

Dear Sirs/Madam,

Please accept this open letter as our comments on the above current planning applications whose numbers I cannot obtain now as your internet Public Access is down.

After Nirvana heights, the student 'Lego' building and the enigma of Victoria Circus Southend-on-Sea Council has a lot to prove when it comes to local design. Laudable effort has been made at City Beach even though there is difficulty with establishing shared space. Warrior Square too, is a really good improvement. Now a planning application for a new building at the pier head is in the public domain (see www.southend.gov.uk). But why is the Council so coy about its plans? Missing are perspective drawings that officers normally request from property developers, unless you are prepared to search deep into the Design & Access statement where four very small renderings hide away. All the other drawings and practically unintelligible so how does this help and engage the public? Unless there is a healthy public dialogue this building, good or bad, cannot be properly understood, criticised nor even embraced. Like the above mentioned schemes most people shall just have to wait and see what they get?

We therefore ask that the Council prolongs the consideration of this application and submits good sized CAD rendered perspective drawings to give the public the chance to fully understand what is proposed and properly participate in the planning application?

That said, the world famous site deserves something exceptional. We need it to be special. After the ravages of fire we are left with the steel structure, a deck and just memories. The canvas is blank so needs a new building language. The Council have proposed an angular twisted form which is an interesting, modern counterpoint to the rectilinear iron form of over one hundred years ago. This probably wasn't intended but it is also a small reference to the twisted wreckage of the historic fires (part of our history, like it or not). But the proposal has been cut back. Both the austerity squeeze and, supposedly, the ruddy turnstones have seen the project scaled down. The biggest loss, the fundamental loss is the removal of the rusted aesthetic of Corten steel. This made the competition winning design (see <http://en.white.se/>) work and gave it a warm, sheltering glow most appropriate to a pier pavilion. The sleek, sheer steel and glass would have beautifully referenced the Victorian iron pier in a very modern way and might have even been a masterpiece. We suggest that this is a fine approach to the conservation of the pier structure. Instead we are presented with the reduced cost, knocked down, perhaps all too typically Southend, fibreglass cladding which runs the high risk of looking like a giant caravan that washed up from Sheerness in a storm. The basic bitumen felt roof doesn't help dispel this image.

We all want to see the historic structure protected and given a vibrant community future. Clearly we all have to accept that economic vitality is essential and these are difficult times. But some cut backs destroy the original and its ability to succeed. This is the case here.

Unfortunately the floor plan is simply awful. If the overall appearance of the building is "sculpted by wind and wave" the interior is what the elements ignored: dire with almost accidental, space filling tables and chairs; a tiny 11m² kitchen; a tiny detached servery that won't work; just two male urinals stuck behind a door and only four female toilets; a domestic cleaners cupboardwe could go on. A large mixed use space and an artist's gallery are fine, hopeful and refreshing but the rest needs some serious design time. We would love to see a through the wall counter, serving people as they promenade – let the building easily open up.

We do particularly like the articulated steps-cum-seating, arranged either side of a performance space. This could work very well and maintaining the use of the timber deck material is both elegant and understated.

Given that we have a blank canvas we happily support in principle this brave modern solution, but only with the above reservations.

The Council will not refuse itself planning permission but must apply the most rigorous planning standards to our landmark, identity structure when they are both applicant and planning authority. Are they brave enough to restore the Corten steel or give themselves the temporary consent that they would give a developer in the same position for a plastic version of a better building. It was after all the Corten which was a key part of the competition winning entry! But if a plastic version is the temporary stepping stone to a better building in future then again we support this.

And whatever ends up being built, please will the Council realise the pier's huge potential to boat traffic on the Thames.

Andy Atkinson
Chairman – Milton Conservation Society