy of respect and which must be conserved if the town is to retain its individuality” (Abercrombie & Nickson, 1949: 56).
Traffic issues are prominent, as is usual in plans of this period, with an underlying assumption that motor traffic needs to be provided for. Constraints on vehicular access and circulation arising from a historic plan and narrow streets are a recurrent theme. In Warwick the options were further constrained by topography of steep gradients and the dominant role of the Castle and its grounds on the south side of the town. An outer bypass to the north-west had been proposed since the 1930s and Abercrombie and Nickson also proposed an inner road around the north of the centre. Most of the major new development in the inner area was to be located in this part of the town. Though the plan did not seek strictly defined zoning it did suggest land use precincts of different emphases. Functionally, the key role of Warwick was seen as being a tourist centre. Though identifiably a master-plan in style, plan implementation was regarded as a gradual process (see figure 5). Three stages were identified, with the first two running over twenty-five or more years. Population was to be allowed to grow from 14,200 by 3000.

Ostensibly preservation was the key objective in the Warwick plan and there was sensitivity to both the contribution of relatively humble buildings and the character of areas. Small historic houses in poor condition should where possible be repaired and reused. One photograph illustrated a court which in many plans of this era would be emblematic of outworn building stock but was here used signify an important part of the historic character of Warwick (see figure 6), whereas other photographs emphasised group contribution over individual architectural merit. Though not as explicit as Sharp’s plans,
there was a sense of overall townscape composition, for example, the
dominance of the church tower of St. Mary’s church was noted. Change
needed to be carefully managed; the frontispiece included long composite
photographic elevations for the principal streets of High Street and Jury
Street to aid the assessment of any proposals for change (see figure 7).

The analysis of the historic building stock was underpinned by a
comprehensive survey of building condition. The results of this reveal that
despite the foregoing rhetoric it was estimated that it would only be realistic
to retain 57% of the historic building stock beyond fifteen years.
Furthermore, Slater (1984) has shown how the plan’s conception of the
historic character of Warwick was narrowly conceived, placing little weight
on the extramural areas beyond the line of the medieval wall. The historic
city was equated with the walled city, whereas, in common with many
British cities, historic suburbs were also evident, especially on the principal
routes leading into the city. The denseness of the medieval morphology of
the centre was, as has been mentioned, sometimes used to illustrate the
qualities of Warwick but elsewhere in the plan it was presented as a
problem. Furthermore, the inner road proposals were a standard engineering
specification of the time and today they would be regarded as having a
catastrophic effect on the historic core. Ironically they would have entailed
the demolition of the historic extramural suburb of Saltisford, which the
condition survey showed as one of the groups of historic buildings in the
best condition. What was presented was a tight inner historic core, separated
and boxed in from the surrounding city on the northern and western sides by new roads.

Abercrombie makes very little detailed representation of future architectural contributions to Warwick, unlike some of his other plans such as Bath (Abercrombie et al., 1945), simply suggesting some guidelines for massing. The plan was well illustrated with photographs, using tellingly to make points about the town’s character. The aerial perspectives included are much cruder than Sharp’s, though ironically as a result does not present such an unfavourable contrast between old and new building (see figure 8). Overall this was a more workaday document than the stylish Durham plan, though contemporary reviews were positive (Mellor, 1950; Parkes, 1950). Little of Abercrombie’s plan was implemented, though how influential it was in preventing things from happening it is impossible to judge. Slater (1984), whilst welcoming the non-implementation of many proposals, notes that unfortunately Abercrombie’s guidance on massing was ignored, with the bulky County Council offices being a particular offender.

**The Modern Historic City**

The early 1940s was an extraordinary moment in the history of British planning. Historic cities such as Durham and Warwick that had slowly evolved over hundreds of years commissioned plans that if implemented would have entailed relatively rapid large-scale transformation. This was
not due directly to the impact of the war, although this certainly gave a
tremendous vigour and impetus to the process. However, the root cause was
a crisis in responding to the forces of modernity and pressures that had been
building up for some time, in particular the impact of the motor car and the
political imperative of addressing housing conditions. Incompatible
neighbouring land-uses needed to be separated out. Major changes to urban
form were considered to be inevitable. The ideology that underpinned
reconstruction plans was that this change should be addressed through
comprehensive planning, rather than unregulated development and the
muddled and unsatisfactory attempts at planning that had occurred up until
that time.

These issues were found in urban settlements of all types across the country.
Planners responsible for studies of historic cities were faced with a further
problem, the need to reconcile functional modernity with the historic
qualities of place. As the demand for comprehensive planning had
developed in the inter-war period so had an awareness of, and desire to plan
for, historic character, despite the disdain for the concept displayed by some
architectural historians of the period (Summerson, 1949). The absence of
planning was thought to lead to both inadequate solutions functionally and
aesthetically. Character was conceived primarily as a sensory experience,
particularly in terms of visual qualities but also in terms of enjoying places
free from, for example, the choke of traffic. Abercrombie and especially
Sharp had a refined appreciation of visual relationships in their plans,
though other contemporary plans displayed a more monumental approach to
their planning (Adshead, Minter, & Needham, 1948; Greenwood, 1945). Picturesque sensibilities were characteristic of British modernism more generally (Bandini, 1992; Esher, 1981).

Neither Abercrombie nor Sharp showed the same interest or sensitivity to historic urban form that they did to the visual qualities of place, placing little significance on historically and morphologically significant extra-mural areas, for example. Sharp seems to have been particularly uninterested in morphology, most clearly seen in his Exeter plan where he was adamant that the street plan of bomb-damaged areas should not be recreated (Sharp, 1946). Furthermore, in convention with the period, their positive appreciation of the architecture of Warwick and Durham included medieval and Georgian buildings but generally characterised Victorian building as a negative influence on place character. Indeed the Georgian period was a key source of inspiration, representing a period of planned and ordered civility in town and countryside that resonated with modernism and contrasted with the perceived solecisms and ugliness of the Victorian era. Both plans sought to make changes to the use of land, for example, through removing industry from the historic core. In the case of Durham land-use changes were always related to architectural character, and Sharp argued that the principles of the neighbourhood unit were neither strictly necessary nor necessarily desirable in a city of the size and character of Durham. The Warwick plan took a similar approach, stressing the need for slow and incremental change in the historic centre, though as Slater (1984) noted the plan did suggest a shift in retailing towards a new shopping area.
Thus, in both Durham and Warwick appreciation of the historic qualities of place extended beyond the major monuments to include relatively minor fabric and was focused on geographical centres, particular architectural periods and visual qualities. However, though both Sharp and Abercrombie displayed sensitivity towards modest historic fabric in contributing to the historic nature of place this did not mean that all such fabric could or should be preserved. Historic character would be sustained through the careful management of change, “the balanced approach”, in achieving twentieth century functionality. Roads loom large in this respect. At Durham Sharp had a romantic conception of the positive contribution roads could make to place, the Warwick plan, though, acknowledged them as being destructive of historic character. However, cars had to be provided for and relief roads would allow the historic core to be enjoyed free from the choke of traffic. The imperative for change was not limited to the growth of motor traffic, however. The value of the heritage of more modest buildings was highlighted, but sat alongside a rhetoric that identified many of these buildings as “outworn” and in need of replacement.

Sharp is the clearest at discussing the responsibility, and potential problems, of making large-scale interventions into the fabric of historic cities. Though elements of the historic city are sometimes presented as important planned effects, such as the approach to the Cathedral form Owengate, there is a wider recognition that it is difficult to achieve the picturesque qualities of the old city through extensive new planned development. At Durham, he
discusses at the length the importance of roofscape, strongly advocating that new buildings have pitched roofs. In other cities he argued for new buildings as a “seemly” foil to historic architecture (Sharp, 1946). In all his plans, though, he explicitly advocates that new buildings should be clearly contemporary in style. Abercrombie was less preoccupied with this issue. The Warwick plan referred to the need for buildings to be contemporary in form, historic character was to be retained within a modern place, there was no need to “recreate an atmosphere of vague antiquity” (Abercrombie & Nickson, 1949; 64). Elsewhere though he was more ambiguous on this issue (Abercrombie et al., 1945).

In advocating the retention of historic character and the preservation of significant numbers of buildings consultant planners such as Abercrombie and Sharp were often acutely conscious that this emphasis might conflict with other local objectives, such as the desire to expand the industrial and economic base of the area. This is evident in both the plans considered here, the national (or international) significance of the Durham and Warwick was asserted to make conserving historic character a higher order objective than what Sharp and Abercrombie regarded as more parochial concerns. Establishing the correct functional role of the town or city and limiting the size of settlement were regarded as key in this process. In Warwick tourism was seen as key and in Durham as important, though as discussed this was not regarded as legitimating the reinforcement of historic character through pastiche and historicist building. Both plans also made extensive use of
imagery to sell their proposals, in common with others of the period (Larkham, 1997).

Abercrombie and Sharp were prominent in the production of reconstruction plans for historic cities. They exemplify sophisticated and historically sensitive mainstream rational planning thought in the UK of the period. There is much that they share in their approach to the planning of historic cities. Though there are differences in the approaches and styles they adopt overall the plans have much in common. If the historic city was to survive it needed rational, bold planning and parochial and conservative resistance had to be overcome. Preservation was not to be confined to the major set-pieces but was more broadly defined in terms of character of place. This was essentially defined visually. The aim was to create a high quality of environment, free of the worst excesses of traffic congestion. Comprehensive planning was the means by which to achieve this goal and to balance the desirability of preservation with the imperative of change.

**The Legacy of Reconstruction Plans**

In practice few plans were realised to any great degree, the victim of various circumstances including, crucially, a level of post-war austerity and political retreat from comprehensive planning that made proposals hopelessly ambitious (Hasegawa, 1999). As Tiratsoo (2000a) has shown general public support for re-planning was fleeting and subsequently more focused on
demand for better housing. Also, there was significant resistance from established commercial interests. The first generation development plans of the 1950s, following the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, are notable for their focus on pragmatic land use considerations.

It has hard to say how influential the Durham and Warwick plans were in practice. Neither can be said to have been ‘implemented’, but what is less easy to determine is how important some of the ideas they put forward have been, both in terms of desirable and undesirable development. For example, it is difficult to know how influential such a clear articulation of Durham and Warwick as major historic places was in acting as a restraint on inappropriate post-war development. In practice Sharp’s continuing work for Durham as a consultant meant that he has had a greater enduring influence on Durham than Abercrombie and Nickson had on Warwick.

The plans for Durham and Warwick today seem hopelessly dated in some respects, however. The optimism in the potential of comprehensive planning, enabled by a far stronger state, to create better places was quickly dissipated, before being killed off with the collapse of modernism in the 1970s. The belief that towns and cities could be shaped through three-dimensional master-planning had by that time become a minority view in a planning profession that had shifted to considering planning in terms of systems and process (Taylor, 1998). Many of the specific policy preoccupations, such as accessibility and transport remain today, but with very different solutions prescribed. Furthermore, the subsequent evolution
of the management of historic places, and the legislation and policy that frames this, now places far greater stress on the retention of historic fabric than found in the reconstruction plans, that sought a dramatic evolution of place alongside the retention of historic character.

However, despite this one can also see in the plans for Durham and Warwick and others of the period important enduring legacies for historic cities. First, there was for the first time was a body of planning documents that specifically recognised the significance of the historic city as a whole, albeit working to a narrow definition of what the historic city was comprised of. The emphasis on character that was used has proved to be extremely enduring and indeed forms the cornerstone of the national designation of protection of historic areas, conservation areas, introduced by the Civic Amenities Act, 1967. Though this approach is evident in the Warwick plan and Abercrombie’s other plans for historic cities, it was Thomas Sharp who articulated and developed these ideas most clearly. His Durham plan was an important stepping stone to his plan for Oxford (Sharp, 1948) where he set out ideas about ‘kinetic townscape’. Sharp’s plans formed an important antecedent for the townscape movement. The concept of townscape (nowadays usually associated with Cullen’s (1961) book of the same name) has proved enormously influential and still underpins much urban design practice (see, for example, Tibbalds, 1992). Sharp also set out a view about new buildings that again remains a key issue in the management of historic towns, strongly arguing for new buildings to be clearly contemporary rather than historicist in style.
Thus, the 1940s plans for Durham, Warwick and other historic cities are more than historical curiosities. Though they represent a largely unimplemented high water mark of master-planning they were also ushering in a new consideration of the planning of historic settlements as a whole, and in their focus on townscape, setting one of the key enduring frameworks in managing historic cities.
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