



Sir Peter Quimsley, FRIAS.

Design Champion

City of Weelaine, Scotland

Arriving in our sister city of Edinburgh from attending a recent architectural conference in Paris, and in need of a stiff glass of Highland Park, I stopped first at the local Blackwell's to request a copy of "A Vision of Britain," by our own HRH the Prince of Wales.

I had been embarrassed (yes, even your Design Champion experiences occasional embarrassment) in a discussion during the conference by not remembering all of the Prince's "Ten Principles" for preserving the architectural heritage of Great Britain, which "lapse" the questioner found remarkable.

With all due respect to our Royalty, I didn't know His Majesty was taken all that seriously on the Continent. Perhaps it was just a touch of Scottish cynicism (independence?) that made me feel this way, but as my trip to Blackwell's confirmed, the cynicism was not mine alone.

Walking up to the most knowledgeable looking bookseller in the shop, I asked for a copy of "A Vision of Britain."

The bookseller looked at me quizzically.

"And who would the author be?"

"Well, Prince Charles, you know, The Prince of Wales; it is a book about architecture."

"We have nothing like that here; perhaps you want to look at the children's books?"

It was not until I got home, to Weelaine, that I was able to obtain a copy of the book from the library of a fellow architect. I must confess that although I had read "about" the book previously, and generally knew the outline of the "Prince's Vision" (on the whole quite admirable), I had not read the book cover to cover.

It was enlightening to do so now, upon my return to Weelaine, when I could consider the principles in light of the new residential units

that had just been completed with public money in Weelaine at 35th and Jacobin Street in East Weelaine, and when Weelaine City Council was considering tearing down buildings in the 1100 block of Main and Mercat Streets to make way for "new development."

Although we live in an era when government-funded housing has a bad reputation, the new housing units, in East Weelaine, in this author's view are quite good, and meet at least 7 of the 10 principles championed by Prince Charles, who quotes Egyptian architect Dr. Hassan Fathy in his Introduction as follows:

"...beautiful architecture is an act of civility toward the person who comes into the building. It bows to you at every corner, as in a minuet...Every ugly or senseless building is an insult to the man passing in front of it. Every building should be embellishing and adding to its culture. This is very

difficult to do now because we have abandoned human scale and 'human reference.' We need to reintroduce human scale, human reference and musicality in architecture."

While the design and construction of the new residential units may be short on three of the principles, "Materials, Decoration, and Art," given the fact that they were built as low cost housing; they are attentive to HRH's principles of "Place, Hierarchy, Scale, Harmony, Enclosure, Signs & Lights, and Community." Along with the construction and design of the new residential units in North Weelaine, these are the first new buildings in downtown Weelaine to express nearly all of the principles, even if the designers were faced with modest budgets.

A look across the street, to the more embellished but less principled building (better suited to a suburban mall, than an old urban neighborhood) allows better comparison to the accomplishment of the designers of the residential

units, and shows how even low cost housing units can be built with sensitive, architectural forethought.

Quoting again from the Prince's Introduction, and the words of Dr. Fathy:

“...The less expensive, the poorer the project, the more care and attention that should be paid to aesthetics.”

This author applauds the final product of the designers of the new residential units, and thanks them for their sensitive approach to these (including the North Weclainge Townhouses) units, which happen to be the first new residential units to be built in Weclainge's historic downtown for many decades.

The applause stops with City Council's plan to demolish the entire block of 1100 Main and Mercat Streets, presumably because it believes the old structures to be non-salvageable at worst, and eyesores at best, and that their removal even before plans for their replacement are advanced will generate quicker re-development in the historic downtown by having the City do the dirty-work of clearing the lot, which the as-yet-unknown future developers won't want to do.

This is getting the old adage, “Build it and they will come,” backwards. “Tear it down and they will come,” has never been an accepted mantra for urban re-development.

Even accepting City Council's premise that the buildings are non-salvageable and eyesores and must eventually be torn down by the City to assist in new private development, there are at least four good reasons why the “timing” of the proposed demolition should be delayed UNTIL serious developers have come forward with their own replacement plans.

The City Will Lose Its Only Leverage Power To Influence Replacement Design If It Demolishes the Buildings Prematurely

It has been a weakness of the City decried by this Author that it has no design guidelines for commercial construction in the downtown historic district.

Certain new development in one of the historic downtown core neighborhoods (the subject of the “dream” in my column of February 8, 2009) shows that the lack of such guidelines can allow for design and construction in the historic core of buildings that not only seem to lack any consideration of the “principles” outlined above, but which are perceived by some as downright “ugly.”

Weclainge can do better than ugly, but the only way the City will have any input into what is

designed and constructed is to use its offer to demolition the buildings and clear the lot AS LEVERAGE in negotiating with the serious developer who has a sensitive plan for replacement development.

It is not hard to imagine that if the buildings are demolished, and no one comes forward in the near term to re-develop the vacant lots, that the city will become increasingly desperate to fill the holes in the urban fabric, and will allow (because they will not be able to prevent) even the most despicable replacement construction, as soon as someone promises that in doing so, they will bring, say, 2 new jobs to the downtown.

Good developers do not need to see vacant lots to understand the value of a location to future development. They generally have well honed imaginations to envision new development on any already occupied site. So long as they know they can shift the demolition and clearing costs to the City as an incentive to their proposed development, they will be sensitive to the wishes of the City in offering a sensitive and cogent design that at least, like that of the new residential buildings, takes into consideration at least the principles of “Place, Hierarchy, Scale, Harmony,

Enclosure, Signs & Lights, and Community.” Additionally, it may also influence the addition of consideration of the principles of “Materials, Art, and Decoration,” as noted below.

Even If It Is Clear That The Buildings Have To Be Demolished, Delayed Demolition Will Encourage “Aforethought” (Consideration) of The Lot's Prior Building Heritage.

Even the most ardent subscribers to the belief that these buildings have no historic or architectural value to justify their preservation must admit that they were participants in the “Hierarchy, Scale, and Harmony” of a once thriving downtown community whose streets were filled with businesses, shoppers, city residents, and gawkers.

The fact that this downtown activity has currently been all but lost does not detract from the Heritage of what Weclainge was in the past, and does not determine what it will necessarily be in the future, unless we consciously and desperately seek immediate development as a “quick fix” to immediate problems, rather than as an orderly, long-term, organic development of a city that still believes in a future.

Only the most callous of developers fails to consider the urban fabric that was in place prior to their arrival before offering a plan for something “better,” but if the example of

what they are replacing is “nothing at all,” the starting bar is set incredibly low, and tempts the City to conclude that ANY new development is BETTER than what was there before.

If the City seeks requests for proposals from developers with the offer to demolish the buildings upon approval of the developers’ plans, it can expect more consideration from the developers of this past and future heritage when they appreciate that the City itself has an interest in preserving what heritage it enjoyed, and still enjoys.

Premature Demolition Will Deprive Prospective Developers of All Options for Re-Development.

One feature of great design in Scotland’s cities has been developers who have incorporated “pieces” of historic buildings, even if just the “materials,” into new designs for construction; not only as an enhancement of the new designs, but to link their modern construction to the historic culture of the city.

No developer will have this option once all the pieces have been demolished, and all the materials removed from the site.

This limits the options of the very best developers, and actually encourages the

developer who would never think of linking the modern to the historic, thereby diminishing the very heritage of a city such as Weclainge.

A Delay in Demolition Will Allow For Immediate Diversification of Municipal Investment.

Money not used today by City Council for demolition and removal can be re-directed for more immediate needs in the historic downtown, including infrastructure repairs,

To believe that deferring the expense of demolition and removal may “change” City Council’s mind in the future when the right developer does come along is merely an expression of lack of confidence that the City will not arise to the occasion when the time is right to carry out its “announced” plan to demolish the targeted buildings.

We have more trust in the present City Council, and refuse to believe that it cannot keep its word when the time is ripe. We urge only that the time is not ripe. Weclainge is an old city. It has had its share of economic decline, like many small towns in this area of the country. But it still has its heritage, and the community of people that makes it home to all of us, who still love its historic and cultural heritage.

At times, even the most optimistic among us may think we are running out of time. But like every endeavor of life,



35th & Jacobin Street (Under Construction)



35th & Jacobin Street (Today)

even in the life of a city, timing is everything. Let’s take a pause, and make sure the right opportunity is at hand before we try to seize it.

Otherwise, some of our new design and construction may show up as the very worst of its kind in the Prince’s

revised edition of “A Vision Of Britain,” a fate worse than the good bookseller at Blackwell’s will ever realize.



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