



Speaking for Scotland's Buildings

25 May 2020

Austin-Smith:Lord
296 St Vincent Street
Glasgow G2 5RU

By email: glasgow@austinsmithlord.com

Dear Sirs

Ayr Riverside consultation

I am writing to express the concerns of the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland for the revised scheme of development as outlined in

Ayr Riverside – Booklet 1 Design Proposals

I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the proposals at this stage and ask that you take the Society's views into account in preparing final designs before application. I can warn that an application closely based on the proposals as outlined will be objected to by the Society and I am pleased to have this opportunity to give you our views before that happens.

I spoke at the **South Ayrshire Council Regulatory Panel Meeting, County Hall, Ayr - 9th May 2018** giving the Society's views on the previous application for the site, which was refused. We objected to that application in our belief that it did not comply with the South Ayrshire Local Development Plan for the Historic Environment. LDP policy states 'We will support development proposals [affecting conservation areas] if we believe the quality and design of the proposed development will protect, conserve or improve them. ...All new development in a conservation area has to improve or preserve the area's character or appearance.'

It remains the AHSS view that any application for this important site must fulfil the above requirement for high quality architectural design in association with important listed buildings and in the historic centre of South Ayrshire's most important Conservation Area. The AHSS is not against development on this site but is determined that an extremely high quality design is required, for the impact it will have both on the High Street and on the Riverside, where a poor result will have a very detrimental effect on what has always been Ayr's most iconic view with the Auld Brig and the steeple of the Town Hall.

The AHSS has a number of comments and suggestions to make about the current proposals. Following the withdrawal of the previous scheme it has been agreed that the principal purpose of this site in the future is to be a public open space, which is something lacking in the historic centre of Ayr. The AHSS is supportive of

AHSS National Office | 15 Rutland Square, Edinburgh EH1 2BE
0131 557 0019 | nationaloffice@ahss.org.uk | www.ahss.org.uk



Speaking for Scotland's Buildings

this idea as long as the existing listed and other character buildings of the Conservation Area are successfully incorporated into the scheme and not left as mere adjuncts. A town centre open space can have several characters.

1. MUNICIPAL - faced by public buildings, churches, town halls, museums, shops and cafes.
2. PUBLIC GARDEN - for leisure use, separated from the bustle of the town.
3. COMMERCIAL- for the more specific purpose of holding markets etc.
4. CULTURAL - to be a focus, setting and enhancement for the surrounding heritage buildings.

To be successful such an open space must have character and this character must reflect the historic character of the town it is in. It is our contention that the current proposals do not do this. It is evident that the proposals attempt to be all four of the above, and fail significantly in all of them.

- If MUNICIPAL it does not give sufficient importance to the surrounding buildings as well as removing one. The clutter of parked cars, bus stops, bollards etc. will detract from the buildings on the High Street and a successful public square does not have the back sides of buildings as two of its elevations, nor does it have a busy street running across one side. It also needs a better relationship with the river, see below.
- If PUBLIC GARDEN it needs more separation from the road, more planting with considerably more significant trees, a less geometric layout and a better relationship with the river - the cantilevered deck is probably a mistake with a stepped down approach more likely to be successful, see below. The deck will also be damaging of the view from the other side of the river and from the two bridges.
- If COMMERCIAL then commerce should not be an afterthought. Wind- and rain- swept stalls on an open prairie are not going to attract the unwilling shoppers of tomorrow.
- If CULTURAL then where is the culture with no museum or gallery, no public art and no fountain and no attempt to be the focus, setting and enhancement for the surrounding heritage buildings.

This being said the AHSS does have suggestions to make which it considers could lead to an improved scheme.

- The first concern of the AHSS is the proposed demolition of 8-10 High Street which, despite its sad condition, can be restored to make a significant contribution to the scene once it is given the handsome appearance still apparent on similar buildings round the corner in New Bridge Street. The whole project seems to ignore the greater context inclusive of the important streetscape along New Bridge Street with which the aforementioned works together as a pivot point at the corner. Removing 8-10 High Street would reduce this potential greatly and reduce the buildings up to the bridge to even more of a soulless back façade when seen from the site.
- The narrow medieval character of the High Street will be permanently eroded if too large a gap is left for the square. The present empty site already demonstrates how important it is to get this aspect right. To remove another building will make it worse. 8-10 might be supported and enhanced by a new build against the right gable wall as with the proposal at the other end of the site. We made this



Speaking for Scotland's Buildings

point with the previous application and it remains relevant. The concept of 'bookends' that has been used is a good one, framing the view into the open space but helping to maintain the historic street line. Consideration should also be given to building against the left hand gable wall and removing the damaging trees.



- The layout of the open space lacks definition and has too limited planting of significant trees. Both the historic line of the High Street and the Riverside would be better defined by planting than by what is proposed here.
- If there are to be temporary market stalls they would make more sense, be more easily serviced and be better protected from the elements if they were ranged along the line of the High Street. An alternative might be to infill the full length of High Street streetscape, for instance, with a slender building and permeating it with vistas of the river. This would reduce the vastness of the square to something more intimate, protect it from south west winds and facilitate outdoor events such as al fresco dining - within the arches or the riverside space itself. This might be achieved with a simple arcade which would define the historic street, protect the stalls and also protect the public open space from the busyness of street and town.

Speaking for Scotland's Buildings

- The concept of the freestanding cafe/schoolroom is unnecessary. Both would be better accommodated in the ground floors of the retained 8-10 and whatever building were put next to it.
- The approach to the Riverside should be redesigned to bring the visitor into a closer relationship with the water than is possible with the cantilevered viewing deck suggested, which will be extremely exposed as well as producing the dead and uncleanable land beneath it where all the floating rubbish will collect. A stepped approach along the lines shown below could work better. A primary purpose of the garden should be to draw you through it to the river.



- Opportunities for high quality public art of different kinds should be explored.
- The site now opened up offers unique potential to re-orientate the town's urban fabric and social space to the River Ayr. This is something that is currently lacking and it does so just off the major axis of New Bridge Street - the gateway into central Ayr. At present there is little urban reference to



Speaking for Scotland's Buildings

the river - the main artery in the other direction and these proposals should promote the river, and the two bridges, as central to the fabric of the town.

The AHSS believes that these ideas may be helpful in producing a result worthy of its setting. We are pleased to offer them to you for this purpose.

Yours faithfully

Martin Robertson
Chairman