20131202-27-FITZ

Helen Purcell
Town Clerk
Wicklow Town Council
Town Hall
Market Square
Wicklow Town
Co Wicklow

09.12.13

Ref: MH/MD (Part VIII)
App: Wicklow County Council and Wicklow Town Council
For: to create a multi-functional space within Wicklow Town that would improve accessibility, enhance the presentation and public realm of the Town Centre
Site: Fitzwilliam Square, Wicklow Town

Dear Ms Purcell,

Thank you for referring the above application to An Taisce for comment.

In deference to the high quality of historic architecture in the Fitzwilliam Square area and the contribution made by the 'contained open space' in the centre of the square to the setting of the historic architecture, An Taisce submits that great care must be taken to avoid any works which would negatively impact on this Victorian unified lay-out.

As a matter of procedure, it is considered that the particulars submitted, necessary to describe the proposed development, are not sufficient under Part 8 Article 83 of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001. Further, the information provided on the public notice fails to adequately describe the proposed development and consequently falls short of that required under Article 81(2) of the Planning and Development Regulations, 2001. Given the further failure to comply with the requirements relating to the information provided on the public notice, An Taisce submit that the proposed development cannot lawfully be permitted to proceed in any case.

The Wicklow Town - Rathnew Development Plan 2013 - 2019 recognises the need to protect areas such as Fitzwilliam Square and, to this end, has included it as part of the Town Centre Architectural Conservation Area. Under Section 81 (1) of the Planning and Development Acts 2000, an Architectural Conservation Area is defined as a place, area, group of structures or townscape which is of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest, or that contributes to the appreciation of protected structures, whose character it is an objective to preserve in a development plan. The prime objective of the designation, therefore, is the preservation of character.

An Taisce is concerned that, rather than preserving its character, proposed changes to the public realm envisaged in Fitzwilliam Square would be detrimental to it, in particular, the proposed removal of the 'contained open space' which has formed an integral part of the Halpin Memorial since its construction in 1897. The Halpin Memorial, comprising an obelisk and ‘contained open space’ is included in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, which describes it as:
Freestanding carved and cut granite obelisk, erected 1897, having square-profile plinth and base, set on two steps. Incised lettering on four faces. Set in landscaped area enclosed by decorative railings on rendered plinth wall.

Erected as a memorial to Captain Robert Halpin (1836-1894), Master Mariner, who was responsible for laying over 23,000 miles of marine cabling in the nineteenth century, making a major contribution to global communications. It forms part of a group of structures in Wicklow town, including the Bridge Inn, the Church of Ireland graveyard, and the hostel, with a connection to Halpin. Designed by the County Surveyor, Carter Draper, carved by Robinson & Sons of Belfast, it is a notable landmark in the town.

Additionally, the Local Government Planning and Development Regulations 2001 Part VIII Planning Report Fitzwilliam Square Public Realm report which forms part of the application, states at Section 5.1 that the Halpin Memorial is a Protected Structure. An Taisce would also like to bring to your attention the omission from the public notice of this element of the proposed development i.e. the removal of the garden, railings and plinth wall. An Taisce submits that, given that the Halpin obelisk was designed to be set in a landscaped garden enclosed by decorative railings, the Memorial must be considered in its entirety and any protection afforded to the obelisk must extend to its original setting. The removal of what is a component part of the monument and a central unifying feature in the square could not be considered to comply with statutory heritage protection provisions. With this in mind, An Taisce submits that the landscaped garden enclosed by the decorative railings should be maintained in situ.

While public realm improvements in Wicklow Town are to be welcomed, it is considered the approach taken in the context of Fitzwilliam Square is entirely inappropriate. The proposed development, would detract from the rich Victorian architectural heritage of Fitzwilliam Square and Wicklow Town, it would be visually incongruous and would seriously injure the urban area which is characterised by the garden and its railings which has, since Victorian times, been recognised as a landmark in the town and referred to as the "Smoothing Iron".

An Taisce considers that the removal of the soft landscaping and planting area also represents a ‘de-greening’ of the square. Instead of its removal, the retention and proper maintenance of the green area is necessary for the enhancement of the public realm both from an aesthetic and an environmental perspective. Environmentally, trees have been shown to absorb very considerable amounts of air-pollution in towns and the desirability of soft landscaping as rain-water catchment areas is self-evident. While some sections of the plinth wall have been damaged, An Taisce is of the view that the trees make a very significant environmental contribution as well as greatly enhancing the ambience and amenity of the square and indeed the vistas from surrounding streets. It is consequently suggested that a comprehensive assessment be carried out to ascertain whether metal sheeting inserted inside the plinth wall may be sufficient to contain the roots and prevent further damage. A tree survey should also identify whether any tree may need to be replaced. If replacement trees are required, they should be of native species and be carefully selected and planted with a view to avoiding future root damage.

It is submitted that in order to enhance the presentation and public realm at Fitzwilliam Square, as is stated to be the purpose of the Part VIII application, the overriding objective must be to provide an appropriate setting for the Halpin Memorial (of which the intact railed garden forms an intrinsic part), with durable high quality materials appropriate to the historic context. Any new surfacing should be simplified as much as possible avoiding differing colours and materials to achieve an overall consistency, focussed on the heritage and historical character of the area. Likewise, any street furniture should be simple and consistent, avoiding for example, stainless steel which would be inappropriate with the painted decorative iron railings. It is considered that this approach would be more appropriate and would reflect the aim stated in the public notice to "enhance the presentation and public realm of the Town Centre at Fitzwilliam Square".

It is considered that the desired public realm improvements can be achieved with a revised scheme, which would involve, inter alia, the repair and maintenance of the plinth wall and railings surrounding the
landscaped area, the provision of improved surfaces with substitute new materials on the surrounding streets and improved traffic management. Given the historic, environmental and amenity loss resulting from the removal of the Smoothing Iron, An Taisce urge you not to proceed with the current proposal but to amend it such that an improved transport plan may be implemented while retaining what is a notable landmark and key asset of Victorian Wicklow.

In conclusion, An Taisce submit that the proposed scheme would be inconsistent with the proper planning and sustainable development of the area and would be contrary to the provisions of the Wicklow Town – Rathnew Development Plan 20013-2019 relating to the preservation of the character and the integrity of the built fabric of the historic town centre.

Please acknowledge our submission and advise us of any decision made in accordance with the DoEHLG Guidelines for Planning Authorities, June 2007.

Yours sincerely,

Tomás Bradley
Planning & Environmental Policy Officer
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