

GLOUCESTER PLACE, CHELTENHAM.

Demolition of the cinema has been debated at length.

Three facts are paramount:

1. It is not one of the major works by its architect, and hence it is not included in the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Its significance is thus focused upon the contribution it makes to the area as a whole.
2. Its size and form make it very difficult to adapt to other uses. Even in the instance where planning permission has been granted the approved proposals have not been carried through. Almost six years of marketing have failed to find a user. At some point this reality must be faced.
3. Apart from the physical difficulty of adaptation, the main reason for its continued neglect is the massive cost involved, both in repair and adaptation.
4. The question whether it makes a contribution to the character of the area is in the end subjective. It can be argued that despite its largely c19 character this part of the conservation area is very diverse with a mix of buildings of different ages, uses and scale - its character derives from diversity. It is however truer to say that the character of the area is dominated by its c19 buildings, but there have been numerous newer buildings introduced which on the whole tend to undermine this. The cinema is a radical example – it is massively out of scale with its surroundings, and architecturally discordant. The opportunity to replace it with something more appropriate in mass, scale and treatment should not be missed.

The design of the proposals for the three sites has been examined most thoroughly by Council officers, and as a result of the dialogue with them numerous adjustments have been made to details of the scheme. For example

- amendments to plan and elevations of the town houses in the cinema site, and reduction in their height to make them more subsidiary to the perimeter terrace.
- realignment of these houses to increase the opportunity for landscaping.
- redesign of the terrace return elevations.
- arrangements for the storage and collection of refuse.

There are other matters raised, for example the detail of chimney stacks, downpipes and the precise design of the shopfronts on the Albion Street frontage which have been reviewed. Such items are normally controlled by condition to include large scale detail.

In considering the **neo-classical design of the street frontage terraces**, and their relationship with the interior of the site, the principles of the proposals have however not been properly recognised by officers.

- In referring to the need for the houses to be set in a landscaped garden context, the concept of the terraced town house and the villa has been confused. In the domestic hierarchy which the design echoes, this kind of architecture was neither for the rich and leisured nor for the servants who waited on them, but for the emerging middle class of professionals and entrepreneurs who made a living from the leisured.
- Insistence on a greater disparity of scale between the perimeter buildings and those in the heart of the site seems to be based on a vision of street blocks with parallel central mews, but whilst these are very common in London developments of the period they are much less common in Cheltenham. In this instance the street block width is rather greater than a typical mews configuration would warrant.

The design critique includes a number of *generalities* which have been taken as *rules* governing classical design in Cheltenham:

- *Duality*. A design consists of two equal, mirrored halves with no focus for the eye to rest on is said to exhibit duality. Mathematically, all terraces composed of houses two window bays wide (and all three-windows –wide terraces of an even number of units) exhibit duality, and it can either be accepted or mitigated by detailing. The (mutilated) c19 terrace north of the cinema in Winchcombe Street is a humble example, whilst Royal Parade is a much grander case where no attempt has been made, or indeed is needed, to mitigate this characteristic. Duality is not normally an issue in terrace design where the elevation can usually only be seen obliquely, along the street. In revising the scheme, the flanking units have been emphasized to counter the problem.
- *Window spacing*. Whilst in the majority of cases, the fenestration of terraces is such that the spacing of windows is regular along the length of the terrace, this is by no means universal; there are several examples in the centre of Cheltenham where the spacing is greater at the party walls. This is often for reasons of internal planning, but sometimes for architectural effect, and establishes a different and entirely satisfactory rhythm to the façade.
- *Shop fronts project beyond the plane of the building above*. In central Cheltenham, some shopfronts extend greatly in front of their parent building, some project slightly, some do not project at all. There is no dominant pattern.

As well as these generalities, the proportions, especially of the terrace replacing the cinema, have been criticized as atypical and inelegant. If, however, the configuration of these units is overlaid on that of the existing neighbouring terrace, the proportions can be seen to match very closely. The difference is in the height of the ground floor shopfronts. This is not of course of any great moment – the town centre shows countless instances of separate adjoining blocks which do not align in storey levels or proportions.

Underlying these criticisms is a suggestion that the design is unworthy because it falls between the two stools of pastiche and replication. Pastiche may be considered a term best avoided; strictly speaking it is a musical term for a piece making references to past works, but with regard to architecture it has come to be used pejoratively.

This scheme is not intended as a replica of early c19 work. Its intention is to reflect that work by complying with basic tenets of classical architecture, namely symmetry, repetition of elements and the concentration of architectural emphases, within a decorative scheme adopting elements of early c19 design such as cornices, window surrounds etc. The design of rows of town houses has since its early c18 inception been primarily a matter of street architecture. John Wood in Queen Square Bath showed how a row of houses could pretend to be a grand urban palazzo, and terrace design to a greater or lesser extent has adopted this deceit and followed this pattern ever since. This scheme aims to reflect this tradition, enhancing the dominant classical character of the conservation area without slavishly copying one or another example of the genre.

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