

# CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

## BULLETIN

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### TRUST OPEN MEETING

We are most privileged to announce that at our next meeting **Sir Donald Insall** will give an illustrated lecture on urban conservation entitled, “**Living Buildings,**” on **1<sup>st</sup> October** in **Elvet Riverside 1, room 140 at 2.15pm.**

Sir Donald Insall, who founded this country’s leading conservation practice, has an unrivalled number of honours, prizes and awards for conservation of historic towns and buildings. (The latter includes restoration of Windsor Castle following the fire of 1992.) He has been, or is, on every committee dealing with historic buildings. He has won three Europa Nostra medals, and in 2000 was awarded the Europa Nostra Medal of Honour. The citation to Sir Donald for the last-named read as follows:

“For his outstanding contribution to the cause of conservation throughout his career, both in the work of the practice which he founded and which has won a unique number of national and international awards, and through his writing, teaching and participation in the affairs of many significant heritage organisations. His influence on good conservation practice throughout the world has been incomparable.”

On a final note, perhaps you are aware that his practice was responsible for the design of two local developments (St Mary’s Close in Shincliffe and Briardene in Durham).

### TRUST CHRISTMAS CARD

This year’s Christmas card is a painting of Durham by **Walter Holmes**. Executed in 1980, it is composed from below Framwellgate Bridge from a location included by all the masters on their visits to the City. The view may be familiar, but the lighting is dramatic, quite unlike any other representation, with late afternoon sun playing on threatening clouds and wrapping around the peninsular buildings with a warm glow. It is a lighting which occurs only under particular conditions, far from the sunny scene of the snap-

shot recorded by the tourist, but it is a mood which residents will readily recognise.

It is tempting to suggest that the authenticity of the depiction is related not only to the artist’s sharpness of eye, but to the fact that Walter Holmes studied geology at university. He is also ‘local’, having been born in Wallsend and now working from Ponteland. His works, in oils, watercolour and pastels, show him to be one of our foremost painters.

The card is available with or without greetings. An order form is enclosed with this *Bulletin*. Cards, and Trust publications will be on sale at the Open Meeting.

### SIR OVE ARUP

Members will remember that in April 2003 a portrait head of Sir Ove Arup was erected by the Trust on Dunelm House overlooking Kingsgate Bridge, the unveiling being performed by the daughter of the structural engineer (see *Bulletin* 55). Unfortunately, the head was prised off in the summer of 2006. Trustees obtained permission from the sculptor, Diana Brandenburger, for a replacement head to be cast, this time in resin rather than bronze, and were hoping for a sponsor to prepare a new plinth. Now the University has generously come forward to share the cost, make the plinth and to fix the head. At the Trust’s suggestion, a glass plaque, on Dunelm House, will replace the original one. The new portrait head will be unveiled on the afternoon of **Tuesday, 27<sup>th</sup> September**, in conjunction with an exhibition to mark the restoration of Dunelm House, for which Sir Ove Arup was structural engineer and architectural adviser.

### DR A. I. DOYLE

Immediately after this year’s AGM the longest-serving Trustee felt it was the appropriate time for him to resign. Ian had sat at our table since 1964, when we were still called the Durham City Preservation Society. In fact, he seconded the motion which proposed the change to our present title in December 1966. Ian had arrived in the



(1) Before



(2) After

University in 1950 as Keeper of the Rare Books. Through his membership of University College, he has been a member of its Historic Buildings and Contents Committee. Long experience in these two areas means that he built up a unique knowledge of structure, furnishings and contents in a location of national, indeed international, significance. The Trust has been privileged that Ian has been at hand to share relevant aspects of this knowledge on key planning applications. We are heartened by the fact that, although no longer at our table, he will still be able to alert us to salient points in future proposals.

## THE MARKET SCHEME ASSESSED

### *Introduction*

This review should be read in conjunction with the Trust's publication, *The Unmaking of Durham's Historic Market Place*, which summarises the evolution of the project through to approval in November 2009. During this process Durham City Vision proved impervious to Trustees' suggestions or to criticism from any quarter. The result was that the planning applicant drew uniquely overwhelming disapproval and objection from the public, civic leaders and organisations and professionals from the world of architecture and planning. Trustees have withheld all subsequent comment until the scheme was deemed completed through an official opening. The following therefore represents Trustees' considered views. Numbers in the text refer to the photographs.

### *General assessment*

There can be no argument that Durham's Market Place was in need of attention, not least because of the lack of proper maintenance of the late 1970s scheme which followed pedestrianisation of the centre. It was a historic space crying out for restoration; what it received was a modern make-over.

The starting point or context of any treatment of the Market Place should have been the givens of the architecture and statues. As it is, only the two statues, albeit relocated, save the new makeover from being a headlong drive into joining the increased so-called cloning of towns. It therefore fails the key architectural or aesthetic test of preserving or enhancing the uniqueness of Durham, the quality of Durhamness. A ludicrous, but not altogether unfair, comparison of Durham City Vision's determination to make the Market Place fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be to propose laminate flooring and sofas for the cathedral in order to modernise that ancient space. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with laminates or sofas, but the context is obviously totally wrong.

The motivation of the whole project, in the name of regeneration, was to convert the Market Place into a performance space, where 'events' would be staged,



(3)

The former intimacy of the Market Place engendered by the arrangement of the space into two separate halves has been blown open not only by the uniform surface but also by the removal of all kerbing (together with the relocation of the statues). (1, 2, 3) The visual demarcation effected by kerbing was an important element in the form and make-up: in the character of the space and our experience thereof. Flanking buildings rising directly from a sea of uniform floor surface has changed the proportions of architectural space. Such treatment was appropriate in the clean modern lines of Millennium Place, where pavements would be incongruous, but it is inappropriate in the historic Market Place.

thereby improving the vitality of the city. Accordingly, a new heart for the centre has been clearly defined in white granite, with the sides lined with regimentally aligned seating pods and the back marked by steps flanking the relocated Equestrian Statue.

For most of the time, of course, events are not taking place – apart from the children’s occasional roundabout by day and skate boarding by night. When sparsely populated a soul-less quality pervades, which contrasts poorly with the former square which, even when wet and empty, retained a simplicity and coherence. Events, and certainly major events on a Saturday, can only take place at the expense of the open-air market, which has so far received no benefit from the make-over. (Electricity points, built into some of the pods, have yet to be connected, and there is no sign of new stall awnings.)

For a simple test of appropriateness, compare the visual effect of the removed kerbing in Saddler Street with its former appearance from photographs (4, 5) or compare it with Silver Street, where the central wheelers engender a sense of definition and scale entirely appropriate to the intimate scale.. (The genius of Anthony Scott’s award-winning floorscaping scheme was that he resisted the nation-wide fashion at the time of removing pavements and covering the full width of streets with slabs.)

*The Equestrian Statue*

Durham City Vision acknowledged that the original position of the ‘Horse’ was contextually more appropriate and that it would appear more prominent in its proposed position. We agreed - and so it has proved, but the goal of performance space demanded it. As a result,



(4) Before



(5) After



(6)

the Horse now stands somewhat aloof from the heart of the square where once there was a buzz of activity.

Not only is there an empty space in front of the Horse but, with the vehicular service area removed, there is another open space of almost comparable size behind the statue (6). Given the size of this space, it is not easy to understand why it was necessary to go to the considerable expense of moving the Horse at all.

### *Floorscape*

The renewing of the floorscape across Framwellgate Bridge and in Silver Street has been well executed, not least in the use of the appropriate mortar, a crucial detail which has long been neglected. The York stone used here, and also that in front of St Nicholas church, was salvaged from the late 1970s floorscaping scheme, and is quite distinctive and highly appropriate. These three areas apart, however, the choice of surface material is unfortunate..

The new floor surface does not begin to reflect a no-nonsense northern market town. The material is foreign, too light, too smooth and could be almost any town. The white granite of the events area has already been mentioned, but even the colour of the new, diamond-sawn Yorkshire stone, presumably chosen to blend with the major surrounding buildings, links as much to the granite as to the buildings. Many sandstones have patterns or swirls within them, but the job lot used here contains almost as much stone which is unrelieved white as the conventionally sand colour (7). The effect engenders a blandness, which only disappears only when the Market Place is buzzing with people and activity. When the stall

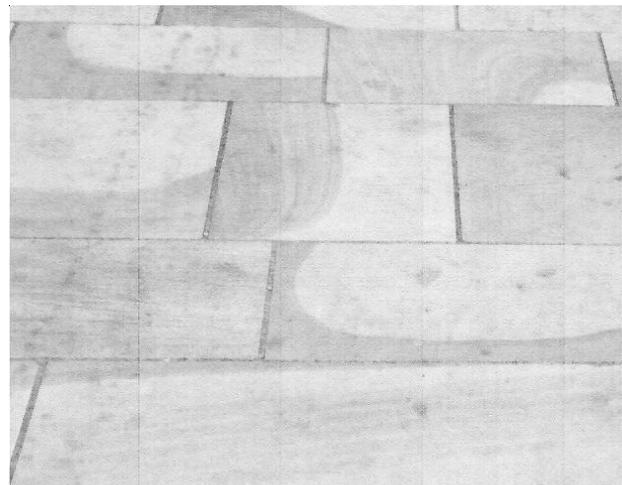
market is in full swing, even the Horse loses some of his prominence.

The light colour of the floor surface means that stains and grease are immediately and prominently visible, and continual attention will be needed to retain an agreeable appearance. Its smoothness will be a challenge to pedestrians in icy weather. The excavation of steps to supplement those provided by the plinth of the equestrian statue have already been criticised by the visually impaired. On the other hand, even the visually alert might be deceived when approaching the square either side of the Horse from the south, or top end, since three steps are concealed

from view until the last minute.

The logic of the deliberate change in stone colour is not always apparent. Visual harmony is lost when a curving edging line, drainage line and bollards diverge. In the Market Place the colour differential also appears to be too subtle for before-ten delivery vehicles, which currently park between the seating pods. Some of the sinuous lines appear to have been designed without reference to the size and type of stone to be used, such that masons were clearly given a difficult task.

The time-line which runs from the church to the Equestrian Statue, summarising the history of the city, is an interesting addition, although it is a pity that the granite hexagon marking the site of the pant for 700 years, along with statue of Neptune for 200, has been lost.



(7)

Finally, a comment on questionable cambers. That on the west, or town hall, side of the Market Place would appear to direct excessive run-off to the vennel next to the entrance door to St Nicholas church. This has already been observed; a future exceptionally heavy downpour could put the church itself under threat. Similarly, the threat of flooding after very heavy rainfall exists at the bottom of Silver Street, where the adverse camber was not corrected in the restoration. The addition of narrow drainage lines in this street is welcomed, although they will need regular pressure-cleaning to remain effective, not least after applications of salt in winter. The third camber is at the junction of Elvet Bridge with Saddler Street; here the hump could prove dangerous to an unwary driver pulling in to allow a vehicle coming down the street to pass.

**Street Furniture**

Criticism at the planning application stage of the granite seating pods has been fully justified. It is difficult to imagine a less ergonomically-designed seat. Their inflexible position and orientation assume the church as the focus.

The silver-coloured litter bins stand proud on the light floorscape, but are inappropriate for a historic space. (The former black bins were much more discrete and appropriate in the former setting.)

And then there are the bollards. Not surprisingly, the delineation of space by subtle changes in stone colour of the street immediately proved insufficient to segregate safely pedestrians from vehicles. Having espoused the concept of shared space and dispensed with kerbing, bollards had to be introduced in some number in an effort to segregate the users. Thus, Saddler Street, which is hardly suitable for shared space treatment, has no fewer than 29 bollards. They certainly do not improve the townscape (5). (The insertion of a loading bay halfway up the street will surely be a source of confusion and congestion.) The east or Boots side of the Market Place has a further seven bollards, while on the

opposite side of the ‘street’ four litter bins have been called into action, along with a post box and Neptune, to form a divide (8).

**Summary**

It is unfortunate, but not unexpected in view of all that had gone before, that Trustees’ assessment should be largely negative on a scheme which was of such importance to the City. Certainly the surface under foot has been improved everywhere, but only in Silver Street, on Framwellgate Bridge and by St Nicholas church is it congruent with the flanking or adjacent architecture. Reduction in traffic through the Market Place is also a bonus, and further adjustments might be expected when banning of parking on Palace Green finally comes into force, although the handling of essential vehicle deliveries or collections during the day in the vicinity of the Market Place remains a mystery. In this respect, emphasis appears to have been entirely on design for performance at the expense of the fundamental, day-to-day functions of the city. It was also expected that we would welcome results of three other components of the scheme - restoration of vennels and shop-front and lighting schemes - but presumably lack of money led to their exclusion. In that regard it is to be hoped that sufficient resources were held back to complete the project by restoring the surface of Elvet Bridge.

**D.C.D.P.**



(8)



