

City of Durham Trust response to consultation on Prince Bishops Place

The City of Durham Trust welcomes the opportunity to comment on proposals for redeveloping Prince Bishops Shopping Centre into Prince Bishops Place. The Trust welcomes sustainable energy generation, and the commitment to securing a high-quality architectural design. The Trust would expect that the provision of retail space and residential accommodation needs to be commercially viable, with a flexible design of both retail and residential accommodation best able to sustain the vitality of Durham City centre into the future.

Sustainable Retail

The City of Durham Trust is concerned about retail provision in the city centre. Durham County Council needs to provide an update to the city centre retail study undertaken for the County Plan. What impact will the redevelopment of Prince Bishops Place have on retail in the city centre? Is the removal of large retail units justified? What provisions will be put in place for smaller retailers losing access to spaces during the two-year period of redevelopment? Alternative spaces will need to be made available to ensure businesses remain. What provision will be made for the two opticians and hearing-aid retailers that provide a vital resource for residents? What provision will there be to compensate for the loss of public WCs (especially given the limited WC provision in the city centre). The Trust recommends a flexible approach to the design of retail spaces, and tenancy arrangements, to ensure the sustainability of small retailers along the High Street.

Vitality of Durham City Centre

Any scheme must be viable in commercial terms. The Trust would like to see a clear business case for another hotel and for another PBSA. It can be demonstrated that there is already sufficient student accommodation in the City, and a new hotel is already waiting to open. What is the business case for a PBSA and hotel in Prince Bishops Place? What contingency planning is there in the event that commercial partners to operate the proposed PBSA and hotel do not materialise or withdraw from the scheme? What is the fall-back position if no commercial hotel partner or PBSA partner is secured? A flexible design would ensure that the scheme is not entirely dependent on securing a PBSA partner, with accommodation suitable for non-student residential units. Other forms of tenancy than a PBSA may be of greater value to the city than further student accommodation. Likewise, flexibility in the provision of

ground floor retail units is required if these are to remain shops. What purpose would these spaces fill if they cannot be sustained as retail? The Trust's preference would be to retain shops, or promote forms of community creativity, rather than hot food takeaways, restaurants, and bars.

High Quality Architectural Design

The Trust welcomes the stated objectives to achieve a high-quality architectural design. The Trust considers the current High Street is a successful composition and welcomes the opportunity to improve upon the existing facades to Elvet Bridge and Leazes Bowl. The existing Prince Bishops Shopping Centre is a very clumsy addition to the historic city setting. The present Elvet Bridge façade detracts from the quality of the medieval Elvet Bridge, historic buildings, and World Heritage Site of Durham Castle and Durham Cathedral. The present Leazes Bowl façade detracts from the city centre, as experienced by pedestrians and road traffic. Its design combines brick, stone and a varied roofscape in a nod to the historic buildings of Durham, but the outcome is a visual disaster compared to the complex that previously occupied the site – the elegant Leazes Bowl Car Park by architect William Whitfield which successfully respected the ancient city walls and views of the cathedral.

The City of Durham Trust is aware of commercial pressures to maximise the building within the cubic space available in the design envelope but urges the developer to produce an architectural design of quality fitting the setting. The existing open High Street of shops successfully merges with the Market Place and Saddler Street. The proposal to create an open square, with new views of Durham Cathedral and Castle, is welcome – provided the design is more imaginative than the monolithic slab that currently features as bland design proposals on the webpages. Presumably this is not the final design. The Clayport Library and Gala Theatre provide examples of high-quality architectural design in the vicinity. Riverwalk and the recent redevelopment of the west bank of the River Wear in Durham city centre show how commercially driven redevelopment can detract from the historic city scape. ICOMOS has raised concerns about the setting of the Durham World Heritage Site, and UNESCO has received public complaints about recent buildings within the setting of the WHS.

The City of Durham Trust notes the need for this redevelopment to last for many decades, and not to need rebuilding within 25 years as has occurred with Prince Bishops Shopping Centre. Current environmental concerns make the sustainability of new architecture crucial, avoiding the replacement of buildings on a short cycle, as professional bodies representing

architects and engineers affirm. Any major redevelopment within the historic core of Durham city needs to be sensitive to its unique architectural character. ICOMOS urged the refusal of planning permission for a proposed Business School on Elvet Waterside, because of its adverse visual impact on the World Heritage Site. Historic England also recommended planning refusal for that proposed Business School. Prince Bishops Place is even closer to the World Heritage Site and must be an enhancement to the setting of Durham city if it is to gain planning permission.

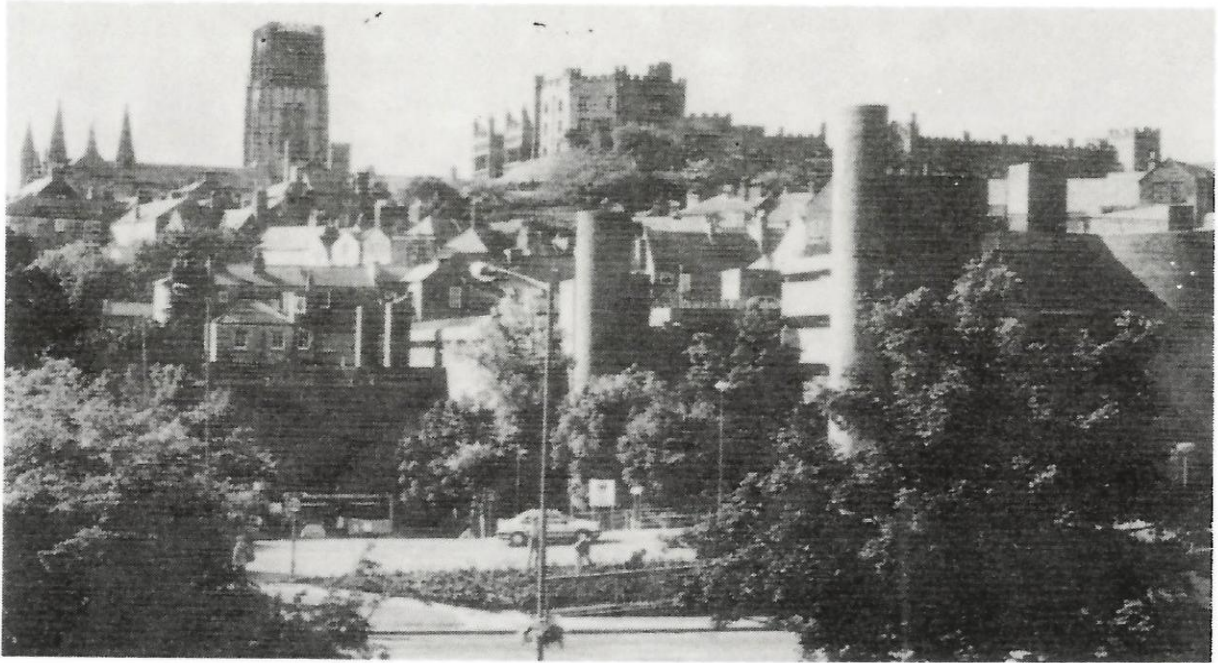


Fig.7 Before: Leazes Road elevation, Cathedral Car Park, c.1990.

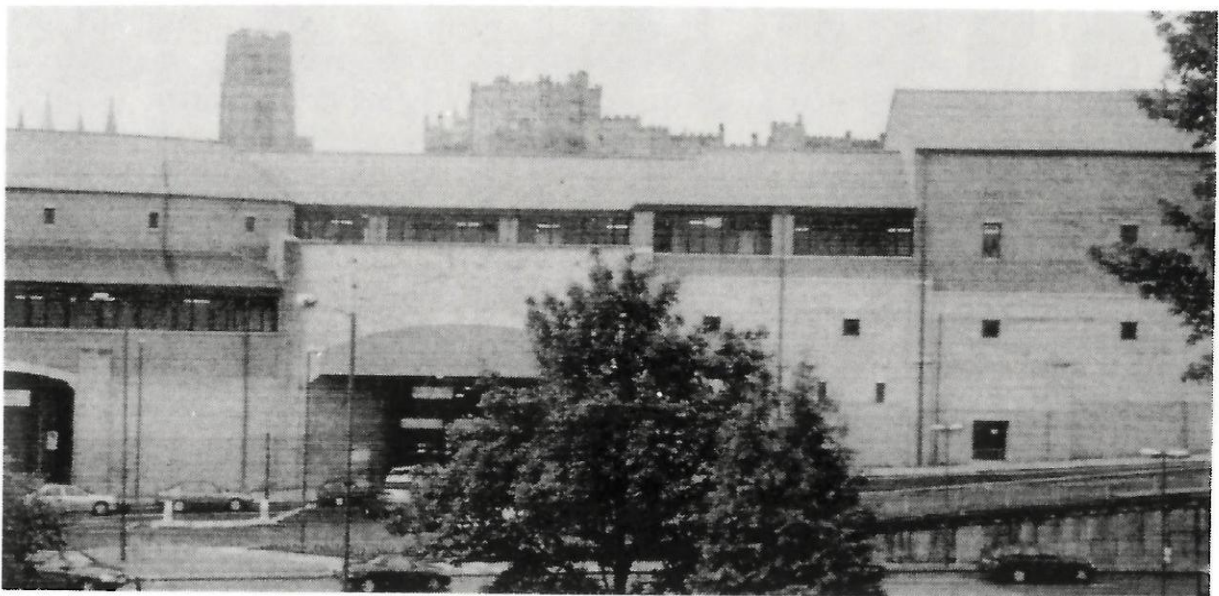


Fig. 8 After: Leazes Road elevation, Prince Bishops scheme, 2000.

Douglas Pocock, *The Futures of Durham* (City of Durham Trust, 2006)