



# Reclaiming the Road A Research-by-Design Approach to the Problems of Small Settlements

output:

Other

name:

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## Output Details

Our research addresses the change and expansion of small settlements. We were interested in the distinctive character of these places, and how they were being forced into change by intractable housing and infrastructure pressures. We designed a 'research-by-design' process that enabled small settlements to explore, communicate and commit to their future, and then to enshrine that in their Town Planning Legislation to circumscribe growth and change.

This is the Small Settlements Research project.

RESEARCHER:

John Lee

TITLE:

Reclaiming the Road: A Research-by-Design Approach to the Problems of Small Settlements

TYPE OF OUTPUT:

Other

DATE OF OUTPUT:

2015-2019



# 300 Word Statement

The Continuity in Architecture Small Settlements Group have been able to help set planning policy for small settlements through the application of new urban design methods and local partnerships.

Investigating the innovations and opportunities afforded by the UK Government's 2011 Localism Act was the catalyst.

We asked the questions

- 'How can researchers contribute to developing viable urban design proposals that serve the people of small settlements?';
- 'Specifically, how can creative design methodologies complement the work of Neighbourhood Planning Committees (NPCs) in expanding small settlements?'

These questions had not been asked in this new legislative context, nor the emerging 21C challenges facing smaller towns and villages explored through research-driven policy-making via NPCs.

We used the Continuity in Architecture Atelier teaching programme as the vehicle for the research, designing studio projects for a live client - the NPC in Bollington (Cheshire). This work identified locations for social housing in the settlements, but also ways to recover better public space for the residents - to reclaim the road. Our academic work bridged a manifest skills gap and a scope gap within the NPCs.

From this, we struck innovative industry partnerships to develop a reconfigured public realm in the town, published in March 2017. Academic quality was established through peer-reviewed papers, notably the REHAB Conference (2019), where the paper 'Reclaiming the Road: People and Vehicles in Small Settlements' was given Best Paper Award, as well as EAAE-ARC and AMPS Conferences (2016-18), and dissemination through exhibitions, articles, book chapters and site interventions.

The value of the findings was evident in the 2018 Bollington Neighbourhood Plan adopted by Cheshire East Council as Planning Policy. How to structure successful research-by-design collaborations in small community settings follow from our work.

The outcome of this research led to a further three commissioned studies for Cheshire towns during 2018-20.

## Research Process

Our research addresses the change and expansion of small settlements. We were interested in the distinctive character of these places, and how they were being forced into change by intractable housing and infrastructure pressures. We designed a 'research-by-design' process that enabled small settlements to explore, communicate and commit to their future, and then to enshrine that in their Town Planning Legislation to circumscribe growth and change.

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### Research Context:

We highlight three principal contexts within which the Small Settlements research was developed under the headings of Theory, Policy and Practice.

These three contexts, the 'seedbed' in which the small settlements research investigations grew, are explained as follows. The problem requiring a solution was to find an answer to the form of building and public realm design, and a means to deliver it in the context of the Localism Act.

Most NPCs work with readily available volunteers to advance design ideas, or with professional architects or Planning Consultants. Partnering of the kind explained in this project is unique - NPCs working with an academic research and design expertise.

#### Theory

Work by urban design theorists and writers dealt with characteristic problems of dense urban settlement (e.g. Jacobs 1962, Gehl 2006), and rarely town/village densities and patterns. That there is no clear discipline of 'Town Design' as against 'Urban Design' seemed symptomatic of a neglect

of a distinctive settlement type. Archival research framed the work of researchers and students.

The task of the Small Settlements Research Group has been to understand small settlements not as 'a big settlement, shrunk down', but rather understood as a distinctive settlement type often more dependent on people than systems to effect change.

#### Policy

The UK Government's Localism Act was introduced in 2011. It changed the profile of small settlements as they were able to determine their own future through the legislative process enacted. Its critics have pointed to social justice shortcomings (Bodman, 2013), to the way it only tinkers at the margins of a systemically over-centralised development planning process, and to its failure to flourish in urban communities (Boys-Smith, 2016).

#### Practice

The Small Settlements Research Group is part of the Continuity in Architecture Atelier in the BA and MArch Courses at the Manchester

School of Architecture. Established in 1993, the Atelier developed practices and theories derived from the ideas of Contextualism, and contemporary academics - Plevoets (Hasselt), Pitera (Detroit) Berger (Rhode Island), Vanore (IUAV Venice), Roberts (Columbia GSAPP). These are used as a teaching vehicle for work in historic settlements of all scales across continental Europe and locally in England: Cartmel, Colwyn Bay, Grange-over-Sands, St Leonards, Wilmslow and others.

The following pages (with timeline) set out the Research Process for one specific settlement example, Bollington in Cheshire.



Fig 1. Settle, Cumbria (Ph. John Lee).

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## Research Methods

The approach adopted by the team was 'Research-by-Design', using brief, programme and design development in a responsive public setting to guide their enquiries. The EAAE charter on Architectural Research describe research-through-design as a method that transforms particular design solutions into 'objects of reflection' and frame them within the wider context in order to generate more than just anecdotal claims based upon a particular project (EAAE:19). Since design and research are inextricably linked, there is a direct relationship between knowledge production and the design process. Thus, the aim of a research-through-design project within a school of architecture is to construct knowledge through the acquisition of insight and understanding - a mixture of peer-to-peer conversations, interactive discussions, and shared experiences combined with continual reiteration of the design process.

The research team aimed to extend existing knowledge by finding suitable places engaged in Localism activities for settlements, and in 2015, Bollington NPC approached the CiA Atelier to assist with the formation of their Neighbourhood Plan. Our methodology began by engaging Masters research students in, artistic interventions, contextual urban analysis, mapping and design proposals.

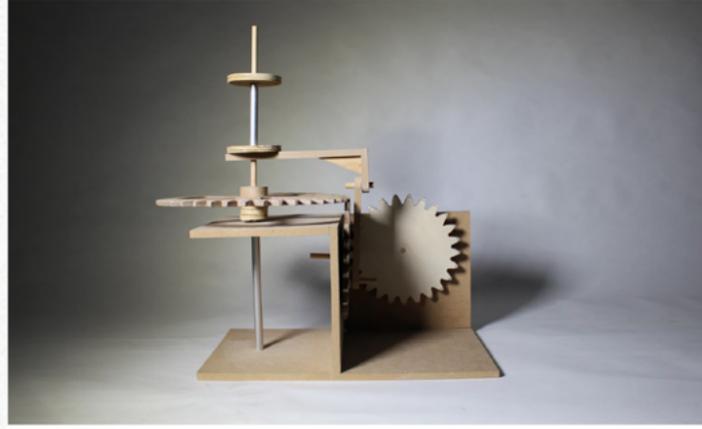




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A series of student artistic interventions in the town provoked by the Researchers to encapsulate and amplify themes of townscape character and materiality, for public display.

**Fig 2-6.** Masters Research Work by the Continuity Atelier, exploring interventions intended to uncover and amplify the character of the town, and show it to the townsfolk. (L-R: C Lipcheva, C McLoughlin, H Clifton, W Priest)

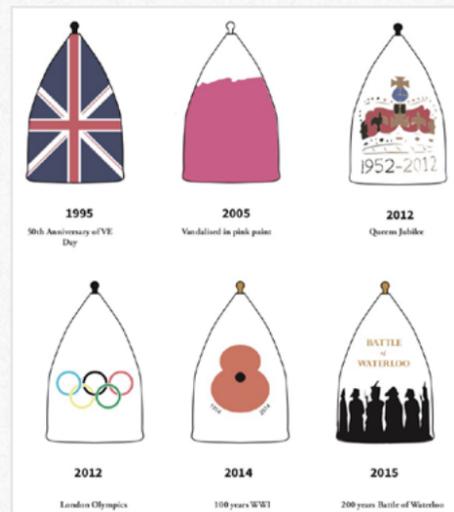
Process of discovery



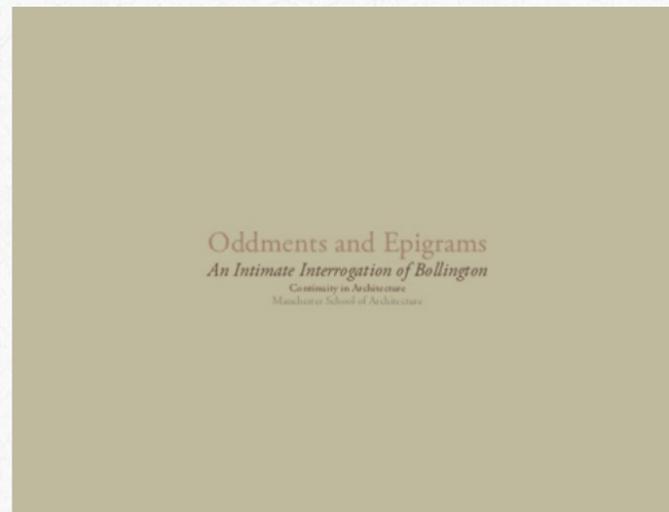
2015: 'Knitting Weaving Wrapping Pressing'



7.



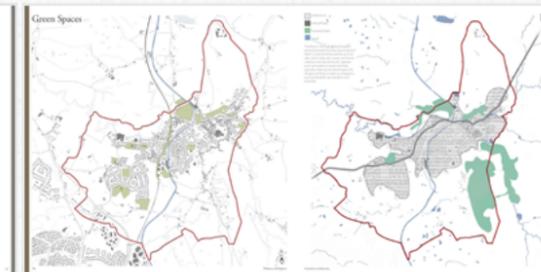
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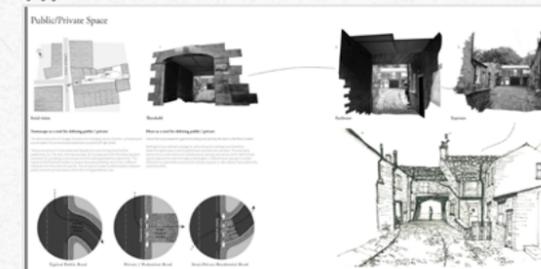
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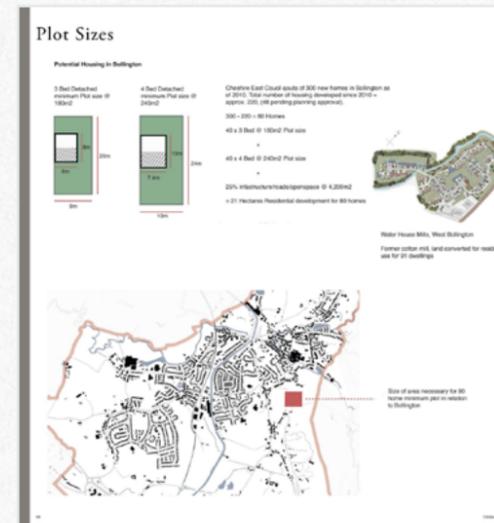
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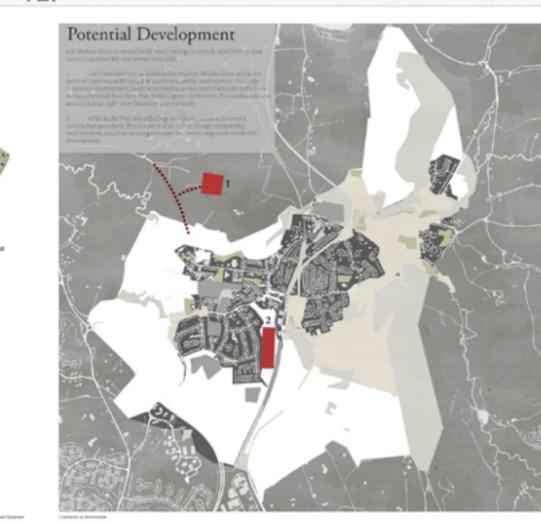
11.



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*Oddments & Epigrams*, 2015, a 136-page research volume by the student research group, summarising the findings of a contextual analysis of the town, its connections and its character, and potential development sites.

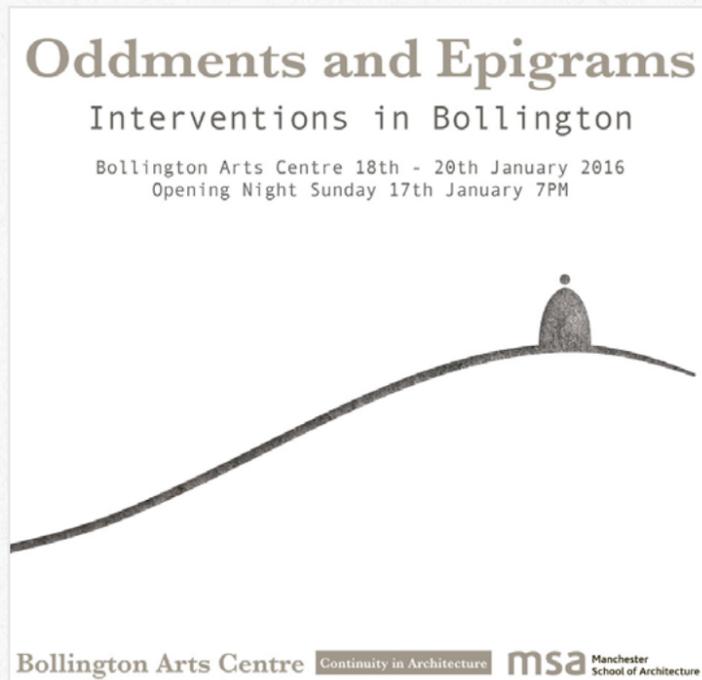
**Fig 7-13.** Pages from '*Oddments & Epigrams*' (Book), 2015.

Process of discovery

2015: 'Oddments & Epigrams' (Book)



14.



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17.

'Oddments & Epigrams' (Exhibition). A 23-piece exhibition of the 'Knitting Weaving Wrapping Pressing' interventions in Bollington, engaging the public in new ways of thinking about their town and how it might change.

Fig 14-17. Exhibition images, and extract of contemporary article from Cheshire Life Magazine.

Process of discovery



2015: 'Oddments & Epigrams' (Exhibition)



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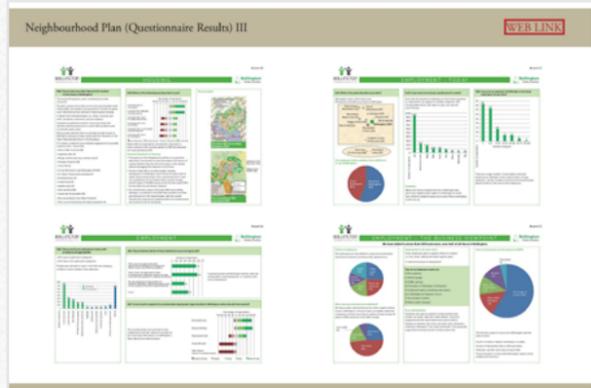
The initial contextual analysis was the foundation for a masterplanning workshop (with ThinkPlace Urban Designers) to develop a framework for the town. This was published in a public document: 'Bollington Local Development Masterplan Framework'. Public consultation on the research prompted heated discussion about the main road, and comments recorded in the NP documentation.

**Fig 18-20.**  
Extracts from the research document produced for the Neighbourhood Plan public consultation process.

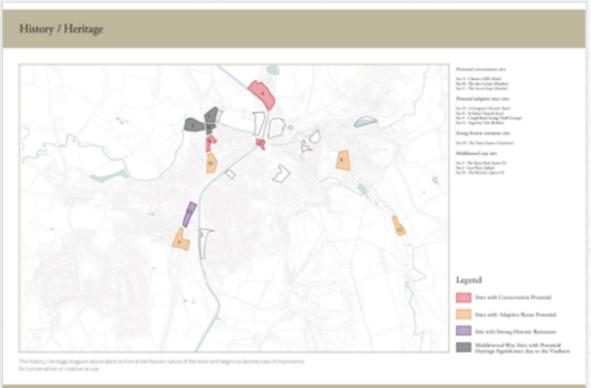
Process of discovery



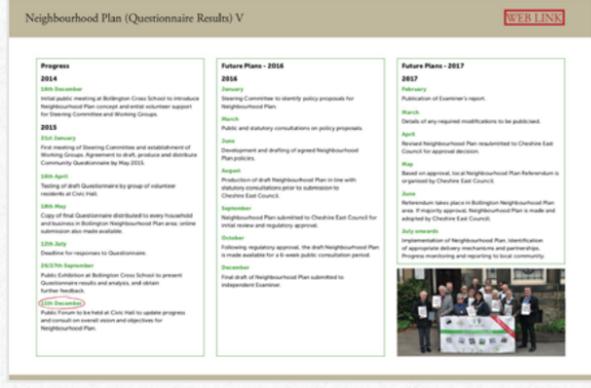
2016: 'Bollington Local Development Masterplan'



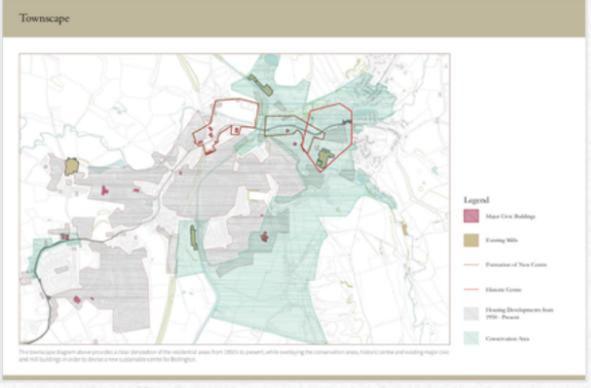
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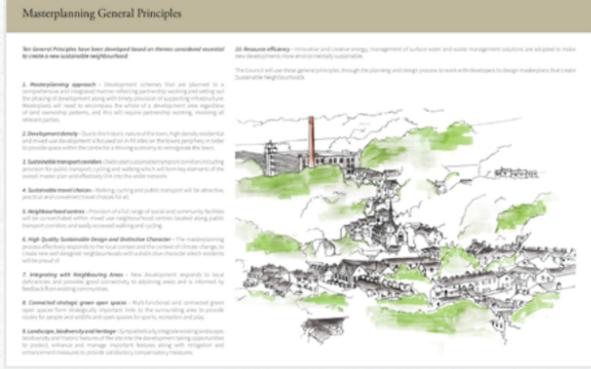
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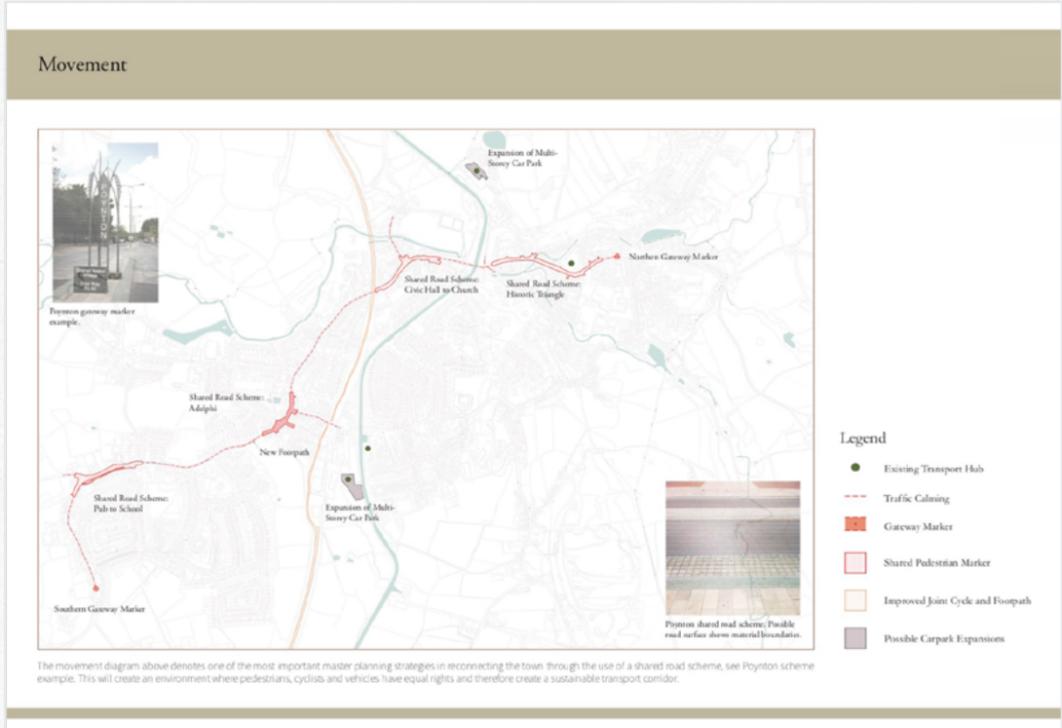
23.



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27.

The 'Movement' section of the Masterplan Framework suggested key 'nodes' along the main road, prompting Bollington NPC to seek further detail on the strategy outlined. This formed the basis of their brief for subsequent work by commissioned from the Continuity in Architecture Research Group.

**Fig 21-27.** Comprehensive urban analysis and research document produced for the Neighbourhood Plan public consultation process by researchers and students.



# Bollington Real : Imagined

Draft Policies for the Neighbourhood Plan to be presented alongside imagined visions for Bollington by Manchester School of Architecture

Bollington Arts Centre 22nd - 26th May 2016  
Opening Night Saturday 21st May 7PM  
Coffee Morning and Discussions Friday 27th May 10AM



Bollington Arts Centre Continuity in Architecture msa Manchester School of Architecture

28.



29.

Public comments at this exhibition and to the NPC afterwards gave further impetus to calls to investigate a solution to road safety and traffic movements along the B5090.

**Fig 28-29.**

A public exhibitions combining presentations of Masters research and projects, and a public consultation on the Bollington Neighbourhood Plan. Comments were gathered for the NP process

Process of discovery

May 2016: 'Bollington.  
Real: Imagined'

# A Place of Safety

Further Research into Road Improvements for Bollington

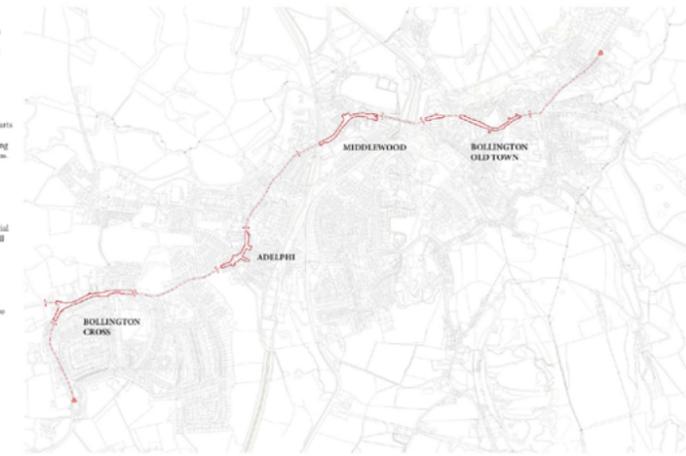


msa Manchester School of Architecture | MANCHESTER SCHOOL OF ART | Manchester Metropolitan University | MANCHESTER | Bollington Town Council | Continuity Research

30.

## The Proposals

- Bollington Old Town**
  - Heritage context
  - Short stay disabled pop-in stops
  - Pedestrian carpark
  - Reconnecting the town to its roots and rediscovering character
- Middlewood**
  - Civic centre
  - New public space linking Town hall, park, pub, library, church and arts centre
  - New distinctive public space allowing people to gather on civic celebrations
- Adelphi**
  - Gateway to Bollington proper
  - Development of industry and commerce
  - Rediscovery and support of industrial heritage centred on the Adelphi Mill
- Bollington Cross**
  - Family and living public space
  - Linking homes to neighbouring shops and pub
  - Supporting the school and church to form a recognisable family space



31.

Bollington, Cheshire Village life, safety and movement on a busy road

## Placemaking Adelphi

The proposals for the Adelphi are illustrated in this sketch. They show the new openness and clarity introduced into the junction. The proposal includes a tentative idea for signage built into a new wall that shields private properties from the new public space. The new combination of finishes can also be seen.

- Foliage reduced to improve visibility
- Feature curved wall with built-in bench
- Material changes allow for safe crossing
- Raised and coloured asphalt
- Curve reduced to slow turning traffic



32.

The outcome of the research work of 2015-16 and accompanying public exhibitions in Bollington, were further questions about the safety and amenity of the public spaces along the main road through the settlement.

This led to the Small Settlements Group being commissioned to produce a further report 'A Place of Safety', with a requirement to research case studies and develop ideas for the four 'nodes' first identified in the Masterplan Framework.

**Fig 30-32.** 'A Place of Safety' Report (Nov 2016) Further research undertaken by the team (including Masters students) provided to the Bollington NPC. This was a preliminary assessment.

Process of discovery

November 2016:  
'A Place of Safety' Report



# Reclaiming the Road

Public Realm Improvement Proposals for Bollington in Cheshire

Revision 1 March 2017

Architects & Urban Designers  
 CIVIC ENGINEERS  
 Bollington TOWN COUNCIL  
 MANCHESTER SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

33.

- Reduce the number and severity of road traffic collisions and casualties
- Create a safer highway environment by reducing incidents of excessive and inappropriate speed
- Create environments that are more sympathetic to vulnerable road users
- Empower local communities to play a proactive role in reducing incidents of excessive and inappropriate speed
- Enhance respect for speed limits and improve compliance
- Support a local transport system that promotes economic growth

2.3.2 The Highway (Road Works) Regulations 1999  
This governs the form, layout, signing, lighting, and consultation processes associated with the provision of road humps and when speed tables or raised entry treatments are being considered.

2.3.4 Manual for Streets 2007  
Guidance for practitioners involved in the design, planning and approval of new residential streets and modifications to existing ones.

2.3.5 Manual for Streets 2010  
Manual for Streets 2 - Wider Application of the Principles, a companion guide to Manual for Streets, was published by the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation in September 2010. The

2.3.2 Highways Act 1980  
This gives legal status to the provision of footways, footpaths, etc., and deals with highway authority powers to undertake improvement

34.

3.4.2 Heart of Hackbridge, London Borough of Sutton  
The ambition of Hackbridge was to build on the collaboration of businesses and the wider community to promote a vibrant revitalised neighbourhood centre. The team identified obstacles to this aim lying in large part in the negative perceptions of the public realm - lack of greenery, traffic speeds, no sense of place, and an inability to 'step and shop' in the centre.

and parking more effectively managed. New surface finishes, bespoke signage and heritage treatments gave Hackbridge a stronger sense of identity, with practical measures such as seating, bike parking and rain gardens improving functionality.

Post-implementation surveys have established quantitative and qualitative gains - increased levels of footfall in the area, and improved overall perceptions of the new environment.

Though modest in cost, the scheme has delivered substantial benefits to the community. Traffic speeds have been considerably reduced.

35.

The research team were commissioned by Bollington NPC to provide a comprehensive design proposal for the road, requiring input from specialist engineering, architectural and cost consultants Arca (the practice of researcher John Lee) and Civic Engineers. It drew together legislative matters, current research and best practice for public realm design, water management, cycles and pedestrians. The milestone document 'Reclaiming the Road' was published in March 2017. Extracts follow.

**Fig 33-35.** 'Reclaiming the Road' Report (Mar 2017) Comprehensive costed and engineered public realm strategy for the B5090 trunk road through the town. Subsequently included in the Bollington Neighbourhood Plan.

Process of discovery



March 2017:  
'Reclaiming the Road' Report



**Fig 36.**  
Map of Bollington.

**Fig 37.**  
Bollington Cross had as its centrepiece the Greig Fountain, building in traffic calming and parking rationalisation to serve the local primary school. Dense tree planting was included for stormwater water management.

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Process of discovery



Bollington Cross



38.

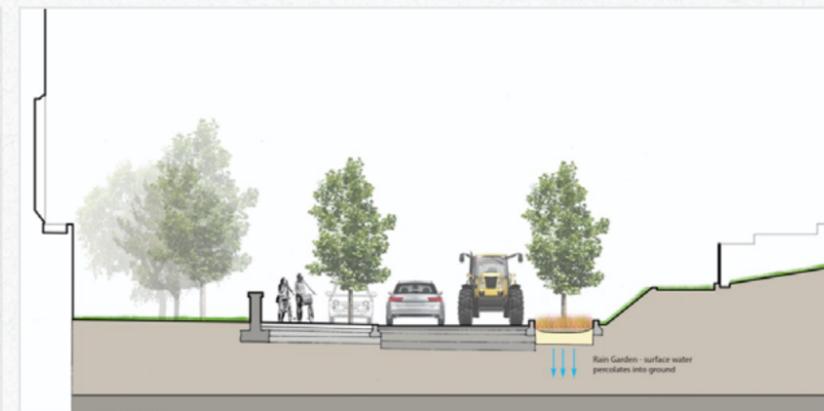


39.

**Fig 38-39.**  
Ashbrook Place introduced a raised table at the junction of this fast corner, additional planting and rain gardens, to give character and identity to the space.



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41.

**Fig 40-41.**  
Middlewood contains the densest concentration of civic buildings, re-contextualised in three new open spaces corresponding to leisure, learning and the town's institutions.



**Fig 42.** Bollington Old Town is a Conservation Area with a car park at its heart. In the proposals this is replaced with a new Market Square, a new focal point for commercial activity.

42.

## Research Insights

The investigation process had clear aims leading to a insights grouped under three headings: findings for general application, new knowledge, and impacting policy.

Approaching the research, we asked the questions:

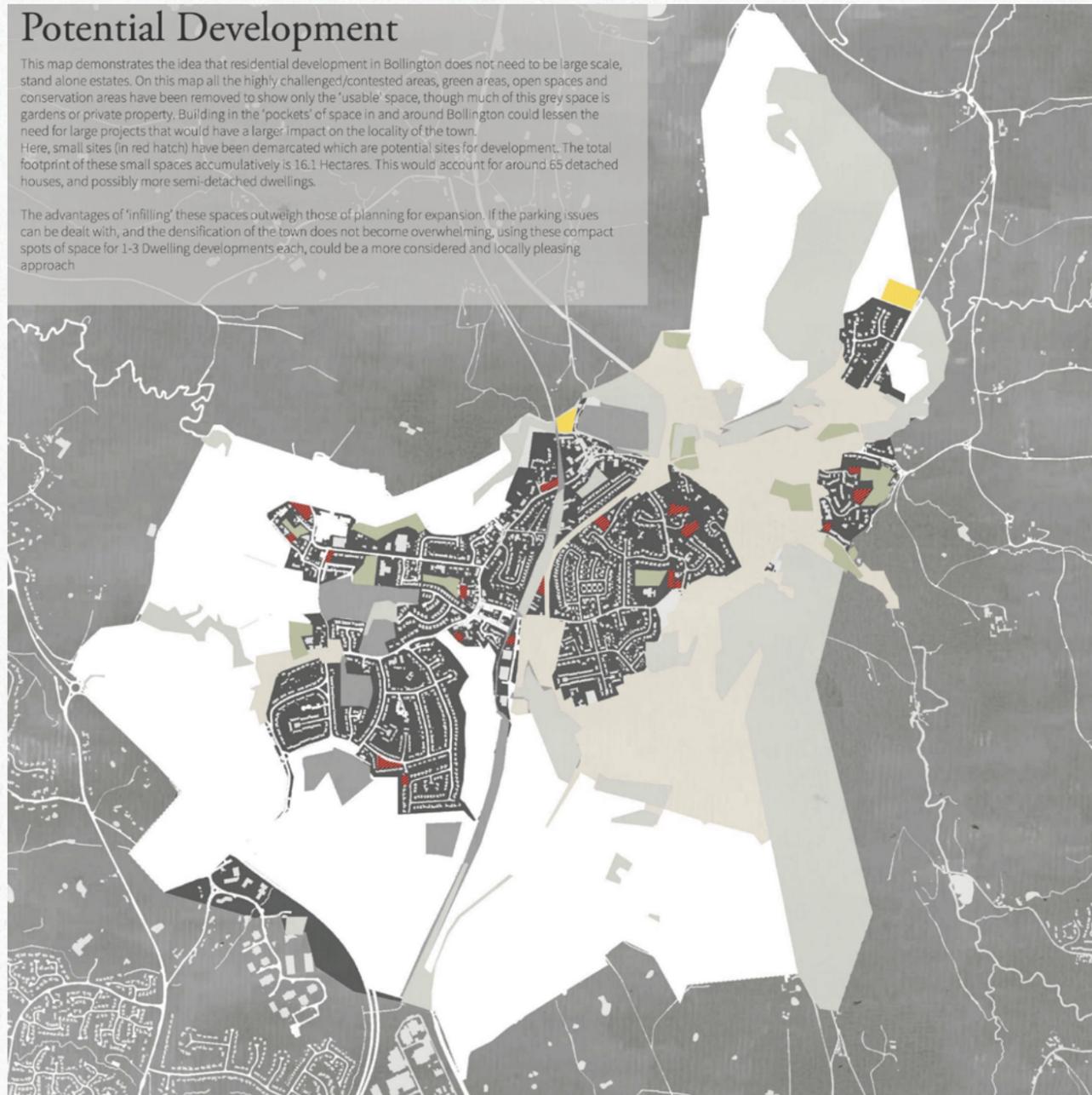
- 'How can researchers contribute to developing viable urban design proposals that serve the people of small settlements?';
- 'Specifically, how can creative design methodologies complement the work of Neighbourhood Planning Committees (NPCs) in expanding small settlements?'.

We believe that by inserting ourselves into a public process of future enquiry and consultation we have demonstrated the capacity of academic enquiry to raise questions, and to raise quality. The process was designed to uncover knowledge about the settlement, engage the public, and develop contextual yet radical proposals for change.

### Potential Development

This map demonstrates the idea that residential development in Bollington does not need to be large scale, stand alone estates. On this map all the highly challenged/contested areas, green areas, open spaces and conservation areas have been removed to show only the 'usable' space, though much of this grey space is gardens or private property. Building in the 'pockets' of space in and around Bollington could lessen the need for large projects that would have a larger impact on the locality of the town. Here, small sites (in red hatch) have been demarcated which are potential sites for development. The total footprint of these small spaces accumulatively is 16.1 Hectares. This would account for around 65 detached houses, and possibly more semi-detached dwellings.

The advantages of 'infilling' these spaces outweigh those of planning for expansion. If the parking issues can be dealt with, and the densification of the town does not become overwhelming, using these compact spots of space for 1-3 Dwelling developments each, could be a more considered and locally pleasing approach



**Fig 43.** Potential new development sites for Bollington identified through researcher-student design investigation.

## Research Insights

### General Lessons.

Firstly, the work has general lessons for research-by-design practice: finding good partners, and being flexible and adaptable in the research process. The team had researchers with strong industry links and were able to find partners who understood the local place, and had a proven record of working with one another. But at various stages it was also necessary to be flexible and adaptable to the opportunities of working in a live public setting.

What the process in Bollington shows is the importance of having an ability to move nimbly and swiftly from pedagogy to research, research to industry partnerships, industry back to research, and so on. The ability to recognise the right skills for the particular subtask is vital - and in all, humility within the relationships to navigate to the most fruitful project outcomes.



Fig 44. Collaborative workshop in progress.

## Research Insights

### New Knowledge.

Secondly, the research generated new solutions to an extent that would otherwise have been impossible. Taking existing knowledge about public realm design in urban settings (e.g. the work of Civic Engineers, Gillespies, West8, etc.) the team for the first time derived potential new solution for the intractable public realm design along a principal regional road through a small settlement. Reclaiming the Road was about taking back control of the infrastructure (at least in part) for the purpose of community safety, amenity and identity. Developing industry partnerships with Arca and Civic Engineers, contact with Cheshire East Council NP Officer, and a reputation for innovative thinking provided the team with opportunities to go on from the Bollington project to support NPCs in Alsager, Lower Peover, Plumley Toft & Bexton.



**Fig 45.** Public realm works in Poynton, Cheshire (Ph. Civic Engineers).

## Research Insights

Taken in the round, the effect of this approach was to lend authority and relevance to the work, such that it had resounding impact.

### Impacting Policy.

So, thirdly, the research derived an answer to how to impact the policy agenda as it affects small settlements. The researcher's partnership with Neighbourhood Planning Committees gave them that opportunity to facilitate change.

From our collaborative experience of working in small settlements, we have heard how activist residents value the 'bottom-up' democratising of the planning processes. Feedback from the public at exhibitions, Neighbourhood Planning Consultations, and during informal feedback sessions expressed positive opinions about the possibility of shaping change in their towns and villages. Despite its shortcomings the Act is seen as a vehicle for empowering residents to set Planning Policy, and researchers were able to harness this in promoting new ways of thinking.



**Fig 46.** Student design (2016) by James Shackleton for Bollington.

## Research Insights

### Impacting Policy.

For example, the question of 'design style' and taste is not without its controversies in a small town. The typical member of a NPC is a retired professional, with great depth of experience in their specialist field. The group are often well organised and professional in their management, conservative by nature, inherently cautious about radical change while in the public eye.

We observed how the NPCs needed in some measure to disassociate themselves from radical change, whilst privately acknowledging the need to work with designers, and bridge the skills gap.

But there was also a scope gap, as we identified at the outset. The town residents and stakeholders in Bollington (and later, Over Peover, Plumley and Alsager) all identified road traffic as a threat to their wellbeing and quality of life.



**Fig 47.** Affordable Housing proposal for Bollington (David Eccles, 2016).

# Research Insights

## Impacting Policy.

However, Highways matters do not fall within the scope of the Planning Development Control, and therefore lie outside the scope of any Neighbourhood Plan. The challenge to the NPCs was to be seen to reflect and act on the townspeople's concerns about traffic, whilst not having the authority to address the problem within the Neighbourhood Plan process.

The 'Reclaiming the Road' project shows how public realm innovations delivered through research-by-design might become possible - and then become policy.



Fig 48. Proposal for Over Peover developed from research in Bollington (courtesy Arca).



Fig 49. Proposal for Over Peover developed from research in Bollington (courtesy Arca).



Fig 50. Proposal for Over Peover developed from research in Bollington (courtesy Arca)

# Dissemination

## 1. Planning policy

Bollington, Cheshire, United Kingdom.

March 2018.

Bollington Neighbourhood Plan (Referendum Version), March 2018.

Neighbour Plan Reference document 'Reclaiming the Road' prepared and published in collaboration with Arca Architects (John Lee) and Civic Engineers.

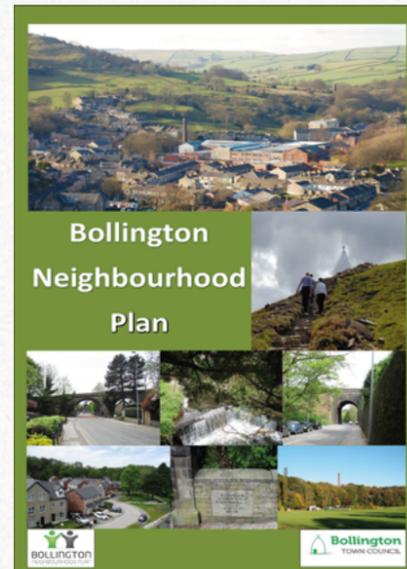


Fig 51. Bollington Neighbourhood Plan (Referendum Version), March 2018.

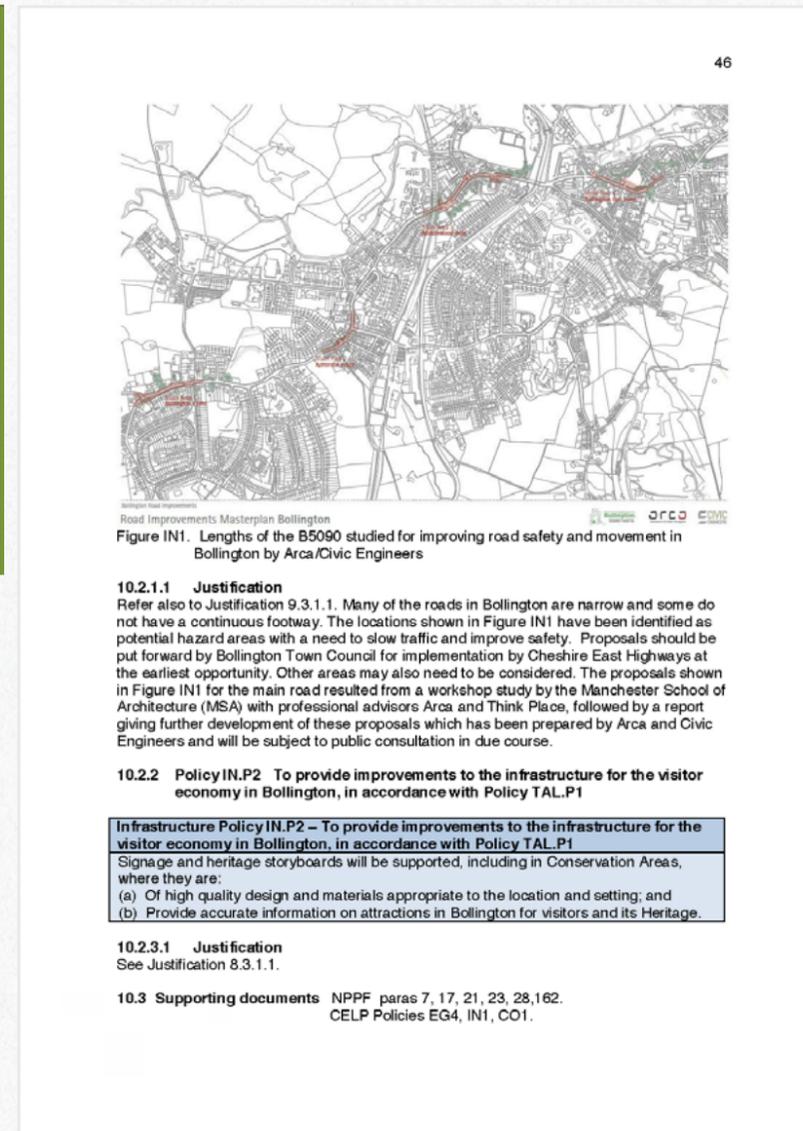


Fig 52. Bollington Neighbourhood Plan (Referendum Version), March 2018.

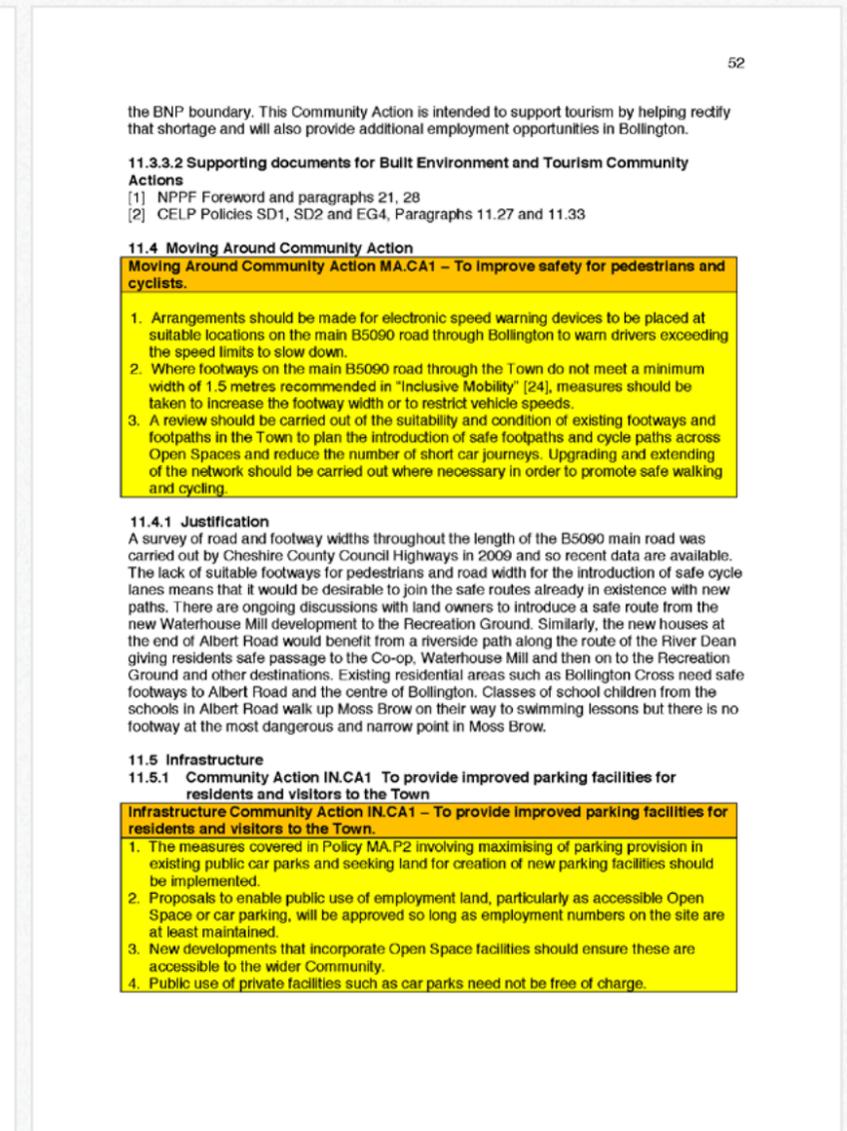


Fig 53. Bollington Neighbourhood Plan (Referendum Version), March 2018.

## 2. Peer-Reviewed Papers

United Kingdom, Portugal.

2016-2019.

Stone, S. H., & Sanderson, L. 2016. Paper 'Oddments & Epigrams', to Architecture\_Media\_Politics (AMPS) Conference in Liverpool (2016) on the theme of 'Government and Housing in a Time of Crisis: Policy, Planning, Design and Delivery'. Published (2017) In K. Day, & C. Chatzichristou (Eds.), Housing Solutions Through Design (Vol. 2, 1 ed.).

Stone, S. H., & Sanderson, L. 2017. Paper to EAAE-ARCC International Conference 'Trouble in Happy Valley: The Documentation of a Research Through Design Collaborative Project between a Postgraduate Atelier at the Manchester School of Architecture and the Local Community of a Small Town'. Published in EAAE-ARCC International Conference Proceedings (EAAE-ARCC 2016)

Lee, S. J., Stone, S. H., & Sanderson, L. (2019) Reclaiming the Road: People and Vehicles in Small Settlements. Published in REHAB 2019 Proceedings. Guimaraes, Portugal. Awarded Best Paper.



Fig 54. REHAB 2019 Best Paper Award.

## 3. Exhibitions

Bollington, United Kingdom.

2016.

Sanderson, L., Stone, S. H., & Lee, S. J. (2016).  
Bollington. Real : Imagined (No. Of Pieces: 23)  
[Exhibition]. Bollington Arts Centre.

Sanderson, L., Stone, S. H., & Lee, S. J. (2016).  
Oddments and Epigrams : Interventions in  
Bollington (No. Of Pieces: 50) [Exhibition].  
Bollington Arts Centre.



Will Priest | 11071270 | Continuity in Architecture

Fig 55. Views of Bollington village.

#### 4. Installation

Bollington, United Kingdom.

2016.

Installation 'Gold Brick' (2016), Installed in Local Wall in Collaboration with the Neighbourhood Planning Committee.



Fig 56. 'Gold Brick' (installation by W Priest).

## 5. Public engagement

Bollington, United Kingdom.

2016.

'Make White Nancy Fancy' (2016), Kite Making and Flying in Collaboration with Local Schools. Funded by Hawkins Brown Architects.

'Bollington Imagined', Laura Sanderson, Bollington Live, Summer 2016.



Fig 57. Bollington Live! Summer 2016, Issue 67. Cover.



Fig 58. 'Bollington Imagined!', first page of article by Laura Sanderson.

# Dissemination

## 6. News coverage

Bollington, United Kingdom.

2016.

'Bollington in the Frame', Paul Sweeny, *Cheshire Life*, March 2016.

'Architecture Exhibition Launches', Karen Britton, *Macclesfield Express*, January 2016.



Fig 59. Extract from Cheshire Life magazine.

# References

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**Brown, J.** (2011) *Villagers : 750 years of life in an English village*. Stroud: Amberley.

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## Image credits

Fig 1. **John Lee.**

Fig 7-13. **Continuity in Architecture MArch Atelier students.**

Fig 14-17. **H. Clifton and R. Stanton.**

Fig 18-26. **Continuity in Architecture MArch Atelier students.**

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Fig 30-32. **MSA Continuity in Architecture.**

Fig 33-35. **Arca/Civic Engineers with MSA Continuity in Architecture.**

Fig 36-42 **Arca/Civic Engineers with MSA Continuity in Architecture.**

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# Collaborators

This research was made in collaboration with Sally Stone and Laura Sanderson.

