

Plymouth Design Panel Review

Wednesday 31st April Thursday 1st May 2008

Council House, Civic Centre, Plymouth.

In Attendance

Les Sparks (chair)

Bruce Duncan

Prof Adrian Gale

Roger Zogolovich (standing in for Martin Harradine)

Mark Pearson

Tanya Griffiths (secretary)

Agenda Items

1. TV Screen Armada Way - live application
2. Pierwest Pier Street, West Hoe - live application
3. Exeter Street - pre-application /confidential
4. Tothill Sidings - pre-application /confidential
5. North Cross Framework - pre-application /confidential
6. Derriford Hospital New Entrance- pre-application

Note: The developers of three of the agenda items have requested that the reports be treated as confidential at pre-application stage. If any of the pre applications discussions result in the submission of a planning application the Plymouth Design Panel report will be available on request and will be referred to in the Planning Officer's report. They will also be published on the Plymouth City Council website as a matter of record.

1. TV Screen in the Plaza, Armada Way

The panel was grateful for the opportunity to review this proposal and wishes to express the following concerns:-

Location

The aim of the 'Live Sites' initiative as part of the Cultural Olympiad to provide interactive media screens as a focus for sporting and cultural activity was thought to be great opportunity for Plymouth. However, the panel has fundamental concerns about the proposed location of the screen at the north side of the intersection of Royal Parade and Armada Way as a permanent intervention in the public realm.

The creation of the Plaza as significant public space has been acknowledged as a major achievement and a milestone in the implementation of the Vision for Plymouth; this was recognised at the recent Abercrombie Awards. By removing the barriers between the civic square and the city centre, liberating movement at ground level and creating a flexible space for social exchange and popular events, the Plaza has been instrumental in transforming the city centre experience.

The screen at 9m tall and 8.2 m wide will have a very intrusive physical, visual and acoustic impact and reintroduces a barrier between the Plaza, the civic square and the Hoe, thereby undermining the principles and enervating the achievement of the Plaza project.

The panel felt strongly that the screen in the proposed location would be very dominant and place a demand on the space which would inhibit other activities eg. markets, seasonal events, fairs etc.

Alternatives

The panel explored a number of options and conducted site visits in the city centre working on the assumption that the screen would need to face north or at least be in sufficient shade to be legible and that the range for optimum aspect ratio (not specified in the application) would be a criterion for locating an appropriate area for audience space. The limited time frame associated with the bid was also a factor. With a different timetable this project should have given rise to a much greater ambition to deliver a landscaped performance space and an inspirational cultural legacy for Plymouth. The panel looked at the section of Armada Way north of Mayflower Street (this was the panel's preferred location for a permanent landscaped performance space), the development site north of Drake Circus, other sites associated with Drake Circus and surface mounting the screen on buildings within the city centre including around the Plaza.

The panel concluded that a position well to the south of the intersection of Armada Way and Royal Parade would be more appropriate having the benefit of extending active use within the established public realm, and with the mature trees in the civic square affording a backdrop and some screening of the rear of the LED panel. The location, in close proximity to both civic and retail functions and to existing café amenities, was also thought to be beneficial. The panel would not exclude the possibility of locating the screen in the pool as an option to be tested.

In addition to the above comments the following are general remarks for the screen in any location:

Materials.

The over-cladding of the steel frame with aluminium composite material must be shown to be robust. The surfacing around the support legs should be carefully detailed and materials selected of a quality and character which complements the existing landscaping.

Noise

It was felt that the acoustic impact of the screen should be considered not just in terms of its decibel rating but also the social interference accompanying the visual distraction that a video screen inevitably brings with it especially if the intention is for it to be active for 16 hours of every day.

Views

A blank face on the rear of the screen is a visual imposition on the public realm and must be carefully considered. Attaching the screen to a building (as in Exchange Square, Manchester) is a better solution. The notion of concealing the back with public art should be regarded as a failure to find an appropriate location for the screen.

In conclusion the panel cannot support the proposal to permanently locate the screen at the southern end of the Plaza and would urge that alternatives be further explored as a matter of priority.