

THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND



FOR THE STUDY AND PROTECTION OF SCOTTISH ARCHITECTURE

AHSS East Lothian Cases Panel,
15 Rutland Square, Edinburgh, EH1 2BE, Scotland.
www.ahss.org.uk tel. 0131 557 0019

Service Manager - Planning
East Lothian Council
John Muir House
Haddington EH41 3HA

8 February 2017
Your Ref: 16/00644/P/LBC
My Ref: 17. IM

Please quote the reference number above, in all correspondence about this letter.

For the attention of Mr Iain McFarlane

SIGNAGE

Dear Mr McFarlane,

When you kindly agreed to meet the East Lothian Panel of the AHSS some two years ago, you encouraged us to provide occasional feedback on the Council's planning procedures. We have always hesitated to trespass on your time; but a case has come up which prompts us to ask for your help.

The Council have currently advertised retrospective proposals for the main elevation of Block B in Brewery Park, now being used as a business centre (16/00644/LBC). On paper the proposal looks feeble, with a pale blue front door lost in a sea of dark painted rendering, overshadowed by an *objet trouve* of assorted plumbing. In practice (the work has been completed) the arrangement is effective, clearly the object of considerable care. Unfortunately, however, the development raises issues of principle which we feel merit further attention.

Signage has for some time caused the East Lothian Panel a good deal of disappointment. In an important conservation town such as Haddington, we have repeatedly urged that signage should always respect local tradition. This, we have argued, means that signs should normally be hand-painted by a professional signwriter, in most cases directly onto the plastered front of the building concerned. Where this is not possible, because the surface is of bare stonework, a fascia sign-board should be provided for painting on, having four, or at most six non-ferrous screws judiciously positioned after careful survey of the stonework, so that each screw enters a plug in a hole drilled *into an existing mortar joint* in order to prevent the cumulative damage to the actual stones, due to the relative frequency of replacement (3 to 5 Years on commercial buildings). In Conservation Areas we have consistently remonstrated against attaching each individual letter to dressed stonework by several fixings, a procedure the repetition of which damages a stone facade by a multiplicity of abandoned drill holes or mortar fillings, often coupled with the use of permanent resin fixings, making it impossible to dismantle an old sign without core-drilling them out from the stone frontage, thus causing damage to the fabric of historic buildings. Plug and screw fixings only into mortar joints, ensure that

each alteration to the building, is readily reversed when the time comes for it to be replaced. We have also regularly remonstrated against the insensitive use of “logos” or “house styles,” unless they are adapted to the character of the Conservation Area in which they are used. A signwriter is able to reproduce a ‘house style’ at a reasonable scale for the conservation area.

Haddington contains several excellent examples of good practice in what we would commend as an appropriate approach, in at least one case on a Council-owned building. The Council has also had some success in persuading banks, charities and fast food chains to modify their one-size-fits all assumptions. We applaud this achievement, and wish it could be followed through more consistently. We were disappointed, therefore, to find that in the case of Brewery Park Block B, the Council has pushed through a development which calls in question the work of bodies such as ours. Not only have our frequently expressed views been flouted, the Council’s planning application has been lodged without giving the usual notice. The fact that there can be no independent appeal against the Council’s consideration adds insult to injury. It is impossible to see this as anything other than a particularly unfortunate example of bad practice – and this in a case which should have been the exact opposite.

B Block is the centre terrace of three historic blocks used by the Council for offices. The present proposals are not without merit. They avoid the excessive use of roof lights which disfigures Block C: and the fenestration nicely echoes that of Block A. Taken together, this group of unpretentious buildings hold their own in a sea of parked cars, an asset which does the Council credit. But the flat stainless-steel plate lettering which has been used on Block B is an extraordinarily insensitive intrusion. Each of the twenty-five letters used requires a minimum of two to four securing pins, all of them imbedded in resin. Nearly all have been drilled into the good quality stonework face, not into the mortar joints. The surface of these letters show up to advantage only under certain, limited light conditions. It would be illiterate to suppose that an equally attractive impression could not have been achieved with traditional materials. It is the story of the bank logo and the fast food chain all over again.

We hope this case will be subjected to a *post mortem*, leading to a tightening up of the rules. During this process, we would hope you might ask a number of searching questions. From our perspective, some of the following are among the most important:

- 1) Was the case for using traditional signage for Block B made and, at any point, seriously considered?
- 2) Were conservation guidelines for signage followed? Do they exist?
- 3) Was a waiver sought for completing this project without planning permission? Why was a relaxation deemed reasonable?
- 4) Were the disadvantages of drilling into good quality stonework properly aired? Why were they disregarded?

Looking to the future, and without prejudice to what lessons, if any, might be learnt from this particular case, we would hope you might agree it would be timely to review the Council’s guidelines for signage on its own buildings. We would hope this might lead to a raising of standards more generally, not just in Conservation Areas but throughout the county. To be clear: we hope the Council will tighten up its guidelines on signage for all planning applications.

I very much hope you will find it possible to let us have your comments on these representations.

Yours faithfully
Bill Dodd
On behalf of
East Lothian Cases Panel of A H S S

Cc Historic Environment Scotland

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