



Newsletter No. 88: January 2015

Coming Events

Wednesday 28th January 2015: Rubislaw Quarry - Could its Future Be As Successful As Its Past? - a talk by Hugh Black & Sandy White, Directors of Rubislaw Quarry Aberdeen Ltd, and Jenny Brown, Curator (Science & Industry), Aberdeen City Council. At the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

Wednesday 25th February 2015: The Music Hall - A Vision For the Future - a talk by Jane Spiers, Chief Executive, Aberdeen Performing Arts. At the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

Friday 13th March 2015: the Civic Society's **Annual Dinner** at the Royal Northern & University Club - details to follow.

Awards Ceremony 2014

The following is a copy of the address given by Dominic Fairlie at Aberdeen Civic Society's Awards Ceremony held on 15 October 2014.

This year we have had a varied selection of buildings, developments and restoration projects to explore. I will take you through the story of our considerations of the contenders that reached our final list, those which we visited on a bus trip in early September and some others that just failed to make it. Some of the projects will receive recognition through a mention, commendation or an award and others will not. It is worth saying that it is an achievement by itself for any project to have made it onto the final list and to be part of this presentation.

Every year as I prepare for this presentation I start by collecting the projects into groups to put them under a heading – so that what I have to say is a little more structured. This year I am going to break it into two sections – the first on housing and the second, I have rather blandly called non-housing. There are a couple of projects that could span somewhere between the two descriptions – and to deal with these I have just put them in the middle.

As I was doing this it occurred to me how strong the influence of road design is on what we have looked at. With, I think, only two exceptions all of our entries in the final list this year are projects that have the benefit of an existing or historic road layout. In other words they are infill developments that do not rely on forming new roads or streets. This made me realise how large an impact the roads and road design in particular has on what we consider to be good development. Buildings may come and go, they get refurbished, knocked about or even knocked down and re-built, but the pattern of our roads, streets and squares remains very much the same. The public spaces contained by the roads and streets are therefore a much more permanent feature of civic space than the buildings that look out onto them. Why is this? Why is it that our final list includes so many schemes that have not relied on the construction of a new street? I am not sure I know the answer to that question, but it is a thought. Perhaps in future we will give an award to a project that has involved the formation of a new street – and the award is made because of that street. Something for us all to look forward to.

So let's start the story.

HOUSING:

Former Police Station Peterculter

This is a development of flats on the old police station site in Peterculter.

We were impressed by the work here. It is quite a tight site on a bit of a slope, but a very good attempt has been made to deal with it. The building benefits from the use of good materials and detailing. Granite banding round the windows and doors is a specification that is higher than what may be provided by many of the national housebuilders.

The variation in frontage, reinforced by colour, chimneys, detailing, elevation and importance, gives good rhythm and vertical emphasis and a certain natural symmetry.

It perhaps could have been improved if the downpipes had covered the join in render colours and the scheme is let down a bit by the car park at the front, but despite this we liked it very much indeed.

Westburn Drive Housing

This is a small crescent shaped housing development that sits with its back to ARI overlooking Westburn Park. It is a group of six large houses and a number of flats.

This scheme brought out discussion in the group. Some thought it was great and the kind of thing that should be encouraged in Aberdeen. Others though that it was car dominated and did not think that some of the details were quite right. There is no

doubt that the appearance is more traditional, and the use of natural granite is tremendous.

However many of the windows lack vertical emphasis and no attempt has been taken to reduce the impact of a large number of cars parked at all angles in the front. This meant that there is no natural line for the street. These things made it difficult for the site to be considered too favourably.

Beechgrove Church

Beechgrove Church has been converted into flats. In the process the building has had a spruce up and been given a good clean.

Cleaning by itself is not something that we like to celebrate as it is more of a maintenance activity, and even then it is an activity that is not always approved of due to the damage that can be caused to the stonework. In this case some re-pointing has also been done.

The conversion from church to housing is good. It is extremely difficult to find alternative uses for all of our old churches and they need to be done well to look right. Someone on our committee made the comment that this was a relatively easy building to convert, but I am actually not so sure that any church is what you would call an easy conversion. Here the developers have taken care to keep within the constraints of the site, sensibly excavating underneath the building to form a car park and remove clutter from the street. The local area appears little changed to what it was before.

We liked the way that some of the details had been done – not only the car park but also for how thought had gone into the sensitive siting of the refuse bins and window treatments.

Well done with this conversion. A development has been achieved that had some people on the awards committee saying that they don't see why we should be considering it because to the street it is nothing more than stone cleaning. But it is obviously so much more than that, and it has been done in an effective way that makes so little change to the area around and about.

This project receives a MENTION. Owner – Denmack; Architect - TCD Architects; Contractor - Graeme W Cheyne (Builders)

Dandara Oakbank Housing and Wall

We looked at Dandara's housing development at Oakbank both as a development in its own right and also specifically at the granite walls that are so much a feature of the entrance. The development is a mix of houses and flats.

Some of the properties are very large indeed. New granite has been used in many of the properties, which also have white panel render, and black window frames. The design is different, and is obviously liked by the house-buying public.

When we looked at how the site measured up to our guidelines for the awards, we decided that it just did not fit very well if you judge it by the amenity it provides. The houses and flats were packed together (which by itself is not a problem) but this is exacerbated because little attempt seems to have been made to deal with cars.

We were delighted to see the use of new granite, although unfortunately some of it is already a little discoloured which tends to give a patchwork appearance to some of the walls. Although the site contains both houses and flats little attempt has been made to truly integrate the flats and the houses together – the site seems to have been split into houses here and flats over there.

Granite taken down from the old school buildings (which was the former use of the site) has been re-used in the boundary and entrance walls – and this is a luxury. There is no doubt that the warmth and character of the old materials adds something solid to the whole development – the development would have been poorer without them. There has been effort put into creating a wall that gives the site a sense of place.

We did feel that some of the details and the stone work in the walls could have been better. For example the mason could have positioned or dressed stones better to avoid ones that obviously had been part of a previous feature being built in with that feature still on show. The capping to the wall is not that traditional and probably not in keeping with the rest of it. A wall like this would probably have mortar applied in a more buttered way to cover over the mix of stones.

Despite these negative comments, the committee was pleased to see the attempt that had been made here and it has so nearly worked. It was definitely worthy for consideration for as part of our final list.

Windows at 44a Rubislaw Den South

44a Rubislaw Den South has had its sash and case windows repaired – about 30 of them. I can hear you asking what is so unusual about that in Aberdeen! The first thing I would like to say is that they are timber, and what a relief it is to see that the owner wanted to see repairs rather than replacement with new PVC.

Some of the windows in this property are very unusual sash and case installed when the property was built over 100 years ago. They are installed to the first floor and are best described as an antique and original version of a sash and case tilt and turn window (although that is my own rather simplistic description).

They are a patented design called NAP standing for National Accident Prevention and they allow the window to turn for cleaning. It is thought that the windows are

unique in Aberdeen and probably in Scotland. When originally installed they must have been horrendously expensive.

Over the years they have been repaired and the last time this was done it was fairly inappropriate. Filler had been used to patch up rotten bits of the window and then painted over. Needless to say this repair did not last.

The joiner who had been called in to repair this time contacted Aberdeen Heritage Trust. Working with the Trust, a repair was organised that involved removing rotten parts and poorly repaired parts and splicing in new. This has all been done to a very high standard. If you went to the house today, you would not notice much of the work, the windows just look like traditional Aberdeen sash and case windows that are well maintained.

But some of these windows are special, they now look as good as they would have when new – and getting to this point has involved some very good care and first class carpentry and joinery work, which we are delighted were brought to the attention of the awards committee.

This project receives our special AWARD FOR CRAFTSMANSHIP. Owner - Mr and Mrs M Hume; Craftsman - Mr Derek Thomson of Ho Ho Design

403 King Street Student Flats

We now move on to the two developments that fall in the middle of the description housing and non-housing. The first one is the newly built block of student flats at 403 King Street. The word “interesting” is often used to describe something that people are not completely sure about. Well it is fair to say that this block of student accommodation in King Street had us all over-using the word interesting.

In Aberdeen we are used to granite. White brick, timber and glass are not a common combination in the Granite City. However, in a funny way it seems to have worked. The building has a presence on the corner of King Street and Merkland Road – probably more presence than the granite building that was there beforehand. Mature trees on the boundary with King Street have been retained as have some of the granite boundary walls.

The whole thing is large and quite imposing – it is certainly noticeable. This is not a bad thing at all. The scale is fairly bold – but probably about right. The public street elevations are clear of all services such as pipes, vents and grills.

The windows have a vertical emphasis and this verticality is reinforced by the timber boarding, which we are glad to see is real wood rather than plastic.

The brick? Well – whether you like it or not it is different – and dare I say it - interesting.

After we had stopped saying interesting, we had to acknowledge that we were all quite impressed and thought that a good attempt had been made to do something different.

This project receives a MENTION. Owner – Ardmuir; Architect - Cumming and Co (Aberdeen); Contractor- Ogilvie Construction

Cults – McCarthy & Stone flats and Outreach Centre

This is a site previously occupied by Cults East Church and a house. It has been developed into homes for retired living – by McCarthy and Stone, and an outreach centre. Many of us will remember the steeple of the church which was a noticeable landmark on this site for many years. We considered both the flats and the outreach centre individually, but as they are so closely linked on the site I will cover them as one here.

The McCarthy & Stone properties are set back from the road in a U shape. We felt that the site seemed overdeveloped – there was little private space and the entrance was cluttered with vehicles. The buildings just were a bit too much and the detailing on things like the windows could have been better.

The Outreach Centre was (and apologies for the re-use of this word) interesting. Granite had been re-used from the former church both inside the centre and out. The most visible element of this was the strong granite wall that punctuates the building facing North Deeside Road, but inside some of the arch features – and others - had been resurrected and given new life.

Externally the materials include metal, render coloured mustard, traditional Scottish granite and chocolate brown timber boarding. The variety of materials used tended to emphasise the lack of natural symmetry.

Having said all of that the outreach centre did add character to the place and the inside was appreciated, but all in all, we felt that both the outreach centre and the residential properties were just a little too much for the site. It was all a bit cluttered.

NON-HOUSING:

18 Carden Place

This is a modern extension built at the back of number 18 one of the imposing old granite properties in Carden Place. In years gone by these buildings on Carden Place would have been a premium residential address in Aberdeen. With one or two exceptions these have now been taken over by commercial users. This extension is obviously to make the space available in the original property larger to cope with expansion.

This was not the only development of this type that we looked at in this year's awards committee. We considered 18 Carden Place to be the best of them. It is well hidden from the Carden Place side – ie the front of the building - and it appears to use the space well.

As we discussed this project we talked in depth about the impact that this kind of development has on an area and what it contributes to the amenity of the city. We concluded that almost all development of this type leads to an intensification of the back lanes, and ultimately a deterioration in their overall ambiance.

We felt that, although only visible from the back, it was fairly imposing from this location and the relationship to the old building could have been better. It seems a little overpowering for both the area and the site itself. It does not really contribute that much to the civic space.

The Chester Hotel

The Chester Hotel - formerly Simpson's - on Queens Road has had a new lease of life. Work has taken place both outside and in – new seating areas are added outside at the front, and inside there are private areas for seating and dining as well as more public spaces. New buildings have been added at the back and landscaping has been improved.

There were varying views about what has happened at the front with the granite seating areas – some of us liked it and some were not too sure. The inside lent itself well to holding private conversations and offered private dining as well as the more public areas, and there were similar mixed views amongst committee members.

However, we were fairly unanimous in our appreciation of the work that has been done to the rear, particularly outside. Gone are the rather bright colours that used to be a trademark of Simpson's. Access to the rear seemed better and many of the existing trees and much of the old garden walling remains.

The outside space and landscaping work was good, and changing from what it was has seemed to tone it all down and in the process made the space feel larger. On our visit we all lingered in this area – and I would take this as an indication that it was an area that was welcoming. This formed a key part in our decision making.

This project receives a COMMENDATION. Owner - Mr and Mrs G Wood; Architect - Graham Mitchell Architects; Contractor - Bancon Construction

Aberdeen Sports Village, Aquatics Centre

The new Aberdeen Aquatics Centre (which is on the site of the old Linksfield Academy in King Street) is a fabulous new sporting addition to Aberdeen.

There are two pools – a diving pool and the other a huge 50m international sized pool which can be split into two for everyday use. It has a range of features

including moveable floors in the pools and security to restrict access to the diving boards. There are very comfortable and very large seating areas for spectators. Only one member of our committee admitted to having swum in the pool – and had obviously been relieved to see that the barrier was up and the pool was not quite as big as it could have been. Viewing it from the spectator area as we did on our visit made many of us appreciate how tiring it must be to be an international swimmer.

The aquatics centre can be accessed either by itself or through the existing sports village. If there was any criticism it would relate to the car park, which is visible and to the front of the building.

We were impressed by this new facility for Aberdeen. The materials used in the building itself are a combination of metal petals, glass and panelling with a strong vertical emphasis – and they work well together.

The linkage to the sports village and how the two designs work together was liked. The inside is light and airy and the whole thing does not have that characteristic stuffy, smelly and humid feel so often associated with a swimming pool. It is very good indeed.

This project receives an AWARD. Owner - Aberdeen Sports Village; Architect - Faulkner Browns Architects; Contractor - Graham Construction

The Health Village

The new health village is built on a site between East North Street and Frederick Street. The site has been vacant for many years and was used for a time as a car park. The building addresses both East North Street and Frederick Street.

It appeared to us that the new building is right for its location – not too big and not too small. The way that it relates to the granite warehouse that is next to it is good.

The stronger elevation is definitely the one to Frederick Street, and this is what you would call the front of the building, it is where the front door is. The East-North Street elevation is less inspiring – in fact it is not really that interesting. On East North Street the whole building is set at a level just below the street and a rather unfortunate wooden fence has been built probably to shield it from the noise of passing traffic. The elevation is stepped in and out along East North Street, which hopefully will not be a maintenance headache.

Internally and just beyond the reception area there are a series of glass corridors which join the various parts of the building. These are effective and introduce great light, but the intervening courtyards remain a little unfinished. We would hope that this is something that will be corrected.

We thought this development has made a big improvement to the streets in this area. It is a good addition that respects its setting and makes a strong, but not overpowering, statement on Frederick Street.

This project receives a MENTION. Owner - NHS Grampian; Architect - J M Architects; Contractor - Galliford Try

GDF Suez Building

Now down to the north bank of the River Dee, and at the junction of North Esplanade West, Old Ford Road and Palmerston Place. This new building for GDF Suez is the latest addition to the developments in this area. Formerly an area full of small business predominantly involved in fishing the area has been undergoing a transformation recently and this is the latest addition.

It is a strong frontage to an important and active road leading to the city centre. The building overlooks the River Dee. As a general comment on this area, there is no doubt that it has the ability to contribute strongly to the future development of commercial space in Aberdeen. It does have one thing that is very much in its favour. The area benefits from having an existing closely knitted and interconnected street pattern. It includes cobbled streets, buildings that sit at the back of the footpaths, rear lanes and a fair amount of commercial activity that actually occurs on the street. The streets here have always been shared – not only by cars and lorries but also by pedestrians, workers, forklifts, produce and piles of ice. I do appreciate that some of this activity is now difficult to do safely and anyway, Aberdeen's fishing activity is not what it once was. But what this means is that the area has a heritage and culture of its own. A developer coming in is able to take advantage of these attributes, and take cues from and build upon the street layouts, character and materials that have existed for years.

The GDF Suez building does this very well. It is high, but not overly so. It is good and simple design with a clean execution.

Some on the committee thought that the ground floor, with the car park access, had failed a bit in that it was the weakest part of the building, allowing the strong design to "leak" – but at least the cars were out of the way and round the back.

The whole development is pleasing, and will hopefully act as another catalyst for more strong buildings that will ensure that this important approach to the city has significant presence.

This project receives a COMMENDATION. Owner – Tritax; Architect - Halliday Fraser Munro; Contractor - Balfour Beattie Regional Construction

Brodies Office in Union Grove

A new office for the legal firm of Brodies now occupies the site of the former Esso filling station in Union Grove. Re-development of this site seemed to have been delayed because of the recession that started in 2008, and the site lay vacant for some time until recently.

The building is a transition between the strict and regimental nature of the tenement flats on the south side of Union Grove and the corner building which was a church and is now converted to flats. The building manages this transition well. A new car park has been built under the building.

The building is very striking. It is probably a little larger and more imposing than the tenement flats, but it fits in well. The building sits up and front door access is elevated, meaning that there is a flight of steps leading up to the front door from street level. To cater for the requirements of level access this means that a lift has been provided at one side and external to the building. This is a shame as it makes the whole ground floor look cluttered and to be frank a bit messy and presumably comes about due to the car parking not being fully underground.

Despite this we felt that the rest of the building it is very good indeed.

Prime 4, Kingswells – Phase 1

At the beginning I mentioned that there were a couple of projects that were an exception when it came to road design. Well this is one – this is a project that has had to create a new road or street structure as an integral part of the project.

People living in Aberdeen will have noticed that there has been a fair bit of building going on at the Prime 4 commercial development at Kingswells. Some of the work has attracted some strong comment about the additional traffic that has been generated at the morning and evening rush hour peaks.

The council is trying really hard to get us all out of our cars. One thing they do is to restrict car parking when they grant planning approval for a commercial development. I am not convinced that the council's efforts will succeed – and no doubt time will tell. This topic is something that I am quite willing to discuss later over a beer.

So much has happened at Prime 4 that we were not really sure what we were supposed to be considering. In the end we agreed that we should view the first three buildings (Apache, Nexen and Transocean) as phase one and consider all of these buildings and the space around them as a group.

To go back briefly to the issue about getting us all out of our cars. If the evidence on our bus trip was anything to go by, this has not worked particularly well at Prime 4. This was the only scheme that we visited that none of us put a foot out of the bus –

and no - it was not raining! Normally the bus stops and we pile out to walk around, but here we did not, choosing instead to be driven around a couple of times viewing it all from the (relative) safety of the bus!

I am being overly negative and I should not be. Because the committee were unanimous in that the qualities of the building design, the desire to create a place, the landscape setting and the quality of the materials were very impressive. All of it sets the bar very high indeed for commercial development on commercial land. Wouldn't it be great if this standard could be adopted more widely? The development worked well in its landscape setting. Thought had been given to how to make the buildings fit in, and this had been completed very successfully.

Prime 4 was the source of much discussion as we considered all of the developments in our final list. We all recognise that the Drum Property Group is trying to do something different, bringing a new and refreshing ethos into otherwise boring commercial development. Apache, Transocean and Nexen as the occupiers of these first buildings on phase 1 have all bought into this approach and we understand that there are others signed up also. We look forward to seeing the high quality set by this initial phase to continue in subsequent ones. We also look forward to the general approach being adopted on other commercial sites. Well done, it is not always easy to break the mould.

This project receives an AWARD. Owner - Drum Property Group; Architect - Halliday Fraser Munro; Contractor - Sir Robert McAlpine

Contributed by our Chairman, Mr Dominic Fairlie.