

Ask the Trust

SUBURB RESIDENT JUDITH CHANEY INTERVIEWS DAVID DAVIDSON, THE ARCHITECTURAL ADVISER FOR THE TRUST

Many residents buy a house in the Suburb because of the excellent schools, pleasant environment or handy location, only to find that the Trust may prevent them from making major alterations to their own home. I interviewed David Davidson to ask him why the architecture of the Suburb is worth defending.

So what is it that makes the Suburb special?

People respond to the qualities of the environment as a whole; the trees and hedges, the open spaces, the architecture and the way the houses relate to each other. What really makes the Suburb unique is the way all the different elements complement each other so well and the level to which the design is continued in all the attractive details. And because it has survived so well, without major damaging changes, unlike most areas of London.

This quality of design is obvious in Central Square, but what needs preserving in the very ordinary houses?

There really are no ordinary houses in the Suburb. All the homes were designed by talented architects and built as part of an overall planned vision. If you compare them to typical speculative housing of the period which was aimed at the same market, you see that in the housing layout, density, variety, quality of design and crafted detail, they are hugely superior. And this is as much true of

the houses built between the wars as it is of the older parts of the Suburb. I feel very strongly about this. People occasionally say “there is nothing special about my house, why can’t I do what I like with it”. But when I point out to them why their house is so well designed they recognise it.

When looking at plans for alterations, is not the design element just a matter of personal taste? Why should the Trust’s ideas of what is appropriate be more valid than the resident’s?

The ‘element of taste’ was decided for all of us when the architects of the Suburb designed such a well detailed and cohesive environment. The main question for the Trust today is whether or not a proposed change is consistent with the existing character and appearance of the house and its surroundings. It’s not about personal taste at all – it’s about making an accurate analysis of the qualities and

Hill Top homes built in the 1930s. These are not ‘ordinary’ houses.



character of the area and applying carefully considered guidelines.

Each house is not an individual building – it is part of the Suburb as a whole. If an extension is ugly or too large it affects all the surrounding properties too. Changing a front door in a terrace of cottages can destroy the appearance of the whole group. Laying a hardstanding can spoil a group of well tended front gardens. You can’t get round it – living in the Suburb entails some constraints on individual choice but this is done for the huge benefit of all Suburb residents.

Ok, so drastically changing the front of my house would be refused permission if it destroyed the character of the area around me, but why are you so fussy about the backs of houses?

It is the same point really. Why should the back be different from the front? Often the backs of houses are just as visible as the front.