

Memo

14 October 2015

To: Hannah Thompson – Planner, Central and Islands Planning

From: George Farrant – Principal Heritage Advisor

**Subject: Plan Modification79 – Queen Elizabeth II Square
Heritage Unit Comments**

1. Introduction

1.1 The following outlines reactions from council's Heritage Unit to this proposed plan change application that seeks to rezone Queen Elizabeth Square in Lower Queen Street from Public Open Space to City Centre zone.

1.2 It will be appreciated that while direct heritage concerns are focal to this unit's area of concerns, the total effects of the proposed action do have impacts on heritage, but also on closely related issues such as historic urban amenity, and the urban design qualities of a precinct with historic values.

1.3 It is also axiomatic that while the Plan Change proposal relates to the square only, it is inevitable that some discussion needs to occur about the current square's origins in the earlier territorial developmental absorption of the former Little Queen Street that ran from Customs Street to Quay Street into the current 'Downtown' development, with a compensatory area-for-area grant of the western bay of the current square into the public realm; and whether the totality of the new proposal maintains this sense of urban space equity.

2. The Current Queen Elizabeth Square

2.1 As a key part of a very limited (and inadequate) sequence of downtown public spaces, QE Square has evolved since its creation in the early 1980s into a moderately well-tailored public space, distinct from street-spaces and from nearby shared spaces, largely because of its reasonably expansive area, and its designed nature following the Britomart-era changes.

2.2 The square in this form acts as a relief from the linear and relatively confined channels of lower Queen Street and Quay Street. In this way it forms a larger urban 'breathing-space' at the foot of town, immediately before the harbour edge is encountered. Functionally this is a valuable urban asset, particularly in relation to the the very busy pedestrian commuter traffic flows to and from the harbour ferries at peak hours.

2.3 Although (as predicted prior to the creation of the square and the 1 Queen Street tower) it has a notably unfortunate circumstance in south-westerly winds in the northwest corner, the remainder of the space is a comfortable and well-used space, especially in the period up to early afternoon when it remains sunny on a good day. This access to sunlight is protected in the district plan(s).

2.4 The Square also provides in its current form exemplary vistas of the Ferry Building, and particularly (from the western side) an axial view of the grand symmetrical façade of the former Chief Post Office, now fronting the Britomart Station. Both of these key heritage buildings are handsomely served by this circumstance, as is the square itself – the relationship is a classic one of urban synergy. The prospect of the former CPO is a particularly valued one.

2.5 In this form it has been possible to create a genuine sense of public open space distinct from the co-opted street nature of most shared spaces. This effect has been a result of a rare opportunity to constructively expand existing public space.

3. The disposal, rezoning, closure, and re-use proposal for the western bay of QE Square

3.1 It is understood that the disposal and proposed return of the western part of the current functional square to the Precinct development will see its resumption of building coverage, in return for sheltered public laneways within the development, providing through-site-links to an equivalent level of urban pedestrian and spatial amenity to the replaced area of the square.

3.2 It is not clearly evident from the documentation comprising this application – at least as available to the writer – that the effects of construction over the west bay of the square is compensated in urban amenity terms by the scale, width, and nature of the Precinct Laneways.

3.3 Although as noted in 1.3 above the Plan Change issue is statutorily separate to the Precinct intentions bordering the current square on its west edge, in a practical urban view the design of what may subsequently occupy the closed square is particularly important.

3.4 The relevant concerns, not answered in the proposal, are these:

3.4.1 The offered precinct public walkways/laneways require a permanent open space nature as they traverse the area of the closed square, and have a plan geometry and transitional expanded space as they exit onto Queen Street space on their east end to celebrate and provide for a retained expansive axial vista of the former CPO facade;

3.4.2 Assurances (subject to ongoing consultation) that these walkways/laneways are of adequate widths as they traverse the closed square, and assurances that they will not become taken over by retail of similar uses;

3.4.3 The designed urban form of the eastern exit of the offered laneways onto the Queen Street space shall provide a celebratory, expansive (widening) and preferably symmetrical exit, precisely on the key central axis of the former CPO, so as to heighten a constructive revealing relationship between the Precinct development walkways/laneway and the CPO across the reduced residual public space.

3.4.4 The hours of opening of the walkways/laneways shall be agreed such as to ensure unconstrained public access at reasonable hours – in comparison to the 24/7 nature of the public space to be closed;

3.4.5 Adequate shelter and commuter access shall be provided for the occasionally heavy commuter pedestrian traffic along the west side of Queen Street, provided this does not in itself compromise other conditions as defined herein;

3.4.6 The effect on existing views of the Ferry Building and other harbourside icons are to be specifically addressed in the subsequent design.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The application deals appropriately with potential archaeological matters.

4.2 If the concerns noted above were to be ignored, there would inevitably be a palpable sense of public loss and disenfranchisement in the exercise of the proposed Plan Change/Modification.

4.3 The heritage matters would be appropriately addressed if the outcomes and issues outlined above were applied through the provisions of the proposed plan change.



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