

Gallery development in West Princes Street Gardens causes outcry

Trees in Princes Street Gardens were felled last week, but despite all the public outcry, it is now too late to complain.

The application documents lodged with the council over the last three years by National Galleries of Scotland clearly show the intention to remove trees for the formation of accessible pathways to the renovated gallery.

They always have, and before both the 2015 and 2017 designs were finalised, there were public exhibitions to allow members of the public to have their say.

The trees were inspected in relation to the planning application, some of the trees were described as 'over mature', i.e. they impeded the view, and this was the conclusion :

“There are thirty nine trees worthy of retention on the site (Category A and B in the tree survey) which are being removed to facilitate development. A further eleven trees of lower quality are also being removed. These are mostly young trees. Twenty two trees are being planted as part of the replacement planting. This is acceptable because the replacement of all the trees would be inappropriate with the new layout. The final selection of trees will be developed in consultation with the Council.”

A safeguard was put in place with this provision :

“The drawings provided do not reflect some of the discussion about replacement planting and therefore conditions should be applied to agree the suitable replacement of all of the trees

lost in the gardens. These trees will either be planted as part of the comprehensive scheme proposed or used to supplement tree planting and management elsewhere in Princes Street Gardens.”

A major part of the plans is to make changes to the gardens which will improve access to the galleries, improving the experience of all visitors whether able-bodied or not. The plans suggest that the view of the galleries from elsewhere in the gardens will be opened up and improved, and onlookers will be able to see the portico of the gallery which is not visible at present.

The intention is to guide around two thirds of their visitors to the new entrance from East Princes Street Gardens rather than the entrance at The Mound which becomes congested. The revolving door will be removed and replaced by a series of opening doors.

PLANNING APPROVAL

Council officers recommended the two planning applications for approval in June this year and the planning committee gave it unanimous approval. They specifically mentioned the trees :

“While the loss of trees along the frontage to the NGS will change the view to the building, the principal arrangement of the natural/ designed environment, the wooded form of the valley will be unchanged.”

They also explained that :

- **The removal and management of tree cover and replacement planting will conserve the appearance of the gardens as a wooded valley in long views, while opening up cross views**

There will be new grass terraces formed with connecting footpaths while retaining the form of the valley. The report

also mentions 'revised tree planting and management' and 'developing biodiversity'.

At present the grass banks are quite steep, again something recognised in the planning report ('These will always run the risk of failing') and this was settled with an assurance that the parks department will be fully involved in the final installation.

NATIONAL GALLERIES

A spokesperson for the National Galleries of Scotland told us : "We are working closely with the City of Edinburgh Council on the removal of a number of trees from Princes St Gardens. We realise this is a sensitive subject and this decision was not taken lightly.

"The removal of the trees allows the Gardens and Gallery to become fully accessible to people with mobility impairments, prams and pushchairs.

"Without this new path, the east gardens would remain accessible only via steep gradients or the flight of stairs. We and expert advisers explored a number of options, but due to regulations on safe gradients – which meant the new path had to be a certain length – and the necessity for removing tree roots in order to reshape the embankment, trees unfortunately had to be removed.

"The Council understood, accepted and agreed with the justification of the removal of the trees. As a part of this, 22 trees will be replanted in spring 2019, with species chosen to tie in well with existing trees in the wider gardens.

"These trees will be between 4.5 metres and 6.5 metres in height. Additionally, the reduction of the currently dense tree canopy will recreate carefully framed views through the Gardens to the Old Town. These views were part of the architect William Henry Playfair's original vision for this

world-famous location, which is of primary significance to central Edinburgh's World Heritage Status."



View of the new galleries

HAVING YOUR SAY

If you have not had your eye firmly on the meetings of the planning committee then you may not realise that this permission is actually a revision to previous plans. When first considered by the board of the National Galleries of Scotland, the plan was to encroach into the gardens by around 5 metres. That is about 25 feet which would have been removed from the grassy area and pathways there. Owing to civil engineering concerns principally about building over the railway tunnels that idea did not proceed.

Owing to civil engineering concerns principally about building over the railway tunnels that idea did not proceed. NGS still

need to buy some land from the city council and that process is underway. The land is what is known as 'inalienable' and the use of it must be changed before any transfer.

You can keep an eye on matters which are open for consultation here on the council website. There are many consultations there open for discussion and awaiting your contribution.

THE PLANNING COMMITTEE

In answer to a question at the planning committee meeting in June from Councillor Staniforth as to whether more trees could be replanted, even elsewhere in the gardens. The council officers had little difficulty in agreeing that. Cllr Mitchell also questioned the removal of the trees, but he was advised that there has been a detailed look at the trees and the history of the development of the garden to improve the views. There will be more 'round crown' trees like oaks used in the replacement programme.

Green councillor Chas Booth also queried the replanting programme, questioning the removal of around 50 trees and replacement with 22 new trees. He raised this 'substantial loss of trees' later in terms of an environmental condition and suggested adding a condition that the council encourages discussion around replanting. That condition was added and provides for 'discussion about numbers and species in the wider Princes Street Gardens as part of the Management Plan'.

Cllr Joanna Mowat described the existing displays of Scottish art as 'woefully awful' and welcomed the development which she regards as an improvement. She suggested better wayfinding and said : "What we have to understand is that this was conceived as a designed landscape and great thought was given to where the trees were placed in that original design.

"I think we may have lost sight of that in the intervening period. This is one of the really important landscapes to Edinburgh along with the Royal High School which is probably

the other one. I think we now have a reasonable scheme which will improve access.”

The planning convener Councillor Neil Gardiner said that he approved of the plans. He said : “It is a very important site in the city. I think this design mitigates between the two previous designs. On balance, I think I can support this scheme as it is. I do appreciate there are concerns about removal of trees, but I am happy that this is done as part of an overall landscape strategy for the gardens which the city council must remain in control of. The galleries are an important part of the landscape but we have control and responsibility for maintaining the whole valley and wooded nature of it.”

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Parts of the building which were previously offices have the best view of the gardens, and these will now be incorporated into a new public gallery. And people outside in the garden will be able to see in.

A high quality stone and glass facade will replace the existing glass frontage looking over the gardens. Council officers believe it will be more ‘sympathetic’ to the buildings which are of extreme importance.

EAST PRINCES STREET GARDENS

The gardens themselves are listed and are considered to be outstanding in the category of Work of Art, historical value and scenic value. There is a management plan in place for their protection, and the Edinburgh Parks Events Manifesto ensures a balance of the events which take place there.

But there is an underlying recognition that this development which is currently underway will have an effect.

The report continues :

“The development will change the unique views of this site, opening up views and extending the dominance of the plinth below the Galleries complex above.

However it seems likely that this effect will be curtailed by plans already in place :

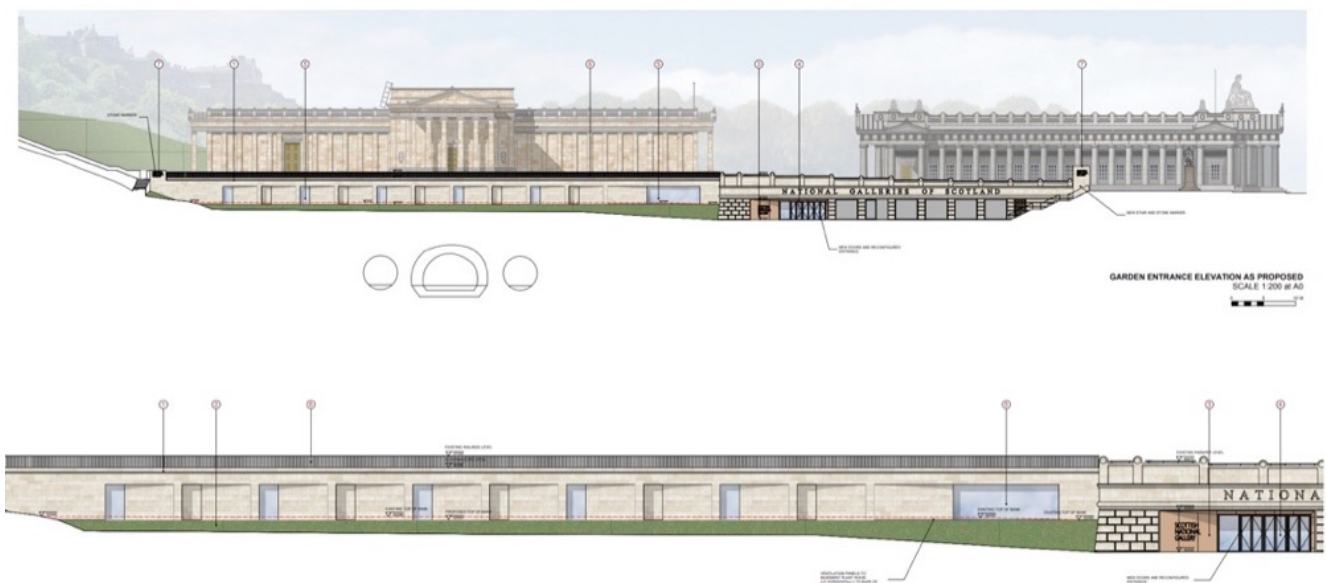
“There is a comprehensive landscape and public realm plan which supports the proposed extension to the National Gallery. The proposals aim to improve accessibility into the gardens, and provide an enhancement of the paving along with management of the tree planting and reconfigured soft landscaped areas.”

The shape of the gardens owes much to glaciers and volcanic activity in Edinburgh. Any school pupil in Edinburgh could tell you that there was a loch there some time ago. That shape and form of the valley which cradles East Princes Street Gardens will be retained.

The galleries will be renovated for generations to come in this multi-million pound project and a new home for the Scottish Art Collection will be formed.



Ambitious plans to create an internationally significant new setting for the world's greatest collection of Scottish art were revealed, as work to transform the Scottish National Gallery (SNG) gets underway.
PHOTO Neil Hanna Photography



What the elevation facing the gardens will look like after the work has been completed

