

Response from Cheltenham Conservation Area Architects Panel

GEORGE A. J. MATHERS A.R.I.B.A., CHARTERED ARCHITECT

PARK HOUSE, Thirlestaine Road, Cheltenham GL53-7AS
Tel (01242) 515771 Fax: (01242) 227496 Email: mathers@parkhouse65.freeserve.co.uk

24th June 2011

NOTES ON IMPERIAL GARDENS

The gardens are an important feature in the town, containing established trees, fountain and statue feature, a garden layout which is unimaginative and is broken up with beds in a formal geometrical arrangement leaving little opportunity for 'recreation' for the young or community sitting space.

Three sides are against major residential and traffic roads, and that onto the Queens Hotel is permanently lined with car parking from residential and nearby office employment.

The rear of the Town Hall has no presence as an important access into the building discharging onto a car park as a 'back door' to the building and adjoining an oddly located enclosed Skillicorn Garden which is generally inaccessible to the public.

The town has become noted for its support of cultural, social and technical festivals and events throughout the year and whilst the gardens are accepted as a treasured asset to the town it must also be accepted that the Town Hall has become inadequate to accommodate certain of the festival displays and activities and the use of some portions of the gardens for overflow accommodation is reasonable if this can be provided without interfering basically with the amenity which the gardens provide.

The proposals now being considered address only the location of tentage sporadically arranged across the existing garden pattern and providing no coherent and permanent resolution to the problem presented. The multiplicity of large and small tents proposed and the wear and tear to the gardens caused by erection and demolition of the units would be disastrous and rather than attempt to provide the accommodation by proposing dual use of what is already there, the problem should be resolved permanently by comprehensively redesigning the whole area for such dual use planned by a competent designer, since to deal with the problem correctly alterations needed to the rear access to the Town Hall as well as the re-landscaping of the gardens. The comment card questions are irrelevant to nay new and necessary approach to the dual use of the gardens as set out above.

As a brief for the project the following is proposed:-

1. The features of the garden to be maintained would include all the major trees on the perimeter of the area, the fountain and statue.
2. The rear of the Town Hall to be improved to provide adequate and pleasant public access from the Town Hall into the gardens and vice-versa and to upgrade the immediately adjoining area to a presentable condition.

Response from Cheltenham Conservation Area Architects Panel

3. The Skillicorn Garden is badly sited and in view of its proposed re-planning an alternative location within the gardens better integrated with the overall design should be found.
4. The proposed marquee space should be confined to a single area which would be prepared with a permanent hard surface integrated as a sitting and play terrace or piazza attached to the rear approach to the Town Hall with a separate permanent built kiosk to provide refreshments. The gardens should be remodelled in a less formal style with a combination of hard, grass and garden surface providing recreation space more appropriate to current society. The present existing geometrical formality is meaningless and unrelated in any way to the Town Hall or any other feature surrounding the area.
5. There is no doubt a fear that creating hard surface in replacement of garden space is retrograde but this must be more acceptable than the proposal that the gardens proper should be covered presumably with temporary flooring over the existing flower beds to provide a base for temporary tenting. The array of marquees and tents shown on the drawing have no pattern or reason and visually could be disastrously unattractive. The gardens re-planned with a substantial area of carefully chosen quality paving as a permanent base for a large marquee to meet the requirements of the festivals would not only provide good recreational space when not in use for a festival but would allow a more imaginative landscaping for the remainder of the gardens. These could be designed with the fountain and sculpture and new entrance to the Town Hall as focal points.
6. The success of the scheme will depend much on the use of quality materials, particularly in the paved areas and the fixed furniture employed. The use of gravel for paths, however well bonded, is not appropriate.

George Mathers A.R.I.B.A

Response from Cheltenham Conservation Area Architects Panel

Imperial Gardens

I am a practicing Chartered Landscape Architect with in excess of twenty years professional design and landscape appraisal experience. I have been asked to provide comments on proposals to develop Imperial Gardens as a festival park based on drawing reference 'IMPERIAL GARDENS REDESIGN' prepared by Cheltenham Borough Council dated May 2011.

The proposals plan prepared by the Council is assumed to be illustrative only and show the total area of temporary festival structures required for festival use from 2012. The illustrative plan shows clearly the proposed areas of use amongst both permanent layout of paths and planting beds as well as the position of planting beds which would be covered over during festival periods. The plans do not give any indication of supplementary facilities such as service/VIP vehicle parking, mobile toilets, waste management facilities or security/control barriers which might also be expected to be required during active festival periods. It would have been useful to have a better understanding of where these facilities would be accommodated within the present proposals.

Imperial Gardens is one of only two limited areas of park, along with Montpellier Gardens which provide public accessible open space within the centre of Cheltenham. Both parks have been long established and are an intrinsic part of the historic fabric of central Cheltenham. Both parks provide open space contained by established trees and buildings (both old and new) which were designed to look onto the open space. This long established relationship between building facades and the parks is a significant feature of the historic urban centre and a critical element of the urban character for which Cheltenham is famous throughout the world.

From personal observation over many years the parks are widely used by a broad spectrum of the local population throughout the year but in particular during the period April to October. Montpellier Gardens has developed as a simple park which now provides space for active recreation including ball games, cycling/skating/skateboards and dog walking. Imperial Gardens has retained the flora displays and as such provides smaller scale spaces for more passive recreational activities. The close proximity of Imperial Gardens to the very centre of the town also encourages the park to be used simply for resting during visits to the town for other intended purposes or by local workers for taking breaks. This strategic position within the town has created a dynamic pattern of use which changes throughout the day and sees shoppers, office/shop workers and local teenagers gather to use the same park spaces at different times and for their own specific requirements.

The overview of the historic importance, distinctive landscape character and present use of Imperial Gardens by a broad spectrum of the public has been used as a baseline from which impacts of changes can be considered. The present proposals put forward by Cheltenham Borough Council have been viewed both in the light of this baseline and also

Response from Cheltenham Conservation Area Architects Panel

being mindful of the importance and success of the festivals for promoting the town and the associated commercial and resource value to local businesses and residents.

Observations

1. **Loss of public open space** - the present proposals would result in a significant loss of public open space through the replacement of open lawn with tented structures. Whilst this loss is temporary and understood to be limited to 75 days a year, the period of recover for the lawns could add a further 21 days after each festival before sufficiently attractive or hardwearing to be used for leisure purposes by the general public. This represents a significant period of being out of use to the general public during the well used periods of early and late summer. In addition this period also corresponds with potential periods when tourists are present in larger numbers.
2. **Loss of landscape openness and historic setting** – the temporary loss of visual openness will have a corresponding impact on the landscape character of the park. As the park contributes significantly to the setting of the historic buildings then there will be an impact on way these buildings are seen. Whilst this is only temporary it corresponds with potentially important periods when visitors and tourist to the town will be present. There is also potential for significant detrimental impact on key views from the Promenade to the Queens Hotel . The historic setting of the Queens Hotel and immediately adjoining historic buildings on the Promenade will temporarily lost and the open park seen under mature tree canopy will be seen to be lost to tented enclosure.
3. **Permanent damage to ground and unsustainable approach to design** – the loss of up to 75 day of sunlight, loss of air movement and rainwater percolation will have a detrimental impact on the lawn sward beneath tented structures and walkway coverings. This will be compounded by localised compaction of the soil at entrance points and feature points within and around tented structures. At the very least this will temporarily damage the grass sward requiring a period of recover up to 3 or 4 weeks during the growing season and more if the recover period commences during late October. Compounded over several years this is likely to create an increasingly poor and weak turf unless substantial and expensive maintenance operations are undertaken after each festival event. The areas of damage are likely to extend well beyond the area covered by tented structures and covered walkways and into the narrow areas in which people will be 'squeezed' around such structures. The combination of excessive wear and tear and poorer recover periods would require regular decompaction and returfing and as such does not promote a good approach to sustainable design. The permanent display borders which would not be temporarily covered by structures would be potentially subject to damage by excessive shading from tented structures on northern aspects as well as potentially high levels of rainwater from run off from tented structures. It is interesting to note that the areas presently used for tented

Response from Cheltenham Conservation Area Architects Panel

structures are also the areas which suffer from compaction and associated poor drainage and grass growth. These areas are shown without any permanent or temporary flower beds within the present proposals.

4. **Operational difficulties** – the illustrative proposals indicate a very fragmented layout to the festival structures in order to avoid conflict with permanent park beds and features. This appears to raise potential problems from excessive guying and fixing requirements as well as security and crowd direction measures. Large vehicle access for set up and dismantling appears difficult and awkward along with servicing of these tented structures during event periods. The layout of tented structures does not appear practical with the permanent flower beds as shown in the present proposals.
5. **Limited scope for future expansion** – the potentially difficult operational conflicts that are likely to arise from the festival structures, operational use and the permanent park features suggests that the present proposals allow little scope for future expansion. Even if there are no present plans to continue to develop the festivals it would appear short sighted to not have scope for some future expansion if only for a single special festival event.

Paul Harris CMLI

Darnley House
Whitecross Square
Cheltenham