Sir Peter Quimsley, FRIAS

Design Champion

I have been asked by your editor, a college friend from our time together at the University of Edinburgh, to speak of my experiences as Design Champion for the City of Weelainge, a small post-industrial town in the Lowlands of Scotland with an uncanny resemblance to the editor's own hometown.

But before we embark upon some thoughts on Weelainge, you may rightly ask: Just what does a Design Champion do? As the Design Champion for the City of Weelainge, I have been asked by our city fathers, and at least in one case by our city mother (collectively the Weelainge Town Council) to think and write independently on issues of design and city planning, without being beholden to any political, private or self-interest — apart, of course, from the profound pleasure I receive from being able to sign all my post with the prestigious title of "Design Champion," and hold forth as such at important dinner parties and affairs of state, at which I am pleased to rub elbows with some of the most influential and entertaining personages in design and planning on the city, national and international level, and all that over a wee dram (or more) of old (at least 15 years) Scotch Whisky.

… good design welds the "genus of the place with the spirit of the times."

Why just the other day I attended a conference hosted by Lee Manaides, the Deputy Mayor of the City of Rhodes, Greece (and former resident of your own Charleston, West Virginia), who welcomed the august assemblage with the firm and unchallenged proposition that "cultural heritage is the identifying mark of any city."

Of course, she was not to be outdone by a colleague from Krakow, Poland, whose name escaped me as I poured another glass of that dear stuff, who insisted that one should have a "poetic understanding of a city," and that heritage must "focus on values, not styles or structures." According to our dear Polish friend, good design welds the "genus of the place with the spirit of the times."

At the same gathering, my colleague and fellow Design Champion Sir Terry Farrell likened our job to engaging in "proactive planning for the public realm before private development occurs." In doing so, Sir Terry likes to say that the "space between buildings is often more important than the buildings themselves." He also adds, perhaps a bit boldly in this still petrol-washed society, that the "need for the motor car is overestimated in most cities."

Then too, my good friend Malcolm Fraser maintained as well that the best development includes "context and confidence," and that it is acceptable to build "modern" structures, so long as the design is "in 'context' to the historic core and is good design on its own terms." In this view, he was echoed by Dr. Manfred Wehdorn, a renowned architect of Vienna, Austria, who reminds us that "Vienna

was once new!" and tells all his prospective clients, "If you want pastiche, hire Mr. Walt Disney!"

An obstacle to current good design, in Mr. Frasier's view, is the contagious disease rampant in local development agencies known as "short termism"— an unfortunate, and often desperate urge of small cities to embrace any development that comes along, in the hope of creating a few jobs, or filling up an empty space, when in fact that development adds nothing to the long-term "public value" of the extraordinary heritage at the core of every city. As Ricardo Marini was quick to warn, "Good enough is often not enough by far!"

His thoughts caused me to think of a few buildings recently constructed in Weelainge that seem "outsized"

("awkward," as our youth might say) in the context in which they were placed, and how easy it is to overlook such proposed deficiencies in advance. As Hal Moggridge added, "High buildings that block skylines are a transfer of public value to private value."

Then came the keynote speaker, our own Prince Charles, the Duke of Rothesay, who, as you may know (if you have been able to locate more than his children's books at the local book seller), advocate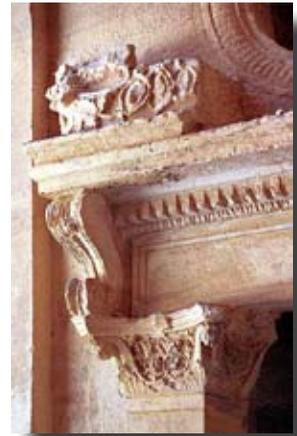s a policy on architecture that emphasizes the "interconnectedness between the human and the natural world." The Duke quoted Patrick Geddes, who said that "town planning must be folk planning," and that "in any sane society, tradition and modernity would be the best of friends" —a very timely thought given what is happening in Weelainge — where we are publicly discussing

> ## Architecture should emphasize the "interconnectedness between the human and the natural world."
>
> ~Prince Charles, Duke of

tearing down buildings in the historic core without any notion in advance of what will replace them — substituting some vague urge towards nihilism (the complete absence of anything) for any sustained plan to weld tradition to modernity. The Duke's question? With our global threats, should we not be studying what our cities teach us?" His answer? "We can find solutions to modernity in what matters to people, meaning and belonging, and things built for the long term."

Some city planners in Weelainge insist that future economic development is destined to be confined to three specific areas surrounding (but outside) the historic core — the Weelainge Casino, the Highlands Kilt Outlet (several kilometers out of town), and our famous Carnegie Park (lately run as a regional resort). Others maintain that overdevelopment or focused development in these three venues have in fact created an impediment to future downtown development.

In future issues, we will take up how Wee-

lainge is coping with its particular design and planning challenges, and hope to offer some suggestions gleaned from our own experience, as well as that from our other colleagues in Scotland and abroad, and in the process, perhaps engender a bit of enthusiasm for my dearly beloved Weelainge, as well as engage in a bit of good clean fun in the process.

Cheers!

Sir Peter Quimsley, FRIAS
Design Champion
City of Weelainge,
Scotland

Any resemblance of the city of Weelainge to any existing city in the United States of America is strictly coincidental.