



Project Title: ABC 18: City Square, Aberdeen
Details: Public consultation on City Square project
Location: Union Terrace Gardens, Aberdeen
Use type: Arts / Leisure / Civic / Public Realm / Infrastructure
Client / Developer: Aberdeen City and Shire Economic Future (ACSEF) / Scottish Enterprise
Lead Designer(s): n/a (previous Technical Appraisal team led by Halliday Fraser Munro Architects and Planners)
Planning Authority: Aberdeen City Council
Planning Status and Ref: Pre-planning
Issue Date: 08 February 2010
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Introduction

This report relates to the public consultation being carried out by ACSEF to establish the backing and opinion on proposed major alterations to Union Terrace Gardens, Aberdeen. The designs, as described in the Technical Appraisal document prepared in 2009 by Halliday Fraser Munro and others, were presented at an A+DS Design Review meeting held on 26th January 2010 in Edinburgh.

A+DS Views

1 General comments / contexts

1.1 We thank the presentation team for setting out the background to the current proposals, and inviting comments at this early stage. The information presented to us considered different options for a 'grand project' in Union Terrace Gardens to improve the public realm, and provide a new 'heart' for the city centre incorporating, amongst other facilities, a new arts centre. Although this information is available through the ACSEF website, the images currently being presented to the public as the 'City Square Project' are based on the 'Full-level' solution that completely covers over the Denburn Valley. The other options outlined to us in the presentation to the Panel for a 'Partial Level' covering most of the valley, or another for 'Improvements to the Gardens' without significant changes to existing levels, do not appear to have been included for consideration as part of the public consultation exercise. Our comments seek to address the single design proposal being put forward through this process, but with reference to the background information presented.

1.3 The level of ambition demonstrated in this radical project to improve the quality of the city centre is supported. However, given the high level of investment and the scale of change being considered for a city centre public realm enhancement project, we see it as extremely important that alternative proposals are carefully examined and any solution is developed such that it will deliver the greatest benefit to the enhancement of

Aberdeen. In this light, we have some concerns about the way in which the project is currently progressing, and suggest that there are a number of issues which should be addressed as the plans for improvements to the Gardens and the rest of the city centre are developed.

2 Approach to Establishing a Design Proposal

2.1 Wider Urban Context

The quality and level of site analysis that has been carried out in relation to the Gardens, and the clear way in which the issues raised by it were presented, is acknowledged. However, the scope of the analysis was set by the Technical Appraisal, and considered only options for 'improving' Union Terrace Gardens rather than addressing the wider context of the city. We believe a broader study is essential if a robust case is to be made for radical changes to the public realm within the city centre, and the opportunities presented by such a significant level of investment fully realised. Such a study should include consideration of the qualities and roles of other city centre public buildings and spaces, alongside those of Union Terrace Gardens, such that a proposal can be developed that allows them all to work together in promotion of a well functioning and attractive city centre.

2.2 Cultural Value of the Site

The site analysis examined at length a series of problems that needed to be addressed and the technical viability of different solutions, but appears to be lacking in relation to the cultural, historical and spatial qualities of this important central greenspace. The Gardens, and the strong topographical form of the Denburn Valley within which they are currently contained, will have a cultural value for the city and its residents which needs to be understood and recognised. While the deep level changes in this area present design issues, they are also defining characteristics of the topography and are part of the fabric of Aberdeen, and we believe that such features can enrich places if embedded within city development. These considerations are vital when planning the future of the city, and we recommend that they be addressed and debated during the current consultation process, and inform any subsequent design solution.

2.3 Uses Contained in the proposals

We remain unclear as to what the needs are that are driving the current proposition. We understand that there are a number of problems which it purports to solve, but we would expect there to be particular functional and cultural uses, identified and set out through a city wide analysis, that pro-actively inform any design proposals and options appraisal. Such an analysis should extend to the nature and use of public open spaces, as well as functions that require to be enclosed.

3 Implications of raising the levels of the gardens

3.1 Typology of public spaces

The favoured option being presented through the current consultation exercise suggests a sizable new public space well above the level of the existing gardens. Clarification is required as to whether any new public space proposed is an urban 'square', or a greened 'park', or combination of both. Where a new 'park' is being considered then we suggest that such spaces are more successful, both in terms of perception and for practical reasons, when they are built up 'from the ground', rather than being on a raised

deck. Spatial typologies should not be confused and their roles should be clearly defined if they are to work well, and the differences between a park and a square, functionally, spatially and in their infrastructure, need to be clearly recognised in the proposals.

3.2 Greenspace provision

Further to the above, we concur with the importance of these gardens in providing a vital greenspace as a place of relaxation and an 'urban lung' in a city centre where such spaces are lacking. The ambition to make the gardens more accessible and usable is laudable, but it is also essential to ensure that new proposals do not compromise the ability of these spaces to function in this way, e.g. to have similar or better degrees of planting, trees etc.

3.3 Impact on surrounding roads and structures

The creation of squares, parks or new public facilities, at or near the level of the surrounding streets, would radically change the nature and function of the surrounding streets, buildings and associated structures. Most obviously, it would impact on the listed arcaded terrace structures below Union Terrace, and potentially remove them altogether. Consideration should be given to how any new public spaces would relate to surrounding streets in both usage and design, and particularly how any major public space would work with Union Street as the main thoroughfare of the city. Any proposals to integrate a raised deck into the back of Belmont Street would be complicated, physically and spatially, and would require extensive exploration and resolution if to be successful.

3.4 Nature of new internal spaces

A further consequence of creating a large raised deck for new terraces, squares etc. would be the creation of a large area of subterranean space beneath it. While such spaces may be suited to certain purposes, they are not conducive to many others, particularly where daylight is a requirement. Their introverted and dark nature may be moderated in interesting, and potentially exciting, ways, but unless and until appropriate needs are identified which might be satisfied by these spaces, the creation of such a large volume of potentially unusable space must be questioned.

4 Future process

4.1 Co-ordination with Council

Given the scale and ambition of the proposals, it is essential that the results of this consultation, and any future design proposals, should be fully co-ordinated with the City Council's processes and plans for future development of the City Centre. With the Council currently drawing up a new City Centre Development Framework, a clear way forward must be found for this area as an integral part of the city centre, and this and any wider proposals must be brought within this framework. An open debate is positive but time and resources should not be wasted pursuing uncoordinated visions.

4.2 Potential Future Competition

We support the proposal for any major future public realm proposal that comes out of the ongoing investigations to be the subject of an international competition. Should this stage be reached, we would hope that A+DS can assist in some form.

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the designs at this early stage and to contribute to the wider debate on what could potentially be radical proposals to change the centre of Aberdeen. Whilst acknowledging a high level of ambition and welcoming the drive to improve the city centre, we have concerns with both the remit and the images contained in the proposals put forward in the public consultation. Most specifically, any proposal for such improvements should be driven by a wider analysis of the city, so that it is clear what the use and urban role of the project should be, and the proposals shaped accordingly. We would encourage the development of a well considered and co-ordinated approach to Union Terrace Gardens as part of a wider aspiration to improve the quality of the public realm within the City Centre. We would look for a strong and well-founded brief for the future development of the Gardens, which could then form the subject of a high profile international competition. We would like to be kept informed of future progress in developing these plans for the future of Aberdeen.