

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

19 April 2007

PROPOSALS: Sketch proposal , public realm treatment of Swan Square
LOCATION: Swan Square, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent
DEVELOPERS: Stoke-on-Trent City Council
ARCHITECTS: FPCR Landscape Architects
REF NO: 060

Background

The proposals presented to the Design Review Panel were drawn up as a result of the Burslem Masterplan, completed by WS Atkins in 2004, identifying Swan Square as a key area in the town. Since the production of the masterplan a series of other spaces in Burslem have already been redeveloped and Swan Square is the latest in this series.

FPCR were appointed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and produced a sketch proposal for the treatment of Swan Square, referred to here as Option 1, and after an initial consultation with local councillors these proposals were adapted and two further options (2 and 3) were produced to better reflect their particular concerns. The sketch proposals presented to panel will form the basis of a public consultation event to be held in April 2007.

Description

Swan Square is a small urban square located in the centre of Burslem. It is bordered to the north and west sides by existing buildings of historic significance and to the south and east by roads, the latter of these being the busy A50 Waterloo Road. A redundant underground toilet block that is surrounded by cast-iron railings mounted on a raised platform dominates the existing square blocking direct access across the site. As a result of modern access and safety standards there is no possibility that these facilities will be re-opened.

The three options presented were essentially based upon the same scheme with options 2 and 3 being variations on option 1. Option 2 retains and re-uses the cast-iron railings from the underground toilet block and option 3 opens the square to the south east corner providing a larger open space for use by the street market or for use as a performance/exhibition space.

Panel Comments

The Panel identified the following key areas:

1. Context, design coherence and use of materials

Despite a general welcoming of the innovative approach proposed the panel felt that each of the three solutions were too busy and tried to include too much in what is a small and relatively enclosed urban space. There was a clear consensus amongst panel members that the key elements of the proposal could be incorporated with greater economy and that this would also lessen the potential long-term maintenance burden on the city council.

It was suggested that a well-designed lighting scheme that lit the interesting facades of the surrounding buildings might also be incorporated and that this may enable a more economical treatment of the ground surfaces whilst maintaining the level of interest.

The proposal to use well-sourced, high quality materials including Yorkstone paving was applauded and the benefits of this in the long-term management of the square were also highlighted.

The panel applauded the general idea of retaining something of the memory of what was previously on the square but considered the retention and re-location of the railings in option 2 to be inappropriate. The panel pointed out that the slope of the site had not been properly taken into account properly and that the railings appeared incongruous when located in the more modern designed space of the square. It was put forward that the retention of an historic feature would be difficult to resolve successfully in what was stylistically a very contemporary treatment.

2. Use of the square and access

The panel welcomed options 1 and 3 that opened up the square to Queen Street to the south and provide the opportunity for the weekly market to expand into the square more than they do at present. The provision of an outdoor performance space as suggested in option 3 was also welcomed and it was noted that this could also double-up as an area for outdoor exhibitions as well as being used by the market traders on Fridays.

The inclusion of an outdoor seating area ostensibly for the use of the Swan Hotel in the rear corner of the square apparent in all three options was applauded as no such outside seating eating/drinking space exists in central Burslem. It was suggested that with good outside lighting this might make the square a welcoming space in the evenings.

The retention of vehicular access via Queen Street to the south of the site was noted by the panel and it was understood that this would only occasionally be used to service the Swan Hotel. The proposal to make this a drive-in and reverse-out (or vice-versa) road was welcomed by the panel as it removed the need for through vehicle access across the rear of the square.

3. Environmental considerations

The panel welcomed the proposals to both retain and introduce trees on the square and suggested that this would have a beneficial impact upon the environment, specifically the difficulties caused by the build up of traffic at the junction of The A50 Waterloo Road and the B5051 Moorlands Road.

The panel also suggested the use of solar powered lighting and noted that although this is often little more than tokenistic in terms of actual energy savings the public square provided the opportunity to showcase the local authorities commitment to the sustainability agenda.

4. Inclusivity and community engagement

The panel considered the redevelopment of an important and historic square in Burslem as being an opportunity to include local stakeholders more closely, specifically local schoolchildren. It was suggested that they might be more closely involved in the design process perhaps designing small elements such as ceramic tiles.

The panel also highlighted the opportunity to investigate further the local historic significance of the area, specifically the connections to Arnold Bennett who refers to 'Duck Square' in 'Bursley' in his novel Clayhanger.

Conclusions

The panel were broadly welcoming of the innovative design approach adopted but had concerns over the complexity and elaboration of the schemes. In general it was felt that the three options presented were too similar and did not provide enough contrast, it appeared that the modern design approach had already been adopted and that the key decisions had already been made prior to public consultation. However, of the three suggested options the panel were most supportive of options 1 and 3 and the recommended actions stated below reflect this.

Recommended Actions

The panel recommend that:

1. Lighting could be used in a more creative way, specifically lighting the buildings as well as the steps to create an interesting backdrop to the square in the evenings.
2. The scheme be simplified generally, the panel recommend greater economy of utility and appearance.
3. Possible inclusion of water and greater planting should be considered.
4. The possibility of using Swan Square to investigate local history should be explored more directly.
5. The inclusion of local stakeholders, specifically local school children should be looked at in an effort to promote a greater sense of ownership.
6. Any finalised design should ensure that the square can continue to be used by the weekly street market stall holders and also provide an area for active performance and possibly temporary outdoor exhibitions.