

2 Study area context

As a result of the historical development process, most Soho streets are seldom dominated by buildings of a particular era and are of a mixed historical and architectural character, although unified by the morphological features and continuing socio-economic role of the area. There are, however, international and national economic factors and trends that constantly have an impact on areas such as Soho.

Study area boundaries

- 2.1 The study area comprises the Soho Conservation Area, as defined in the local authority planning policy, together with the adjacent area of 'Chinatown' which makes up the historic neighbourhood of Soho (See Figure 2.1). For a synopsis of the history and character of Soho see *Background paper 1: History and Character of Soho*.



Figure 2.1: Soho Pilot Study Area

(Source: Max Lock Centre on Google Earth image)

- 2.2 The current residential population of Soho has been estimated at between 4,000 and 5,000.¹ However, the 2001 census gave a resident population in the study area of 2,200 (see Appendix 4). Considerable under-counting was reported in the City of Westminster and this is certain to have been so in Soho with its high transient and 24 hour working life style.
- 2.3 There is likely to have been an increase in population in the intervening period, in line with the estimated increase in the population of Westminster as a whole (from around 200,000 in 2001 to an estimated 244,000 in Westminster City Council's Draft Core Strategy of 2007). A similar increase in Soho and Chinatown, together with an allowance for under counting would indicate a current population between 3,000 and 4,000.

1. Soho Society.

- 2.4 A recent estimate puts the number of businesses in Soho at around 3,000.² Although there are important large business operations located in the study area (department stores and large retail premises, theatres and cinemas along the main streets, headquarters buildings for commercial and institutional organisations), the majority of these businesses are small. (In Westminster as a whole, 90% of businesses are estimated to have less than 10 employees).
- 2.5 Soho has been notably important as a centre of the independent film and video industry and television and film post-production. It is linked to the outside world and film studios and production centres elsewhere in the UK and the World through *Sohonet*, a community-wide network of rooftop telecommunications and below ground fibre optic cables, founded in 1995 by a group of Soho-based post-production companies.³
- 2.6 More generally, Soho is the hub of the main 'creative industries' cluster in Westminster and the Council's Creative Industries Special Policy Area. According to Westminster's Creative Industries Report, 'Westminster is the UK's central hub, accounting for 7% of the sectors employees in the UK. the West End, Soho, St James and Mayfair have the highest concentration of creative businesses in the UK, and possibly in the world'.⁴
- 2.7 Creative industries include the following sub-sectors:
- Designer fashion
 - Music and the visual and performing arts
 - Publishing (print)
 - Video, film and photography
 - Software, computer games and electronic publishing
 - Art and antiques
 - Architecture
 - Advertising
- 2.8 Nearly all of these sectors are present in Soho and, for several (advertising, publishing, video and film, music and performing arts) Soho is the main focus of activity in Westminster. Westminster's creative industries produce a turnover of £14.9 billion (11% of its total turnover excluding financial institutions). The sector also accounts for 11% of all employment, with 64,612 employees in nearly 7,000 business units in 2005.⁵ We have no estimate of what proportion of creative business units are concentrated in Soho but almost certainly between a third and a half. (There is in addition, of course, substantial employment in other sectors – retail, cafes, bars and restaurants).
- 2.9 Good quality public transport and public realm, being close to bars and restaurants and the opportunity for networking are among the reasons that Soho is so popular.⁶ However, Soho's built fabric offers the sort of space that creative industries business, the majority of which (65-75%) are small with less than 4 employees, is clearly a key factor.
- 2.10 Most (92%) occupy office premises and 83% lease their premises. A reliable power supply is a major concern in the Creative Industries Survey. Environment, fast data connections, a safe building environment, good building management/maintenance, good quality premises and sufficient space are also deemed important.⁷ The majority surveyed felt that effective business support was lacking.

2. Estimate provided by Peter Bibby of the Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of Sheffield.

3. *Sohonet*.

4. GVA Grimley LLP. 2007.

5. *ibid.*, p55.

6. *ibid.*, p61.

7. GVA Grimley LLP. 2007. p62.

Conservation Area Issues

- 2.11 The survey of Soho in Westminster City Council's Soho and Chinatown Conservation Area Audit provides an excellent background study of the character of the Soho Conservation Area (see Box 2.1).

Box 2.1: Soho Conservation Area

'Soho is London's most central village, with narrow streets and alleyways, restaurants, cafes and food shops, small businesses and street markets intermingled with many surviving eighteenth century houses. Its multiple layers of history and varied street life make Soho's streets both fascinating and lively. Yet it is also a strongly residential area, with a growing residential population. The important residential element to Soho's character prevents it from appearing entirely commercial.

In terms of its townscape, Soho has an extremely dense and urban character, defined by an irregular and often confusing grid of narrow streets. Longer streets run north/south and the shorter east/west and between the main streets are many narrow courts and alleys. This is essentially a late 17th century street pattern and most of the streets are noticeably narrower than those north of Oxford Street or west of Regent Street, which were built-up in the early 18th century.

Throughout the Conservation Area, there are few long views or urban landmarks, this gives a sense of Soho as being both impenetrable and also separate from surrounding areas. Significantly, there are no tube stations within Soho itself and the only bus routes run along the boundary streets and along Shaftesbury Avenue.

Soho today remains one of London's most colourful and vibrant neighbourhoods. Its character is defined not just through its built form but by its many and varied uses and residents, and the diversity of communities which use and occupy its spaces.

Throughout the rest of Soho, whilst it retains an overall cohesiveness in its townscape, differing uses in particular contribute to the sense of several distinctive sub-areas of character, which have their own identities. These are: Shaftesbury Avenue, Carnaby Street, Berwick Street Market, Soho Square and Golden Square.'

(Source: Westminster City Council. 2005a. p26)

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- 2.12 Although it has a number of listed buildings and a few set pieces of historic urban design, because of its social character, Soho has been subject to fairly continuous redevelopment since it was established. Typically, this happens in waves in building booms as old stock is replaced, although there has also been a process of continuous, infill and site development. However, partly perhaps because of the complex historical, multiple freehold and leasehold ownership and occupancy structure there are few cases of site consolidation and larger scale development, although this tendency is growing. The strength of the historic tenure pattern has given and ensured Soho's distinctive small scale and individual building development and streetscape.
- 2.13 Apart from The Crown Estate (see interview, Appendix 3), the largest landholdings in the area are mainly the result of cumulative purchase of properties in recent times. Soho Estates (see interview, Appendix 3) is the largest landowner and is the result of the late Paul Raymond's purchases from the 1950s onwards. Shaftesbury PLC focused on buying up properties in and around Chinatown and Carnaby Street at the beginning of the 1990s (see interview, Appendix 3).

- 2.14 Each of these major landowners has their own reasons for avoiding interventions that could destroy the character of Soho and its surrounding streets. The Crown Estate has a prime interest in preserving the Regent Street Conservation Area, combined with innovative approaches to remodelling of premises behind the listed facades.
- 2.15 Soho Estates grew out of a business with strong roots in the existing character of Chinatown.⁸ Shaftesbury PLC has demonstrated that a commitment to maintaining the mixed-use fine-grain character of the built fabric in this central location, combined with an effective marketing strategy responding to niche retail needs, can pay handsome business dividends (Interview, Jonathan Lane, Shaftesbury PLC, Appendix 3).
- 2.16 As a result of the historical development process, most Soho streets are seldom dominated by buildings of a particular era and are of a mixed historical and architectural character, although unified by its morphological features (Box 2.2).
- 2.17 There are, however, international and national economic factors and trends that constantly have an impact on areas such as Soho. A recent case is the selling off of pubs (the *Intrepid Fox* is a recent example) for more profitable land uses. This will change the street character and attraction of the area through diminished choice.
- 2.18 The Conservation Area was first designated in 1969 and subsequently extended between 1976 and 2005 (including the separate designation of Chinatown as a conservation area). As previously noted, there were some larger developments including high rise in Broadwick Street, Berwick Street and Ingestre Place during the 1960 and early 1970s property boom. However, as the Conservation Area Audit notes ‘...in the last twenty years conservation has been a strong force in the area, preventing widespread demolition and retaining its individual character’.⁹
- 2.19 Alongside the Grade I and II listed buildings, the Conservation Area Audit also catalogues a third category of ‘unlisted buildings of merit’. These are ‘considered to be of particular value to the character and appearance of conservation areas and their demolition or unsympathetic alteration will normally be resisted’ (p32)¹⁰. Around 75% of the study area falls into one or other of these categories (see Figure 2.3).
- 2.20 By implication, there may be opportunities for substantial upgrading or replacement of some of the remaining 25% of buildings (see Figure 2.3), particularly where these are poor in terms of thermal performance and/or detrimental impact on the environmental and urban character of the area. However, such buildings are also, for the most part, more recent and therefore may already have a higher thermal performance or otherwise not so in need of renovation.

8. See interview with Jonathan Lane of Shaftesbury PLC, Appendix 3.

9. Westminster City Council, 2005. p15.

10. *ibid.*

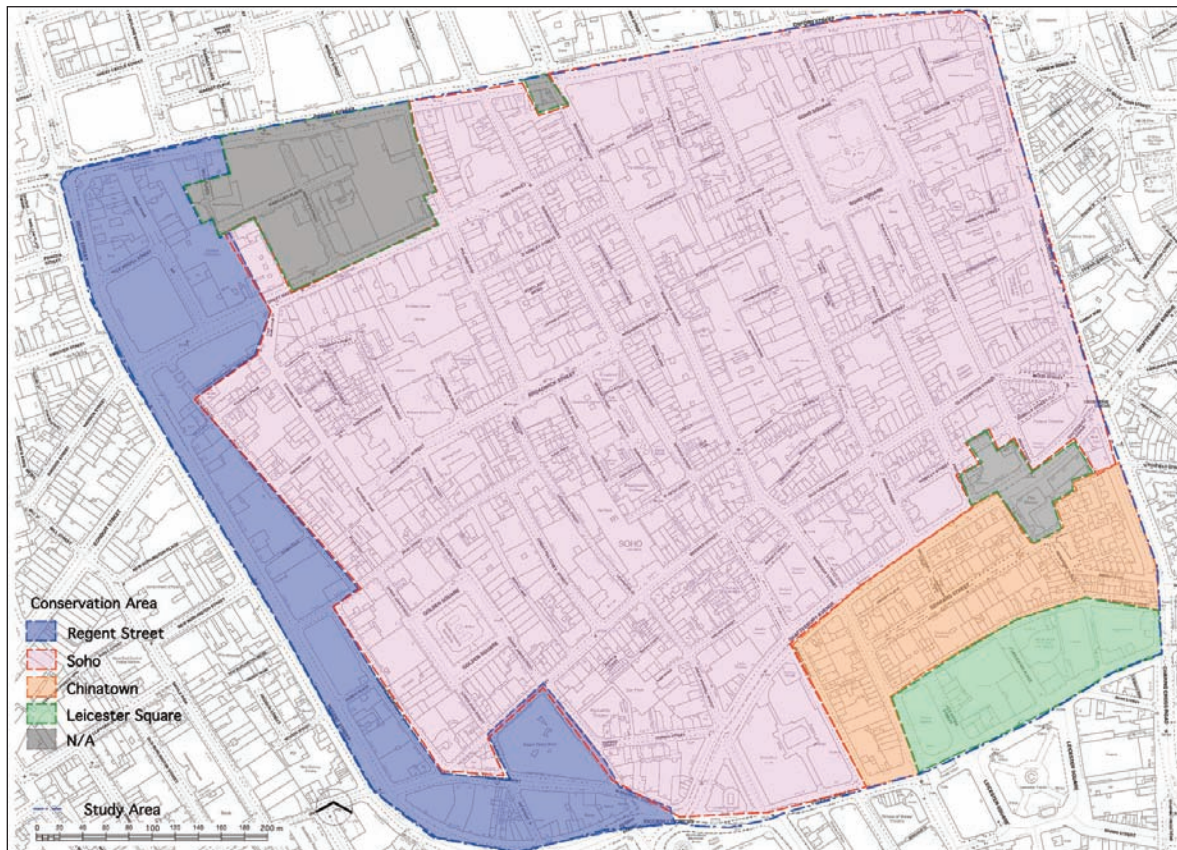
Box 2.2: Streets and architectural character

The historic street layout and the relationship of built form to open space define the overall framework of an area. Within this framework, the fine grain of the townscape, including plot sizes and building lines are important in establishing the pattern and density of development. This has a significant impact on the character of an area, dictating the scale of development and level of enclosure or openness.

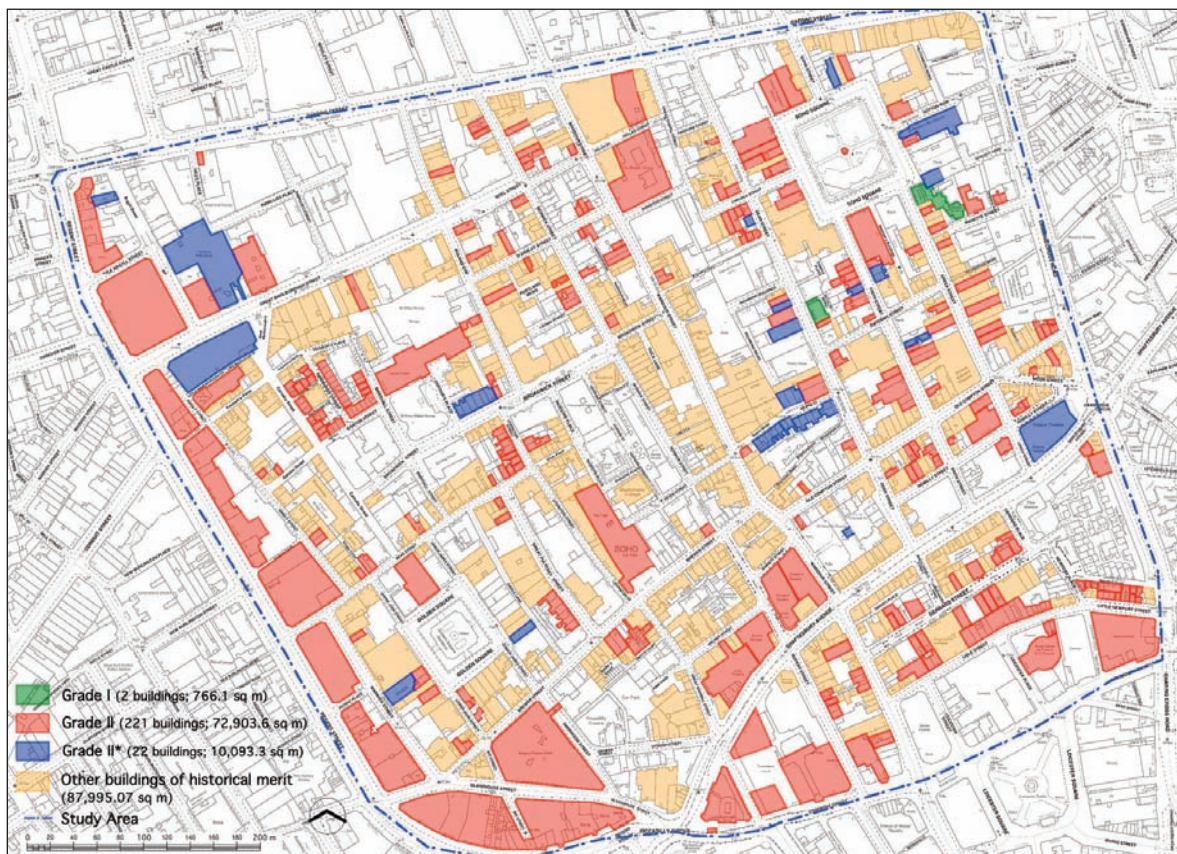
...Both Soho and Chinatown have an enclosed and urban character with a high density of development, small plot widths and few open spaces. Within Soho, the street plan has a predominantly north/south alignment reflecting the line of the old field patterns, so that it is still much easier to cross the area from north to south than from east to west.

For two hundred years no great estates existed in the area with surveyors regulating construction over a large area. As a result, buildings have been repaired, re-fronted and rebuilt in a piecemeal fashion and there are few consistent terraces or streets where the architecture is homogenous, or of a single period. However, a considerable degree of unity is provided by the survival of the original street layout and more especially by the narrow seventeenth and early-eighteenth century building plots. These still predominate, despite some twentieth century amalgamations to provide plots for larger buildings and as a result buildings are generally characterised by their modest scale and design.

(Source: Westminster City Council. 2005a. p25-26)



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Figure 2.2: Conservation areas*(Source: Westminster City Council d, Ordnance Survey – Map by Max Lock Centre)***Figure 2.3: Listed buildings and other buildings of historic merit***(Source: Westminster City Council d, Ordnance Survey – Map by Max Lock Centre)*