

Planning Applications Nos: 09/02261/AR 09/02260/FUL

New Look
11 Southgate Street
Bath
BA1 1AQ

Bath Heritage Watchdog strongly objects to this proposal.

When determining all applications for new shop fronts and signage we ask that the following guidelines are observed.

The context, or general setting, of Bath should be understood, respected and reflected in any proposed work to shop fronts.

Design, materials and workmanship should be of the highest quality.

Any proposed or altered shop front should be historically credible.

House Styles which do not meet the requirements of style, lettering, materials and signs are not acceptable. Multiples should be required to adapt their proposals to the special conditions of the city.

Standard designs of any sort are not acceptable. They should be specifically designed for their context.

Bath City Council. Bath Shop-fronts. Guidelines for Design and Conservation 1993

Introduction

This is the third of a series of major high street retailers shop installations in Bath's major flagship retail development and any hopes that this would be an improvement on the previous two are firmly dashed against its mock-Georgian façade. New Look may be the name of the store but it is 'same old' as far as design goes.

However, this application brings a new element to the equation for this is the first that will be visible from outside the SouthGate complex itself, and therefore the first which will directly impact on the Conservation Area. Not only that but this one will be possibly the only one that will affect the setting of a listed building, because across the road lies the Grade II listed colonnaded neo-classical splendour of the Forum Cinema. It may well also impact on the setting of the small late Grade II listed Georgian remnant of Southgate Street.

Unfortunately the total failure of the Development Control Committee to see behind the subtle rewording of and interpretation of the amended shop front guide, and the failure to

strictly condition this guide, has led us to this “High Street, Anytown” application and ensures this inappropriate design will not be the last in the current line of corporate shock-fests.

Design

At this stage we would point out these comments relate to the design of the shop front and its appropriateness for a Conservation Area in a World Heritage Site and to its effect on the setting of the listed buildings. We have no objection to the company occupying the premises or to the installation of the plant. Indeed, if this company had proposed a design in keeping with its heritage-style surroundings, we might have supported it. There are also no concerns regarding the interior fit-out except where it impacts by being visible such as the first floor windows.

A quick glance at the Design & Access Statement gives an indication of the applicant's lack of knowledge regarding the style of SouthGate, and their words “ *The unit is situated in a prominent shopping park location*” and their claim that the principle aim of the design are to fit out the shell to “*the New Look corporate identity*” are a certain indicator that what is proposed will not be fit for Bath, let alone a Conservation Area in a World Heritage Site. Corporate identity ensures a shop front that would be the same whether Aberdeen or Andover, Perth or Peterborough. The High Street clone is confirmed by the supplied photograph.

The Tenant Fit Out Guide gives further interesting information and gives a further indicator that what is being created at SouthGate is an independent and autonomous enclave that neither respects nor adheres to local or national planning policies or guidance when it comes to shop fronts. The design policy states all this is subject to strict guidelines agreed with B&NES and environmental heritage yet perplexingly the reasoned advice of both the Conservation Officer and Urban Design Officer, who both stated the revised shop front guide was unacceptable, was totally ignored along with the comments of third party objectors. The desperation to grant permission regardless of advice or Local Plan policies was apparent in the decisions for the first applications. The list of permitted and not permitted materials has some novel and surprising choices on both lists but the large majority would be considered wholly inappropriate in this location. This detailed critique is important to show that this stylistically inappropriate design approach is being actively promoted and encouraged, and what SouthGate might have been is being destroyed in the process. Bath will be the poorer because of this short-sightedness.

If the applicants are not aware of the sensitivity of the location and are not encouraged to adapt their proposals to suit a heritage environment, then we should not be surprised by the resultant mediocrity that is submitted.

On this score these proposals do not disappoint.

First Floor All Elevations

Starting with the first floor windows on all elevations, the obscuring of these by black laminated boards is totally unacceptable. This 'blind look' will have a detrimental effect on the character of the Conservation Area and the setting of the listed buildings. This 'blacked out' look on the Dorchester Street elevation will also be visible from the southern slopes. The blocking of the windows will also result in the loss of natural light inside and unnecessarily high levels of internal illumination, which will damage sustainability.

Ground Floor North

The ground floor west elevation sees the rusticated arch filled with glass and there is to be a aluminium stall riser and illuminated signage filling the top of the arch. The stall riser should be of ashlar and the window frame of timber or anodised metal. A fanlight should be installed in the top of the arch and the lettering incorporated into the field below. The fascias should be painted timber with fret cut wooden or anodised metal lettering. There is no requirement for the illumination. This is a busy pedestrian thoroughfare with more than adequate levels of illumination. As the Tenants Fit Out Guide states the site will remain open for pedestrians 24 hrs a day, is it the applicant's intention that their illumination will also be on?

If despite the lack of need the illumination is permitted, it should be with a condition that it is controlled by a timer and is switched off outside the centre's opening hours.

We note the applicants are adopting a new trend of installing illumination behind the glass. This is a way of circumventing the system in order to negate the requirement for advertising consent by claiming the signage is internal. We therefore fully expect the AR application to be considered to have deemed consent and withdrawn, but again would want illumination close to the glass to be controlled by a timer. Bath is a low luminance city, and it would be uncharacteristic to allow parts of SouthGate to create light pollution.

The bronze manifestations are also not considered appropriate for a Conservation Area and appear to be merely a way of disguising the inability to fill the void by providing a timber or metal frame of commensurate quality.

Ground Floor West

The theme is continued around to the west elevation arch so the comments are as those relating to Ground Floor North. The next four spaces between the banded rusticated columns are again weakly treated: nothing offered other than plate glass. Illuminated signs and the signage zones are filled by floral designed vinyl wallpaper. It is totally bland and devoid of inspiration. The stall risers should be of ashlar or anodised metal and would benefit from a increase in height. A quality frame of timber or metal should

be installed. The main New Look logo should be on a timber background with the letters in fret cut wood or anodised metal. Instead of the insipid graphics that look rather reminiscent of the designs applied to Smart cars, something made of faceted or etched glass could be considered.

At this point is a convenient reminder that yards away lies a listed building: The Forum cinema by W. H. Watkins & E. Morgan Wilmot c 1933-4. Its neo-classical façade, as with SouthGate, offering deference to the *genius loci* yet it incorporates Art-Aeco foyers. It begs the question where have this generations contributors to this genre gone. By virtue of their stylistically bereft New Look design these proposals will have an adverse impact on its setting.

Materials

Materials are again not those normally considered acceptable in a Conservation Area. Painted aluminium, chrome and stainless steel and vinyl are proposed. Chrome and the large areas of glass will also be highly reflective.

Conclusion

This application proposes a shop front that will not continue Bath's fine heritage of this genre. It is just another "High Street Anytown" design and another weak declaration of corporate supremacy. In terms of style materials and illumination and in its current form it fails to comply with Policies BH1, BH6, BH17, BH19, BH21, BH22, D2 and D4 of the Local Plan and with guidance contained in Planning Policy PPG15. Therefore the application should be refused.

As this is the first application that is visible from the wider Conservation Area and impacts on the setting of two listed buildings, the Council's own shop front guidance must be a material consideration when determining this application.