



## 1 CITY SQUARE/ ROYAL EXCHANGE

Alastair Adair From the University of Ulster and Patricia Friedman from the Cathedral Quarter Steering Group presented their vision for a new civic park and square at the junction of Donegall Street and York Street. Framed by St Anne's Cathedral and the new University Building this space has the potential to give a strong civic status to inner north Belfast and anchor the cultural corridor to the city centre. Proposals look at removing car parking and walls so the space is seen as one coherent place.

The Current Royal Exchange scheme does not take advantage of its location facing on to this new redefined space. The current proposals are based on pre-banking crisis thinking that retail shopping would drive our city centre regeneration. The scheme was developed before the University announced its intentions to move to its York Street campus. The scheme, despite gaining planning approval in September 2012, requires a total rethink in view of its new and changed context.



## 5 HIGH RISE HOLYLANDS

During the week of the winterschool research revealed that eleven apartment buildings within a ten minute walk of the University of Ulster have been given planning permission over the past few years. These total 1557 apartments with an average of twelve stories. The spectre of this coined the phrase "high rise Holylands" (the Holylands being an area of terraced housing near Queens University Belfast which has suffered major social problems of the past ten years due to the excessive unregulated amount of students renting property in the area.) It is now well recognised that student housing provision requires bespoke design and management. All the proposed apartments are in the private sector and the prospect of inappropriately designed blocks being rented to students in an uncontrolled manner could have a major negative impact on Belfast as opposed to the positive aspect public investment should bring.

## 2 UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

The University of Ulster have submitted their proposals for planning approval at the end of March 2012. A number of issues arise:

### Massing

The architects for the University suggest that massing of the proposed building references 'the new building height' of Belfast determined by recent planning approvals of apartment buildings in the surrounding area. We question if these blocks will ever be built and the validity of the setting of this new building height context. In view of the amount of empty land in the surrounding area, much of it government owned, we question the need for a building rising to eleven stories over much of its site mass. Currently public land is being released to facilitate University car-parking, this creates the precedent that other co-ordination is possible for civic benefit to address the problems mentioned.

### Orientation

The present proposals have their entrances facing Belfast City centre. These should also be orientated towards north Belfast, North Queens Street and potentially wrapping round onto Upper Donegall Street by the release of wasted public lands. At present the project physically and perceptually 'turns its back' on north Belfast neighbourhoods, acting as unshared space.

### Student Housing

The current scheme does not address the issue of student housing with real fears for the surrounding neighbourhoods if the private sector is left to speculate on this end of the market. During the week the name and fear of a "High Rise Holylands" evolved.

### Provision of Parking

The university supports sustainable modes of transport. What steps is the University taking to provide the sustainable modes of transport such as the new station at Gamble Street and avoid what we have witnessed in Titanic Quarter where planning conditions were not delivered? If coordinated action is not taken then sites around will be blighted by car parking to service one large singular building.



## 6 CLIFTON STREET

Clifton Street, a once fine civic vista is now a bleak stretch of road from Donegall Street to Carlisle Circus passing over the Westlink. Wrapping the new University Building round so that a small section of it faces on to Clifton Street would transform the beginning of the street and this overscaled road junction. Further up the street, building a 'living wall' shielding pedestrians from the noise and pollution of the Westlink traffic below would instantly change the experience for the pedestrian and cyclist. We suggest this as an early win for this section of the street. New buildings together with historic buildings being brought back into use could transform Clifton Street.

Many of the listed buildings along the corridor are well used from the Northern Whig building at the four corners, St Anne's Cathedral, St Patrick's Church and former School House and Clifton House, the Indian Community Centre and the Mater Hospital. Some are used occasionally such as the Orange Hall and others are empty and at risk such as the Assembly Rooms, North Street Arcade, the Carlisle Memorial Church, the former Synagogue, the Crumlin Road Court House and Gaol. The potential use of these buildings should be seen in the context of the £1000 million pound investments nearby.



## 3 NEIGHBOURHOOD SCHOOL

Adding to the activity around a new civic square is the idea of a new neighbourhood post primary school. At present many post primary pupils from our inner city neighbourhoods are bussed to schools in the suburbs of the city.

The draft programme for government seeks that by 2015, 22% of our post primary school children should be able to walk or cycle to school. A new school in the perceived neutral Cathedral Quarter would also quickly address the programme for governments commitment to ensure all children in Belfast have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015. This idea has gained support from a number of inner city neighbourhood groups and making education walkable in our city centre would show real leadership from a number of government bodies in striving towards a shared city.

The building of this school should be seen in parallel to the investment in the new university campus and delivering Belfast City Councils vision of a learning city.



## 7 GIRDWOOD

Girdwood is an area of publicly owned land behind the Crumlin Road Jail. A sketch plan of Girdwood was published by DSD as part of its EQIA report, this plan illustrates all the existing streets which bound the area being connected into the site and resolved as an extension of the city streets. In principle this seems like the correct approach. We have used this DSD sketch plan as the basis for a closer study of the site in its wider context.

Our Study area extends up the old Carnegie Library on the Oldpark Road as a key local landmark, plans exist to restructure this Oldpark/Crumlin Road road junction, however we believe this should not be completed as a roundabout. Roundabouts are road engineering solutions and have little place in remaking real streets and allowing good pedestrian access. At this junction and a new sense of urban place can be created that also frames a coherent civic entrance into the Girdwood area.

It is vital that Girdwood is also a new place for the whole city, a civic place near the potential of the historic jail and courthouse, because only in this way will it attract investment and jobs for the local areas. It is interesting that the Lanyon designs of the Jail and Courthouse exactly mirror the location of the Queens Lanyon building in the South.

Can Girdwood not be designed as streets and places of that quality?



## 4 INTERCHANGE AT YORK STREET

At the winterschool the DRD Road Service reported how they were progressing with the analysis of the four options displayed in June 2011. The Forum reported on their ongoing discussions with the Road Service and how they intended making a decision on the favoured option in June 2012 without any further consultation with the eighty groups and individuals who had responded to the exhibition of the options. The Forum reported they were seeking a meeting with the minister of the Department for Regional Development urging him to see this project as the potential to re-stitch the fractured pedestrian links from north Belfast to the city centre - an urban design opportunity and not a roads only project. The Forum, with assistance from UU students have worked up detailed plans and a large model showing a practical vision.

The Forum met with the minister and offered to work together with Road Service engineers to explore the best option for the people of north Belfast and the wider region. This offer was declined in June 2012 and the DRD intend making an announcement on their preferred option in early October 2012 following consultation with the DSD.



**COORDINATE + CONNECT**

The need for a local neighbourhood area plan for North Belfast

