

# Traffic speed in a civilised Suburb - adapting the Suburb to meet changing needs

As an urban design practice we were asked by the Residents Association and the Trust to give some ideas on how traffic calming might be sensitively applied to the Suburb's outstanding urban design quality. I hope these notes are a helpful contribution to the important debate.

We all consider ourselves to be experts on traffic. Most of us drive cars and none of us can avoid the constant conflicts and frustrations experienced every day by pedestrians, cyclists and drivers. But it is difficult to balance the obvious irritations of traffic outside an individual front door against the stated aspirations of the new government on national integrated transport policies in the context of the huge forces of economic and social trends.

## The implications of three facts

To fill in the background it helps to remind ourselves of three related facts concerning future traffic volumes, speeds and the special circumstances of the Suburb.

First, traffic, particularly car traffic, is increasing at such a rate that in twenty years time it is likely to have grown by another 50%. John Prescott's statements on a sustainable and integrated transport policy are sensible. But because we are used to the greater freedom and choice that individual cars give us, the discussion is not about reducing traffic, it is about reducing its likely growth.

Secondly, traffic in towns, as well as being noisy and smelly, is dangerous. The chances of a pedestrian being killed after being hit by a car travelling at 40mph are almost 100%, after being hit by a car travelling 20mph the chances are one in twenty. If drivers could be persuaded to drive more slowly in the Suburb there is the possibility that this might encourage more people to feel safe enough to try using cycles and it may encourage some parents to allow their children to walk or cycle to school. Thus a reduction in speed might also help to reduce volumes of traffic.

Thirdly, some of the designed open spaces that are

an important part of the special characteristic of the Suburb have been altered over recent years to cope with realistic traffic speeds of 30mph - 40mph. A reduction in traffic speed would allow them to be restored. This special reason for reducing traffic in the Suburb is worth examining further.

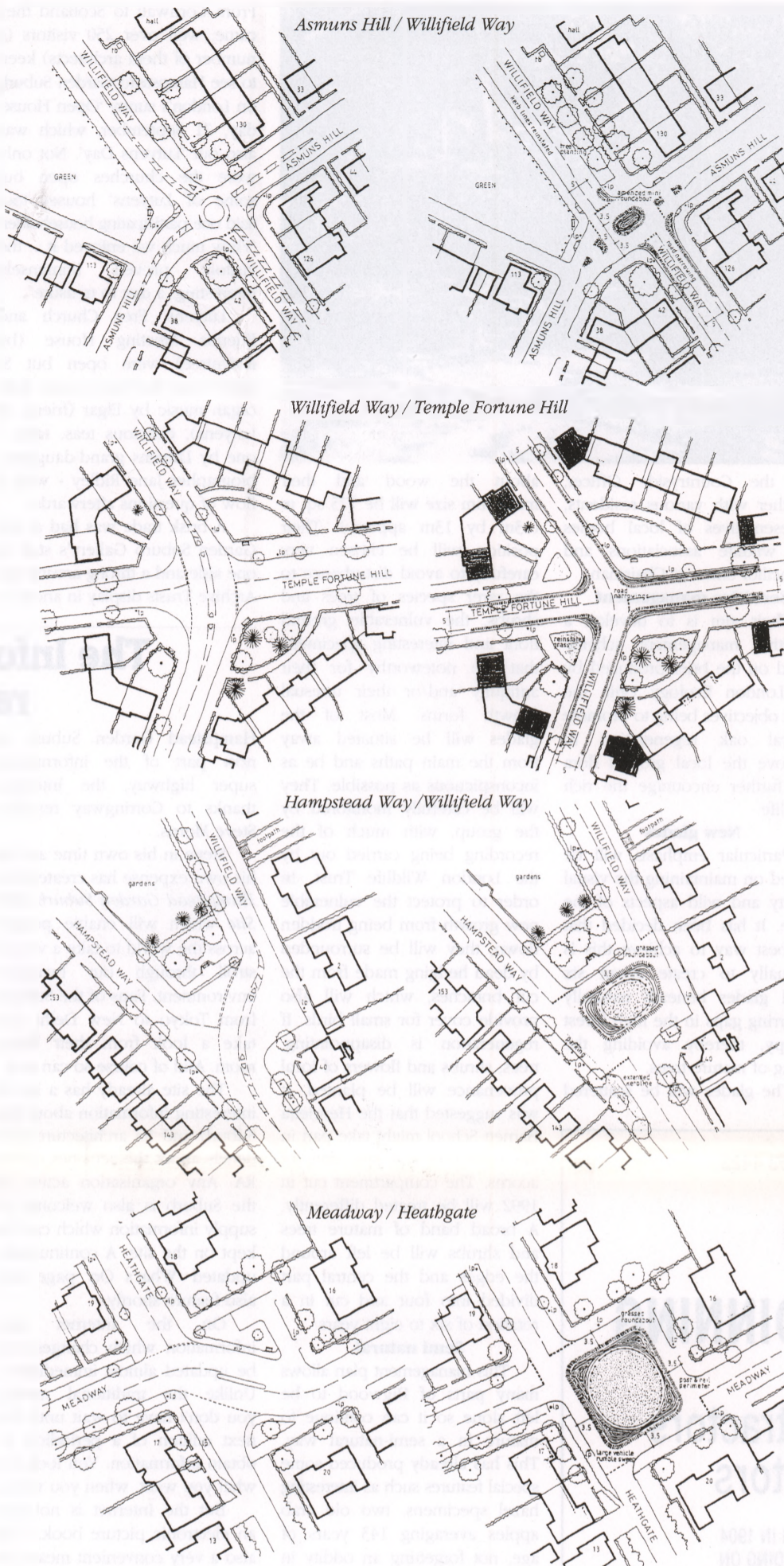
## Unwin's thoughts on enclosed spaces

The contribution made by Raymond Unwin to the design of housing and urban design, particularly through the building of Hampstead Garden Suburb, is well known. Unwin's book *Town Planning in Practice*, written in 1909, contains many illustrations and references to the ideas which were subsequently carried out in the building of the Suburb.

He was interested in the enclosure of open space that is created by the position of buildings. This is the idea that buildings can be deliberately placed at the end of a vista rather as Buckingham Palace closes the vista along the Mall. He developed the idea for example at the intersection of Willfield Way and Temple Fortune Hill so that two groups of houses closed each of the approaching vistas from Willfield Way.

In his book he describes at some length what he intended to do.

*When once attention is given to the subject, there are many ways in which street junctions can be treated, either to secure open vistas or closed-in pictures, as may in each case be desirable. Some examples, showing how buildings have been treated at corners formed by the junction of roads meeting at various angles, will be found in the illustrations. Many small, irregular places and street junctions, from which most picturesque results have sprung, will be found on examining the plans of old Gothic towns.*



*At first sight some of these irregular shapes seem to have no purpose or meaning, but a closer examination will show that they are cunningly devised to give enclosed views and to render possible the erection of irregular picturesque groups of buildings.*

We can see in Willfield Way how he puts these ideas into practice at the intersections with Temple Fortune Hill, Hampstead Way and Asmuns Hill.

At **Temple Fortune Hill** the central space between the buildings was designed as a circular garden, bisected by modest roads. Flanking each of the four roads leading out of the circular garden are houses positioned close to the road to emphasise the enclosure of the open space.

In the last twenty or thirty years Willfield Way has been widened to ease the flow of 30 - 40mph traffic. If traffic speeds were to be reduced to 20mph, sharper corners could be negotiated safely. It would be possible to revert to the original road alignment and therefore restore the original Unwin design.

At the corner of Willfield Way and **Hampstead Way** there is a subtle arrangement of buildings which was intended to form an interesting architectural incident in the Suburb. Unwin's book shows an almost exact model.

Here again, as at Temple Fortune Hill, Unwin's design has been eroded by the widening and straightening of the curve of the road and by the erection of traffic bollards. If traffic speeds were reduced, vehicles could safely turn sharper corners and the existing road layout could be replaced by one that respected the special character of the enclosed space.

A third and even more subtle example of Unwin's enclosure of space can be seen at the intersection of Willfield Way and **Asmuns Hill**. A modern, mini roundabout and an attempt to align both approaches of Willfield Way has destroyed an important feature of the original design. Plans of Unwin's original scheme show a careful positioning of road, open green, wide grass verge and rows of street trees. The deliberate absence of street trees

in some locations was as important to the effect as their inclusion.

The gradual widening and realignment of Willfield Way at its northern approach to the roundabout has removed two of the four trees of an avenue which continued the line of the southern approach. Realignment has also produced an odd bulge in the pavement at the eastern corner of the green.

The original alignment and subtlety could be restored if traffic speeds were more modest. Our suggested design shows a relatively narrow smooth roadway for cars. Larger vehicles would not be excluded; they would merely, as at present, ride up over the reshaped mini roundabout. A further refinement would be the inclusion of a safe and smooth passage for cyclists.

**The practical difficulties of enforcing a 20mph speed limit** All these aesthetic advantages could be carried out quite easily if we could be sure that drivers would conform to a 20mph speed limit. Unfortunately under the present arrangements it is almost impractical to restrict

speed in streets in an arbitrary fashion. There needs to be a degree of logic. Also if traffic is prevented from travelling at normal speeds in one road, it will simply divert to an adjacent road, causing reasonable concern among those living there. So we have to think about reducing speeds on a group of roads which are self-contained. The difficulty is to decide what is the boundary of a sensible and practical group.

Another practical difficulty is that the authorities prefer to enforce lower speeds by making it difficult or uncomfortable to travel much faster. Signs by themselves have little effect.

This brings us to the second part of our work which was to give some ideas on what would be alternative arrangements to road humps. Humps are certainly cheap and quite effective but hardly contribute to the visual quality of the Suburb.

## What would Unwin have done?

To find alternatives we began to think about the solutions that Unwin might have produced if he was confronted with our levels of traffic. The sketches show some of our ideas. They draw upon our experience from work we have recently carried out in other conservation areas and from our studies in similar areas in Europe. In each case a traffic-calming device should be accurately designed to respect the urban design and architectural characteristics of its location.

In the Suburb, the landscape elements that are frequently seen: granite kerbs, green verges, carefully positioned trees are obvious. There is another. Unwin used buildings to define his open spaces. By positioning changes to the road, needed to slow traffic, in conjunction with the existing pattern of buildings and spaces, we can make these necessary additions appear to be part of the original Unwin design.

## Where do we go from here?

Returning to the facts on traffic trends, it seems that unless some quite unforeseen circumstances occur, traffic volumes are not likely to decrease. On the other hand there are compelling arguments on grounds of safety to reduce traffic speeds. And at Hampstead Garden Suburb we have unique opportunities to restore some of the special architectural features that make the Suburb so precious.

COLIN J DAVIS

*The proposals are open for comment and modification. Part of the process for any scheme will include full consultation with the residents by Barnet Council. The RA are equally keen to hear your views on these proposals and any other traffic problems. You can make them known by writing to the Roads and Traffic Committee through myself.*

**Ken Murrell, Chairman  
Roads and Traffic Committee  
167 Hampstead Way,  
NW11 7YA**

*EDITOR'S NOTE - Colin Davis has written several books on traffic in the urban environment. He has advised the Scottish Office on traffic calming in historic towns and villages and is currently engaged on proposals for Strand, Bloomsbury, Devises and Salisbury. His book 'Improving Design in the High Street' was published by the Royal Fine Art Commission earlier in the year.*



## A MODERN JUDAISM "RESPONDING TO CHANGE BUT ROOTED IN TRADITION"

is offered by

**THE NORTH WESTERN  
REFORM SYNAGOGUE**

Alyth Gardens  
Finchley Road, NW11

'Alyth' is a friendly community. It offers a first class Religion School, beautiful services in Hebrew and English, total equality for men and women, study opportunities for all, welfare support in times of difficulty, a range of social activities for all ages.

*Enquiries for more information are especially welcome from Jews with no synagogue affiliation.*

**For further information contact:  
Community Director, Lynette Chazen  
on 0181 455 6763**