

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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Trust Registered Office: c/o Blackett, Hart & Pratt, LLP, Kepier House,
Belmont Business Park, Durham, DH1 1TW

TRUST OPEN MEETING

Our spring lecture will be given by Martin Roberts on '**The Lost Buildings of Durham City**' on Saturday **25th February** at 2.15 pm in our usual venue, **Elvet Riverside 1, room141**. The speaker has a long association with, and intimate knowledge of, our City. He was Conservation Officer alongside Anthony Scott before moving to the regional office of English Heritage in Newcastle, from where he continued his professional oversight of Durham until retirement two years ago. Many of our members will already know that Martin is an engaging speaker, much in demand. His intriguing topic promises a rewarding afternoon.

ARCHITECTURAL AWARD OF THE YEAR

Last year Trustees did not give any award, and now, in the manner of buses, two have come along together, the **World Heritage Visitor Centre** in Owengate and nearby, the **Zizzi Italian restaurant** at 43-44 Saddler Street. Both are essential components on the visitors' route to the cathedral. Both are restorations incorporating new build which have been brought back vitality and interest to the historic core.

The World Heritage Visitor Centre occupies the 19th century almshouses half way up Owengate. At first glance the only external alteration is a modest projecting sign; closer inspection will reveal careful, minimal restoration of the stonework. Inside, the first reaction is surprise at the light and welcoming entrance, not at all the dimness which must have characterised

the former dwellings. The answer lies in the creation of a central conservatory or atrium between the former main living quarters. Beyond again, is an open, paved courtyard. Throughout, the treatment has respected the basic simplicity of the units, care extending even to using reclaimed floorboards and re-inserting old fireplaces from the County Council store. The modern additions have an equal simplicity in line and detail. The blend of old and new is, at the same time, both convincing and honest, with no attempt to disguise the two.



World Heritage Centre, Owengate

On the ground floor the former units provide a reception area and rooms with exhibitions and videos and mementoes for sale. Upstairs are rooms for the WHS Co-ordinator, Seif El Rashidi, Centre staff and, appropriately, the University's Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Study.

We are indebted to several sources for the finished result which we see. The basic design was undertaken by Harrogate Design until they ceased trading, when the work was taken over by Howarth Litchfield of Durham, who oversaw the site work. The contractor was Vest Construction. The University's own Estates and Buildings was responsible for project management. Finally, it would have been impossible to record any of this without the generosity of the University itself, which donated the site.



Zizzi Restaurant, Saddler Street

Nos 43-44 Saddler Street has had its frontage boarded up for several years and been the cause of many a letter from Trustees to the Planning Officer. The fascinating late 18th century double frontage with its Doric columns supporting segmental arches, and with the 'drunken' nature of its main fenestration, is now beautifully shown exemplary respect for its context.

Happily, they and their architects recognise that the attractive frontage has sufficient inherent interest not to need any standard attention-seeking treatment characteristic of many a retailer. Its advertising is applied in a subtle manner, but, then, its wide windows - when the eye has stopped focusing on its ancient glass - reveal a lighted interior, which is in itself the best advertisement.

It is noteworthy that ASK Restaurants, which has 120 outlets in Britain, has a policy of respecting the context in which it operates: there is no standard livery to be applied, irrespective of location. Here, respect for context continues inside, with evocation of the cathedral woven into seat design and large mural on the stairs between the two floors. Other regional references can be found. Their architect was Stiff-Trevelyan of London.

The building is on a different scale from that of the other award winner in that it falls through five floors down the riverbank. Crucial earlier work, therefore, was that undertaken by Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners of London, both internally and with the restoration of the back elevation. The latter, fully visible from Elvet Bridge, happily retains a traditional appearance.

SIR OVE ARUP

The replacement portrait head of Sir Ove Arup was duly unveiled in September in the presence of a gathering of distinguished guests, not least his grandson, Justin, and two of the great man's co-directors. The resin head looks more human than the black bronze of the original, while the new, glass plaque is now more integrated with the sculpture, to which it draws attention. Our environment is enriched accordingly. We can again look up and pay homage to a great man, while he appropriately looks down from Dunelm House to his favourite creation, Kingsgate Bridge.

CENTRAL AREA REGENERATION PROJECT

Trustees' detailed assessment of the completed - or, rather, signed-off - project was given in *Bulletin 71*. Although the 'shock of the new' has faded, the modern make-over remains no less incongruous. Critically, its functioning may be queried. The prime motivation, in the name of regeneration, was to create a performance or events' space, but the first season has been notable for the lack of any of the twenty events a year which Durham City Vision argued would raise the attraction of the City to a new level. (If Lumiere's 'snow bubble' which encased the equestrian statue be considered as a major event to be attracted, two responses may be made. One, the Market Place was included in Lumiere's last visit. Two, Lord Londonderry could have been encased just as easily in his original position – and would not have resulted in such a pinch-point as occurred between statue and the NatWest Bank)

The outworking of the 'shared space' concept remains unsatisfactory, even with the addition of countless bollards, many still appearing what they are – a temporary version of a highway expedient. The subtle differentiation of pedestrian and vehicle space by stone of different colour is unrealistic and in places sufficiently deceptive as to be dangerous. Pedestrians are just not safe to assume that they are the right side of the line apparently demarcating the 'pavement'.

The abolition of a separate service or delivery area at the top end of the Market Place has presented the predicted problem. It would appear that the whole Market Place has become shared space. Before 10 a.m. commercial vehicles park between the seating pods to the rear of Londonderry. (One pod has recently suffered and is currently fenced off.) After 10 a.m., when two bollards cut off the space, they just park in the events space; at night taxis may drive diagonally across it. There is certainly no circular movement around the square, as was planned. An unloading bay, demarcated in stone and paint half



Replacement portrait head of Sir Ove Arup on Dunelm House

way up Saddler Street, has been removed; likewise the accompanying pole with appropriate notice has been replaced by yet another temporary-style bollard.

A further point raised by Trustees was the suggestion that the narrow drainage channels would be easily blocked and require periodic pressure-cleansing. This has already come to pass, for at the time of going to press, Carillion Civil Engineering has given notice that Saddler Street will be closed on five evenings in order to carry out such an exercise. Meanwhile, an old-fashioned water leak has emerged outside the guildhall, and is draining towards St Nicholas church.

One final comment relates to Back Silver Street, a secret, surprising little corner of the City. Durham City Vision at one time considered banishing Neptune here; in November the County Authority erected a squat, round stone pedestal which had



1976 relocated pedestal with indicator, Back Silver Street

previously stood near the head of the Market Place. It is capped by a cast-iron plate commemorating the completion of the city's paving scheme in 1976, having been originally unveiled in the presence of the mayor, a reflection of local pride in a floorscaping scheme which was later to win a national award. Around the top, in their appropriate compass position, were the names of the City's major streets and surrounding settlements. Inside was buried a time capsule containing artefacts of the day and names of agencies which had contributed towards the scheme. The pedestal was swept away in the DCV redesign of the Market Place, and would doubtless have been forgotten but for the persistence of one member of the public. Now, therefore, tucked away in a little-visited corner of Durham and severed from its context, is a part of the City's history.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Members may like to make a note that this year's A.G.M. is on **Wednesday, 9th May**. The lecture will be given by **Anthony R.N. Scott**

D.C.D.P.