

Clipping of Bulletin 52, February 2003

The Trust's award this year has been won by Millennium Place. Designed by David Prichard, of MacCormac, Jamieson and Prichard, the completed scheme fully justifies the choice of the Local Authority in selecting his design as the winner of its competition in 1996. The extensive scheme fully merits its accolade, even though the proposed building across the Claypath overpass was omitted. (It is also a pity that stalling of the Walkergate project currently leaves the riverside elevation of Millennium Place appearing raw and unfinished.)

The insertion of a large scheme in the heart of Durham without damaging visual consequences on the adjacent historic townscape presented a formidable challenge, one which had lain unanswered since the 1960s when construction of the new through-road (Leazes Road) and Millburngate Bridge blew apart the continuous townscape of Lower Claypath. For nearly forty years the new line marked the inner boundary of a derelict area, significantly just 'around the corner' from castle and cathedral, with potential to become a new, distinctive quarter of the city. David Prichard has accomplished this daunting task – and, in doing so, has laid the template that the design of Walkergate must surely follow to complete the quarter.

Simplicity of line, harmony of materials and quality of finish are the key features in a restrained modern idiom. The angled glazing of the theatre, with its red hood and cedar-clad fly-tower, constitutes a distinct marker from the opposite side of the river. The twin arms leading off Claypath – one of which, incidentally, ties Tarran and Caller's 1969 concrete frame building into the streetscape for the first time – open out into a broad public space. Its potential for community activities was well illustrated by the presence of an ice rink during the Christmas period, though there is still some regret that no sculpture has been included as a focal point.

The twin arms of Millennium Place, besides incorporating space for community group activities, are notable for a light, spacious library and resource centre in one, and a theatre in the other. David Prichard is on record as saying that designing a theatre is the most daunting task for an architect after that of a hospital, (In the present instance there was the added complexity that the theatre was to be convertible into a conference venue). The architect here has succeeded magnificently, combining space and lighting, vision and acoustics to give a most pleasurable experience, the climax of a welcome and satisfying architectural addition to our city,

Two recent University buildings have also added to the richness of the City's architectural stock. Especially noteworthy is the Ogden Centre for the Physics Department, which is a gem of a building in a location which, unfortunately, will preclude it from being widely appreciated. The Department has turned values upside down in reserving the best to last, for the Centre is attached to the back of its parent and entered from the side. This side, visible from South Road, shows the progression over time: a 1960s copper-clad barrel-roof corner unit in a construction of glazed panels, both painted and clear, with a minimum of brickwork; a 1990s forward-standing, coursed brick extension with a few outlined windows; finally, recessed, the striking wall of green glazing of the Centre. The colour echoes that of the trees of Little High Wood, which sweep down to the front of the building, while its angled roof acknowledges the slope of the Wood. The transparent glazing hints at the spacious atrium inside, where, on the top floor, a highlight is the inner patio area lit by natural lighting. The building was part-funded by a former graduate, Peter Ogden, after whom the Centre is named. This fact doubtless contributed to the quality of finish, but the uplifting design is the creation of architects Dewjoc of Stockton and Howarth Lichfield in Durham.

Another benefactor, the Sheikh of Al Quasimi, made possible the new building for the University's Institute for Middle East and Islamic Studies off Elvet Hill Road. Here, Howarth Lichfield has composed an intriguingly appropriate essay. Its unique, flowing roof continues the rolling terrain of its setting, while the colours of the timber facades and roof struts hint at environments of a warmer clime, which are the focus of scholarship inside the building. The latter reference is reinforced in the tiled paving which leads to the entrance but, inside, the foyer disappoints in its plainness. A conventional showcase containing Middle East publications and artefacts stands in the distance when, say, a modest acoustic water feature could have effected a more moving transportation. One final word: it is a pity that it was felt necessary to ring the outside entrance with five steel bollards as protection from ram-raiding.

The conversion of Durham's first railway station, latterly a retail warehouse, into a Travelodge has been sympathetically undertaken. This includes the appropriate massing and detailing of a new dormitory block. A disappointment is the lack of reference to its former role – apart from an existing 1994 plaque donated by Belmont Parish Council. Instead, it turns its attention to the history of another continent, with its associated restaurant full of memorabilia of the American Civil War.

The most unusual conversion of this or, perhaps, any year took place beneath the concealed arches of Elvet's mediaeval bridge. Atmospheric is the only word to describe it. The name of the occupying licensed restaurant, Jimmy Allen, happily keeps alive a part of Durham folklore, acknowledging the imprisoned gypsy piper who died here in 1810 while awaiting transportation, and who is said to haunt his former house of correction.