

Preservation of Priory town character keynote of architect's plans

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IMAGINE yourself in a fairy tale. You walk to Christchurch High Street, and fall asleep for three years.

It won't be a magic prince towering over you when you wake, but the new face of Christchurch.

The big question is, will it be supermarkets and more supermarkets, traffic jams, flashing lights, concrete masses and garish colours?

Or will Christchurch have retained its old charm as it moves forward?

Now is the time that this will be decided, and if Gordon Robbins has anything to do with it, the original character of the town will not be destroyed by the new developments.

And, fortunately, Mr. Robbins does have something to do with it.

He's been described as the architect of the new Christchurch and although he's not altogether happy with that label it's not too far from the truth.

IT'S ENOUGH

Already he has been responsible for the design of the Mudeford Sailing Club, the Old People's flats in Wick Lane, and for the lay-out of the new Dolphin site now being built in Church Street and Wick Lane.

The Development Control Committee is about to consider his plans for the controversial Fountain site, at the top of the High Street. They have already seen, and informally discussed, these plans, and with minor reservations are happy with them.

And his plans for holiday units in Willow Way are currently under discussion.

Is this the end?

"I think this is enough for me," says Mr. Robbins although he says that his ultimate aim in the town would be to design a replacement for the Post Office arcade site.

"But that's very much in the future," he says.

Gordon Robbins came to Christchurch from Stratford-on-Avon nine years ago.

He was born and brought up in Birmingham, and worked in Stratford for five years before moving to Highcliffe.

His ideas on retirement are different from most people's.

"I think it's the most stupid thing to uproot in your sixties and move away from your friends and environment. I think you should decide where you want to retire, and aim to move there before you are 30. That's what I did."

"I first met my wife while I was on holiday here, in Highcliffe. We met a few yards from where we now live.

"When we got married I was working in Birmingham and my wife didn't want to live there. So we moved out to Stratford, which we enjoyed tremendously.

"This area, around Christchurch is the only place we have found where we would prefer to live.

"So we moved down. We intend to stay living in Highcliffe until the children (three of them) leave the nest. Then we'll move into Christchurch, into Avonbank."

Avonbank is the elegant riverside house which is now the office of the Cheshire Robbins Design Group, Mr. Robbins' company. His late partner, Mr. Cheshire, was killed in an accident two years ago and Mr. Robbins has kept the company name

His office overlooks the Waterloo Stream and he thinks it is an almost perfect place to work.

"It was by very definite choice that we moved here, and its here that we intend to end our days," he said.

DEEPER INTEREST

"So perhaps I have an even deeper interest in what happens to the town in the next few years.

"I think that Christchurch has slumbered for the last 10 years — to its cost. A town cannot just stand still and mark time.

"But because it has been slow it has been able to learn valuable lessons in what not to do, from what happened around us.

"I don't advocate modern architecture ad lib — but it is the 70's and architecture should reflect this."

One can't re-create a Georgian or Medieval town in 1970, and really I don't think anyone would want to. The front might have looked very nice, but the backs weren't so good."

"I think that both recent and past planning history has a lot to teach us.

"I try to create a time and a physical scale in my work. Scale is very important to me," he said.

TIME SCALE

In the past Gordon Robbins' designs have been called "conglomerated" and it has been said that his design for the Fountain site looks as though it happened before planning permission was necessary.

But he doesn't regard this as altogether an adverse criticism.

"There has been a visible attempt on my part to create time scale and a physical scale on the site. I wanted it to look not like a brand new development, but as though it might have happened over the years.

"We have tried to design small shop units, and not a building which could easily be converted into the supermarket type of shop."

"But one's priorities are modified by experience. I wouldn't, for example, do the same thing as the Dolphin again in the town."

If Mr. Robbins' plans for the Fountain site are passed, he won't be designing any more of Christchurch's major projects for a time.

"This is enough. It could otherwise lead to sterility," he said. "I don't think any one architect should design too much of a town.

"That is why I have deliberately employed another architect for the Cheshire Robbins Design Group.

"If I were to carry on designing architecture in Christchurch it would destroy the very thing that I have tried to achieve from the beginning — a town of varied character."

What does he see for the future of the town, after the Fountain is completed — which he estimates will be in about two years?

"I think Bridge Street and Castle Street are the most attractive streets in the town, more so than the High Street, because they are broken up by the bridges. They have more character."

"Now Christchurch is one of the most attractive and picturesque towns for miles around. It has the potential to be THE most attractive, and I hope it will move that way, and not away from it."

"I'm very optimistic about the outcome of Christchurch it still has a great deal of untapped potential. As long as it is handled carefully....."

“And I make one demand of architecture—that it delights. We don't send anything out of this office unless it delights us, and then we hope it will delight other people.

Not everyone of course. That would be impossible.

“A surprise element is an important factor in any landscape. But it must not be a surprise of horror; it must be a surprise of delight.”