



Land at;
Former St. Tydfil's Hospital,
Upper Thomas Street,
Thomastown,
Merthyr Tydfil

Design Vision Statement

Project Ref: 2447

20 July 2020

A large, stylized green leaf graphic in the bottom left corner, composed of several overlapping leaf shapes in different shades of green.

Architecture
Civil Engineering
Structural Engineering
Urban Design
Transport

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Section 1: Introduction

This Design Vision Statement has been prepared by Spring Design in support of a full planning application to be submitted to Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council in relation to the following development site:

Former St. Tydfil's Hospital,
Upper Thomas Street,
Thomas Town,
Merthyr Tydfil

Spring Design was appointed by Coronado Developments to develop revised proposals following pre-application advice received from the council in September 2019 in respect of a previous design proposal, which had been submitted by another architectural practice.

Whilst the pre-application advice provided by the council confirmed support in principle for residential development on the site, it also raised numerous concerns about the site layout and highlighted specific areas for improvement. These concerns are summarised below:

1. No details provided for the conversion of the existing St. Tydfil's Hospital entrance block, a Grade II listed building, or its relationship to the rest of the site
2. Proposed street frontages are dominated by parked cars. Parking should be off-street, to the sides and rear of properties
3. Poor relationship with Cemetery Park, particularly to the north and south
4. Poor relationship (overlooking) with the rear garden of 5 Union Place
5. Poor relationship to context – very few south-facing gardens
6. Site layout to be reviewed to see if it is possible to front dwellings onto Taff Vale Court to the north and woodland to the east
7. The setting of the listed building is harmed by the felling of the TPO tree and the large extent of car parking immediately adjacent to the listed building. A smaller, landscaped parking area and amenity space was suggested to the north of the listed building
8. Poor relationship between the proposed, higher level amenity area and the site.
Specific comments included:
 - a. Accessible but isolated amenity area with no natural surveillance and a high risk of anti-social behaviour
 - b. Poor surveillance of vehicular and pedestrian routes to the amenity area
 - c. Significant overlooking of rear gardens of proposed dwellings from the retained, existing vehicular access route
 - d. A suggestion to explore a central vehicular and pedestrian route, overlooked by new houses, to the higher plateau
 - e. A suggestion to remove the existing vehicular ramp in order to improve the rear gardens of properties along the eastern boundary
9. The expectation that pennant stone reclaimed from the site will be incorporated into boundary walls and elevations of new houses
10. Impact on neighbouring properties and the need for site sectional studies

This document will therefore demonstrate how Spring Design has addressed the concerns outlined above by means of a rigorous site and contextual analysis to inform a coherent design vision for this important town centre development site.

It will also illustrate how subsequent collaborative engagement with the council has resulted in a final proposal that exhibits strong place-making characteristics and which will deliver a highly attractive new residential neighbourhood inspired by, and firmly rooted in, the architectural heritage of Thomastown.

Section 2: Site Description

2.1 Location

The proposed development site occupies the site of the former St Tydfil's Hospital, of which only the entrance block, part of which is a grade II listed building constructed as part of the original Union Workhouse, remains.

Located to the east of Merthyr Tydfil town centre, the site is of irregular shape and bounded by a number of different character areas;

- Thomastown conservation area immediately to the south and west of the southern portion of the site
- A densely wooded slope along the length of the eastern boundary, separating the site from, and rising up to, Thomastown Recreation Ground and Park
- Late 20th century residential development consisting of social housing flats in Taff Vale Court to the north
- The Old Cemetery Park to the west and whose northern, eastern and southern boundaries are enveloped by the site

2.2 Access

Vehicular access to the site is currently from Upper Thomas Street via a forecourt to the retained Grade II listed building. On the northern side of the forecourt, near the overgrown railings separating it from Union Place is listed statue, dedicated to Sir W.T. Lewis, Lord Merthyr. On the southern side of the forecourt, a mature tree is enclosed within railings on a dwarf stone wall and appears to be part of a separate demise but is within the site boundary.

Access to the interior of the site is afforded by an opening in the non-listed portion of the retained hospital entrance building, beyond which the rest of the hospital buildings have been demolished and piles of pennant stone from the demolished buildings extensively cover the site.

Pedestrian access was previously provided to the hospital site from The Old Cemetery. Whilst the openings into the site have been blocked, the paths leading to them from the park are still in existence.

2.3 Site Topography

The site is generally fairly level and typically falls from north to south at a gradient of 1:54, whilst falls from east to west are more specific to each of the 4 distinct zones into which the site is divided by the geometry of its irregular shape;

- The southern zone, behind the listed building and bounding both The Old Cemetery's southern edge and Thomastown conservation area to the south, which has a typical east-west gradient of 1:54. Union Street, to the south is set at a level that is typically some 2.5 metres below that of the site.
- The central zone, which bounds both The Old Cemetery's eastern edge and the retaining structures separating it from the raised plateau to the east and which has a typical east-west gradient of 1:7
- The northern zone, which bounds both The Old Cemetery's northern edge and Taff Vale Court to the north and which has a typical east-west gradient of 1:34
- The raised plateau, the area formerly served by the ramped access road from the southern zone, which sits typically an abrupt 6 metres or so above and to the east of the central zone and has a typical east-west gradient of 1:11. This area was previously used as a car park and remains surfaced in tarmac.

2.4 Site Boundary Structures, Trees and Vegetation

Boundary structures vary widely around the perimeter of the site but can be broadly summarised as follows:

- The entrance forecourt from Upper Thomas Street is bounded by Victorian railings on dwarf stone walls and by the retained listed building
- The western and southern boundaries of the southern zone consist of a variety of masonry boundary walls to the rear gardens of properties on Upper Thomas Street and the lane that runs from Union Street along the southern site boundary.
- The eastern boundary of the southern and central zones consists of large stone and concrete retaining structures above which rise dense woodland and the upper plateau, respectively
- Although a brick wall separates the woodland to the east from the northern zone, the site legal boundary is set further back within the former hospital site and so no physical structure currently exists along the eastern boundary of the northern zone
- Chain link fencing forms the majority of the boundary between the site and the gardens of Taff Vale Court
- A concrete and brick wall runs along the junction of the northern and western boundaries of the northern zone before giving way to a steel fence for the remainder of the western boundary
- Steel, highway style railings on a low brick wall form the boundary between the site and The Old Cemetery Park on all three sides

Extensive woodland rises above the site along the length of its eastern boundary and forms a well-defined backdrop to views from the west. Within the site itself exist a small number of fair-to-poor quality trees in the south-west corner but most notably a high quality sycamore, benefitting from a Tree Preservation Order, also exists closer to the listed building. Two ornamental cherries of fair quality, along with a mature beech of the same physiological condition frame the forecourt approach from Upper Thomas Street.

Section 3: Constraints and Opportunities

This section should be read in conjunction with the appended Constraints and Opportunities Plan.

3.1 Constraints

The principal site constraints can be summarised as follows:

1. There is only one possible vehicular access route into the site and as access is currently via an underpass within the non-listed section of the existing building, this will need to be demolished in order to develop the site
2. Following demolition, the residual route from Upper Thomas Street into the site remains very constrained
3. Irregular shape with access at southern extremity
4. The setting of the listed building
5. Proximity of residential properties to the west and south of the site on Upper Thomas Street and Union Street and to the north on Taff Vale Court
6. Significant drop in level from the site to properties on Union Street
7. Existing retaining structures on the eastern boundary
8. 6 metre level difference between the central zone and the upper plateau
9. Access to upper plateau
10. Proximity of extensive woodland to development site (future algae growth on buildings)
11. Relationship with the park including access points and level differences

3.1 Opportunities

The principal opportunities presented by the site can be summarised as follows:

1. Enhancing the setting of the listed building through the creation of arrival squares either side of it in the form of an improved entrance forecourt and a new green focussed on the retained TPO sycamore
2. Creation of a genuine relationship between the development and the park by means of:
 - a. Development addressing the park with frontage
 - b. Pedestrian access between the development and the park
3. Creation of a visual relationship between the park, the development and the upper plateau
4. Creation of a dedicated biodiversity/ecology zone within the upper plateau
5. Restoration of the historic and contextual links between the site and the Thomastown Conservation Area

Section 4: Urban Context

This section should be read in conjunction with the appended Architectural Context Photographic Study.

4.1 General Contextual Relationships

Occupying an awkwardly shaped plot at the foot of the steep, wooded embankment that rises to Thomastown Park and Recreation Ground, and with the Old Cemetery park constraining its central zone, the application site is somewhat divorced from the pattern of development that has developed around it.

Just as Thomastown Park is separated from the site to the east, so the town centre commercial buildings of High Street to the west are physically and visually separated from the northern zone of the site by another steep, wooded embankment and the rear lane environment of Tramroadside North, resulting in no obvious relationship between the site and this part of the town centre. Similarly, the late 20th century development of flats at Taff Vale Court to the north turns its back on the application site and is at odds with the overall grain of historic development in Merthyr, exhibiting a plethora of inappropriate, mis-matched architectural styles and details on buildings that are set either side of a standard cul-de-sac that is in turn dominated by car parking.

Even to the south of the site, the 2.5 metre retaining wall that terminates and dominates the end of Union Street marks a clear separation between the conservation area and the application site.

However, the only possible vehicular access route to the site is from Upper Thomas Street and the Thomastown Conservation Area to the south.

Although the Tramroadside cottages date from the late 18th century and the Thomastown Villas some time later, the majority of the conservation area was developed in the Georgian style from the 1840s onwards and named for Dr William Thomas, a prominent Merthyr magistrate of the early 1800s, who had owned the estate and permitted the beginning of what would become one of the first purpose-built residential suburbs in Merthyr Tydfil.

The historic and architectural importance of the Thomastown Conservation Area is summarised in the MTCBC Character Appraisal and Management Plan with the following statement:

“The Thomastown Conservation Area includes some of the earliest examples of planned residential growth of Merthyr Tydfil for the working class, middle class and upper class who benefitted from the industrial growth of the town in the 1800s. The area also includes key sites with national importance such as the Penydarren Tramroad, the Former Synagogue and the Former Miners’ Welfare Hall.”

4.2 Pattern of Development

The Character Appraisal goes on to identify the following as key characteristics of the pattern of development within the conservation area:

- *“Georgian and Victorian residential suburb interspersed with listed religious and community buildings.*
- *Distinctive architectural style that is repeated throughout the area on residential dwellings.*
- *Significant number of narrow alleyways giving access to rear of properties.*
- *Set on slope of hill overlooking town centre.*
- *Smaller, older properties nearer the town centre and larger, newer properties further away and uphill from the town centre.*
- *Rectangular grid street pattern with longer streets following the contours of the sloping land.*
- *Location of various distinctive and important buildings and events with national importance such as the Penydarren Tramroad and the oldest surviving synagogue building in Wales.*
- *Densely developed and lack of public open space within the Conservation Area. Not particularly well connected to parkland surrounding the Conservation Area to the east and north-east”*

4.2 Architectural Design

As it is known to contain one of the largest groups of late Georgian and early Victorian architecture (both of which are expressed in a classical idiom), the Character Appraisal also identifies the following as key characteristics of the design and detail of Georgian buildings within the conservation area:

- Distinctive, uniform, Georgian inspired style
- Flat fronted facades generally without bay windows
- Generally built on or close to back of footpath
- Heavy-set detailing around doorways
- Some double fronted properties
- Repeated, similar door-surround moulded features, such as simplified pilastered doorcases
- Prominent buildings at corner locations
- The majority of properties are finished in coloured render, usually, whites, creams and pastel shades

The characteristics outlined above are illustrated by and expanded on by the appended photographic contextual studies.

Section 5: Design Vision

This section should be read in conjunction with the appended Contemporary Housing Design Precedents sheet.

The design vision for the site is inspired by both the townscape opportunities it offers; particularly those presented by the retention of the listed building and the proximity of The Old Cemetery Park, and by the Georgian architectural heritage of Thomastown.

5.1 Place-making

The place-making vision anticipates the new arrival squares outlined in Section 3; thereby enhancing the setting of the listed building through the creation of an improved entrance forecourt and a new green focussed on the retained TPO sycamore.



The spatial prominence thereby afforded to the listed building will not only set the context for a hierarchy of development within the application site itself but its visual prominence will also be reinforced in relation to the park and the wider Thomastown Conservation Area.



In the manner of the conservation area, the pattern of development will largely follow the same north-south contour at the foot of the wooded embankment that forms the eastern boundary of the site and will ensure maximum connectivity within a self-contained site by avoiding the use of culs-de-sac.



The streets created by such an arrangement will benefit from corner buildings, which aside from maximising natural surveillance, can be used to create interest, and from the creation of long architectural vistas, which can be terminated by appropriately sized and ordered properties.



Properties are to be predominantly situated at or near the back of footpath, which whilst preventing the creation of long terraces in the style of the conservation area does have the advantage of ensuring that car parking can be accommodated on-plot and largely out of sight at the side or rear of properties. The occasional introduction of properties that are set a little further back from the highway will help to soften the streetscape through the opportunity for more planting



In addition to the opportunity presented by the listed building, the site also benefits from the proximity of Old Cemetery Park, which is envisioned as forming the focus for the development. In order to really strengthen the relationship between the new residential neighbourhood and this important piece of public realm, new homes will therefore face onto the park on each of its three boundaries with the site and footpath links will be restored, reintegrating the park as the green heart of Thomastown.



5.2 Architectural Vision

The architectural vision for the proposed residential development is clearly inspired by the Georgian architecture of Thomastown, drawing from a simple palette of familiar architectural features prevalent in the adjacent conservation area but reinterpreting and simplifying them in a contemporary idiom. This is an approach that lends itself well to the rational geometry of classically inspired styles such as Georgian and early Victorian.

So, in the manner of the conservation area, new homes will be characterised by the following architectural features:

- A distinctive and uniform, Georgian inspired style
- The use of symmetry and order to unify the character of the neighbourhood
- A hierarchy of vertically proportioned window styles and sizes, with narrower windows used on upper storeys
- Flat fronted facades generally without bay windows
- Houses generally built on or close to back of footpath
- Some double fronted properties
- Strongly defined doorways with the use of repeated, similar door-surround features
- Larger houses with traverse gables at corner locations
- The use of gables to add interest to the roofscape and add prominence to the front of buildings



Adopting this simple, Georgian Merthyr inspired approach for the new homes will give the scheme a unique character without excessive or pastiche detailing. It will also help reflect the Thomastown tradition of the residential properties being designed in the Georgian style in contrast to the larger, landmark buildings that were built in the more ornate, Gothic inspired Victorian style a little later. Apart from the entrance block to the former St Tydfil's Hospital and Union Workhouse, such buildings include the former synagogue at the top of Church Street, amongst others.

Whilst the houses of the conservation area are uniformly rendered, the proximity and density of existing, mature trees on the eastern and western boundaries of the site leads us to believe that there is a high risk of future visual degradation of extensive render finishes as a result of algae growth.

We therefore consider it prudent to use a high-quality clay facing brick for the majority of the external wall surfaces on the new development and although it is not a feature of the Thomastown conservation area, the use of brick is entirely compatible with the Georgian stylistic approach and is prevalent in other towns and cities where Georgian architecture is common.

Indeed, the success of this approach is demonstrated by the precedent images of recent, award winning housing projects identified on the appended sheet of Contemporary Housing Design Precedents.

However, subject to available quantities of suitable stone, and making subtle reference to the early Georgian stone workers cottages of Tramroadside, we also propose to use reclaimed stone from the site for the front elevations of the properties in the immediate vicinity of the listed building and intend to accent both the brick and stone with the use of render on selected properties and for the door surround features throughout the site. These render features will draw from a similar colour palette to the conservation area, employing white, cream, grey, pale blue and pale green renders to provide variety whilst ensuring architectural unity is preserved.



Together with the associated 3-dimensional imagery, the Materials Distribution Plan submitted with the application illustrates where the brick, stone and render is to be used within the site to create small areas of individual character.

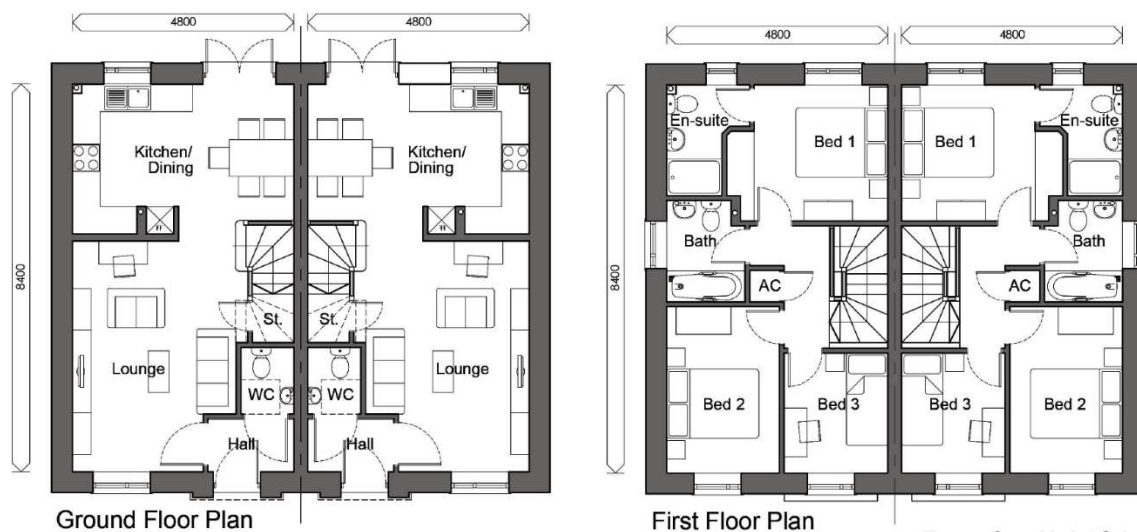
Front doors are illustrated as being IG Doors HNG2L GRP style doors, which is a fully Secured by Design and Approved Document Q (Wales) GRP front door, with simple,

contemporary styling that fits well with the theme. Different colour doors, with colours carefully chosen to complement the render door surround colours will add further interest to the development.

Fibre cement slates, together with dark grey upvc windows and fascias, and black rainwater goods will complete the contemporary take on the Georgian residential architecture of Merthyr.



Finally, in terms of house type plans, we've adopted a modern, open-plan living approach to internal layouts wherever possible, which provides an enhanced feeling of space in smaller properties such as the compact B and C types.

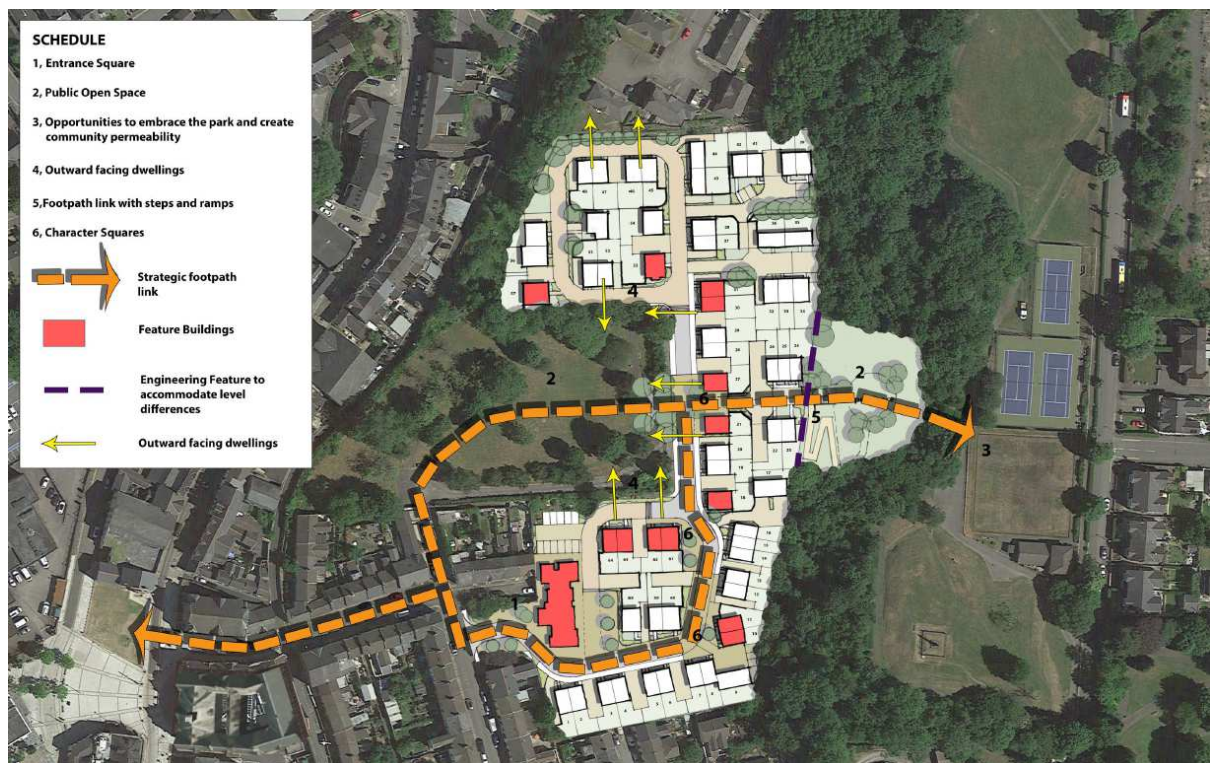


Section 6: Design Development

From the outset of its appointment, Spring Design has engaged in an open and collaborative dialogue with the council in an iterative design process.

The site layouts below illustrate the process.

1. Our initial design hypothesis for an approach to the site layout in response to the pre-application comments provided by the council for the scheme by the client's previous architect was submitted to the council in December 2019:



The following design aspirations are already clearly evident at this stage:

- The creation of new arrival spaces around the listed building
- A development pattern that respects the site contours and existing urban grain
- Creating a strong relationship between the park, the development and the upper plateau
- Parking at the side or behind buildings
- Improved relationship with Taff Vale Court and northern boundary
- Improved relationship with eastern boundary
- Improved relationship with 5 Upper Thomas Street
- Minimising the need for culs-de-sac
- Creating vistas and points of interest within the site

At a meeting in February 2020, the council broadly welcomed the general approach and improvements made over the previously submitted proposals. A positive, design workshop-style discussion resulted in further enhancements, specifically addressing the following points:

- Improved north-south vista termination on main access road
- Improved relationship with northern boundary
- Adopted route provided to upper plateau (at this stage details had not been explored)
- Improved focus on TPO tree and parking arrangement around listed building



As detailed engineering design work developed, it became apparent that engineering constraints would have an impact on the layout along its eastern boundary. The existence of a trunk sewer, revised legal boundaries and the condition of existing retaining structures all had an impact on the next iteration that was submitted to the council for review. By this stage, general arrangement proposals for the conversion and extension of the listed building, along with house type plans and elevations had also been developed and submitted together with the site plan, which is illustrated on the following page.



Whilst acknowledging that site topography resulted in a highly unsatisfactory arrangement for physical access to the upper plateau and concluding that any link should be purely visual, council feedback in relation to the layout above also expressed concern that the site layout could still be strengthened in certain areas, specifically:

- The relationship with the park along its eastern edge
- The relationship between the listed building and the new public space and houses to the east
- Avoiding the use of flats over garages (FoGs)
- Some minor points of detail in relation to house type design

This feedback was addressed positively by Spring Design and further design work was undertaken to improve some of the place-making aspects of the site layout.

It soon became apparent that the desire for a larger and better structured space to the east of the listed building would necessitate a more comprehensive review of the rest of the layout, as viability concerns dictated that any loss of new homes in one part of the site would need to be recovered elsewhere.

The resulting layout is illustrated on the following page and was discussed in detail at an online design review with the council on 16th June 2020.

- A dedicated bio-diversity/ecology area on the upper plateau to be potentially accessed from the existing footpath network in the same way as the existing woodland.

In addition to the site layout improvements outlined above, some minor points of detail pertaining to the design of the houses was also discussed and changes subsequently made in preparation for the application.

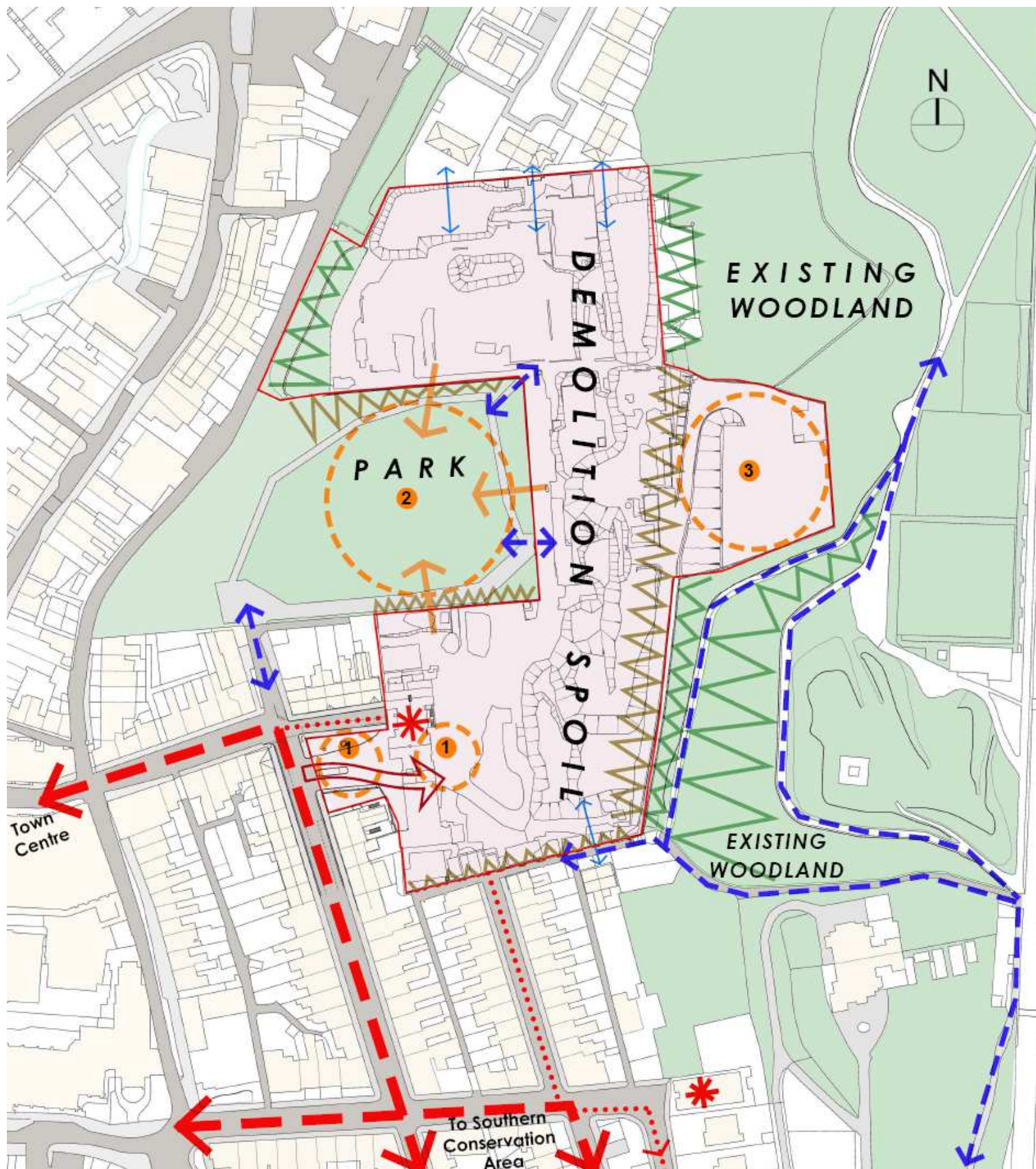
We believe that the dialogue with the council planning department has been extremely positive and provides clear evidence of how a rigorous contextual analysis, followed by a strong feasibility concept and a willingness by all parties to engage collaboratively can greatly strengthen design proposals.

Whilst the clear design continuum between the original and final design proposals is testament to the clarity and robustness of the original design hypothesis by Spring Design, the constructive input of the council has been instrumental to the success of the design process.

We are therefore confident in our assertion that the final proposal exhibits the kind of strong place-making characteristics that will deliver a highly attractive new residential neighbourhood inspired by, and firmly rooted in, the architectural heritage of Thomastown.

Appendices

- Constraints & Opportunities Plan
- Architectural Context Photographic Study
- Contemporary Housing Design Precedents



Constraints & Opportunities Plan

KEY

- Site Boundary
- Proposed Site
- Existing buildings
- Existing parks & woodland

Connections

- - - - - Pedestrian Links
- — — — — Principal Vehicular Routes
- Secondary Vehicular Routes

Constraints

- * Landmark Building
- Site Access
- ~ ~ ~ Topographical Edge
- ~ ~ ~ Green Edge
- < - - - - - > Relationship with existing dwellings

Opportunities

- 1 Arrival Square either side of Listed building
- 2 Relationship with Park
- 3 Upper Ecological Biodiversity Area



Union Place



Union Place and St. Tydfil's Hospital viewed from Upper Thomas St.



Campsie House



Upper Thomas Street



Upper Thomas Street / New Castle Street



Upper Thomas Street / New Castle St.



Upper Thomas St.



Church Street



Church Street



Church Street



Church Street / Union Street



Primrose Hill, Church Street



Church Street



Church Street vista to the old synagogue



Brynheulog & Sunny Bank Villas

Architectural Character

A study of residential architecture within the Thomastown Conservation Area confirms the findings of the Thomastown Conservation Area Character Appraisal by identifying a repeating suite of architectural details and design devices:

- Symmetry
- Hierarchy of scale & fenestration
- Vertical emphasis to fenestration with low cills maximising light to increase apparent space within properties
- Distinctive, uniform, Georgian inspired style
- Flat fronted facades generally without bay windows
- Generally built on or close to back of footpath
- Some double fronted properties
- Repeated, similar door-surround moulded features, such as simplified pilastered doorcases
- Prominent buildings at corner locations
- Strongly defined doorways with the use of repeated, similar door-surround features
- Larger houses with traverse gables at corner locations
- The use of gables to add interest to the roofscape and add prominence to the front of buildings
- The majority of properties are finished in coloured render, usually, whites, creams and pastel shades



St. Tydfil's Hospital entrance block viewed from within the site



Union Street



Lane & Primrose Cottages



Old Cemetery park looking towards the site from south-west corner



Old Cemetery park looking towards the site from north-west corner



Panorama of site looking west from the upper plateau

Project: St. Tydfil's Hospital Site, Merthyr Tydfil

Title: Architectural Context Photographic Study

Date: 19 November 2019

Scale: N/A



Award winning contemporary housing developments inspired by Georgian architecture and proportion, incorporating design strategies and repeating architectural details, as is proposed for St. Tydfil's Hospital site.

1. Goldsmith Street, Norwich - 2019 RIBA Stirling Prize winner
2. Timekeeper's Square, Salford - 2018 RIBA Richard Feilding Prize winner
3. Marmalade Lane, Cambridge - 2019 RIBA Richard Feilding Prize winner

Project: St. Tydfil's Hospital Site, Merthyr Tydfil
Title: Contemporary Housing Design Precedents

Date: 10 July 2019
Scale: N/A





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