

Bath Stadium preference survey

September 2023

1. Context

In May 2023, Bath Rugby Club made public their plans to build a new stadium on the current Recreation Ground, on a riverside site close to the centre of the town. You can see images of that and access more details [here](#).

In August 2023, disappointed by how poorly these proposals responded to their context or to the historic and World Heritage Site of Bath, an architectural firm with strong Bath links, Appolodorus, proposed an alternative more architecturally classical vision. You can read about these [here](#) or on the Create Streets blog [here](#).

2. Survey: what we did

In August 2023, Create Streets commissioned Deltapoll to survey public views on the two proposals using a carefully controlled visual preference survey.

- Deltapoll surveyed a representative sample of 1,061 British adults.¹
- The question asked was:

"Bath As you may know, Bath Rugby Club are proposing to build a new stadium on the current Recreation Ground, on a riverside site close to the centre of the historic spa town. Here are two alternative design proposals for the new stadium. All other things being equal, if you had to choose, which one of the following designs do you think would be more appropriate for a stadium at this location?"

- The two images compared were:



- The choice of images and the questions wording was selected using Create Streets Visual Preference principles to ensure a fair comparison of views. These principles state that:
 - **Images.** "Visual preference surveys should aim to use images which are as similar as possible. Ideally, only the elements which are compared should be different. Often images will need to be edited to align extraneous aspects such as sky colour or level of greenery which might influence the result."

¹ i.e. Not including Northern Ireland.

- *Questions.* “Wherever possible, ask as tangible, specific and ‘real’ a question as possible. Sometimes it is right to ask “which of these do you prefer?” But normally you should relate questions to real life or to actual changes to a place: “Which of these buildings would you rather live next to?” “Where would you rather sit?” “Where would you rather walk?” “Which of these would you rather see built near your home?”

3. *Results: what the British public think*

- *A very clear public preference for the more traditional design.* The British public overwhelmingly preferred the more place-specific and traditional design by 74 per cent to 26 per cent.
- *A preference that transcends politics...* Voters for all three main British parties strongly preferred the more traditional design with Labour voters being closest to the national average (80 vs 20 per cent for Conservative voters; 74 vs 26 per cent for Labour voters and 59 versus 41 per cent for Lib Dem voters).
- *.. a preference that transcends views on Europe...* Views on the design from “remain” and “leave” voters were almost identical. (75 vs 25 per cent for “remain” voters and 77 vs 23 per cent for “leave” voters).
- *... a preference that is shared by rich and poor...* Those of ABC1 social status and of C2DE social status have nearly identical views on the design. (73 vs. 27 per cent for ABC1 and 74 vs. 26 per cent for C2DE).
- *... a preference that is shared everywhere...* With the partial exception of Welsh residents (who preferred the traditional design even more strongly than others, respondents in every British region had nearly identical levels of preference for the more traditional design).
- *.. and by old and young.* Clear majorities of all age groups preferred the more traditional design though with a clearly growing preference by age. (84 vs 16 per cent for those aged over 65 and 61 vs. 39 per cent for those aged 18-24).
- The full results from Deltapoll are available [here](#).

4. *Comment*

Commenting on the results, Create Streets Director, Nicholas Boys Smith said:

“There is a place for a glass box. But central Bath is not that place. Bath Rugby Club’s proposals with their walls of glass and dark metal might almost be a joke. One can imagine the spurious claims that the stingy use of local stone is “appropriately contextual without being pastiche” or that the glass will be “invisible.” It never is and anyway why should we build an invisible building? We should be proud of new places.

Apollodorus Architecture beautiful alternative proposal of oolitic Bath limestone, rusticated arches and Doric porticos create an amphitheatre worthy of *Aqua Sulis* not a glass box worthy of a carpark.

I am not at all surprised that, yet again, the British public are showing very clearly that they prefer streets and buildings which are beautiful, textured and ‘fit in.’

And, in an age of culture wars, this majority is consistent in all regions and among rich and poor, left and right, pro and anti-Europe. Creating beautiful buildings is something we can all agree on.

The winds that blow through Bath, blow down streets of Palladian propriety. If they love the city, if they wish it to prosper in the present and flourish in the future, Bath Council should tell the rugby club to rip up their current plans and start again. Future generations will thank them.”

Mark Wilson-Jones of Apollodorus architects who worked up the counter-proposal added:

“The results of this survey reaffirm the fantastic response our counter-project has received from locals in Bath. Since publishing the scheme in August, we have been inundated with enthusiastic messages of support from local residents and rugby fans. Clearly, the population at large still retains a grip on sanity when it comes to the built environment, and they recognise the enormous significance of this location to the World Heritage Site city.

As is hopefully evident from our scheme, we are absolutely pro-rugby and pro-development. It's a unique and thrilling thing to have a sports venue right in the city centre. But it's also a privilege - and with privilege comes responsibility. Bath Rugby and the local council have the responsibility to redevelop and curate the site in a way that is worthy of this historic city and not settle for expedient, short-term solutions. We hope that the poll results, which show an overwhelming preference for a sensitive, contextual approach based on traditional urban forms and using natural materials, will give pause to some of the stakeholders in Bath and push them to reconsider the plans for the site before it's too late.”

5. *Other visual preference surveys*

This poll corroborates many polls carried out in the UK and abroad which show a consistent, and strong preference for streets and buildings with a strong sense of place, coherent complexity, human-scale enclosure.

- A summary of some of this research can be read in chapter six of the book *Of Streets and Squares* available [here](#).
- A study of some of the reasons underpinning these preferences is available in chapter seven of *Of Streets and Squares*.

Nicholas Boys Smith

September 2023