

New artwork for reconstructed church wall approved despite objections

New artwork on a historic Edinburgh church wall dismantled and rebuilt during tram works has been given the go-ahead – despite concerns they are “poor quality” and “not in keeping with the historic character of Leith”.

The original murals displayed on Leith South Parish Church’s boundary have “deteriorated beyond repair” making returning them not possible.

But plans to install new designs have left some “horrified,” a community council said, and they sparked more than 30 local objections.

The “structurally unsound” 18th century wall had to be meticulously taken down brick by brick while tram tracks were laid along Constitution Street due to fears it could collapse during works. It was re-built as the Trams to Newhaven Project was completed.

Shown on the wooden artwork panels attached to the wall, near the kirkyard entrance, prior to its dismantling in 2019 was a wedding scene at the church, a 1777 plan of Leith, a painting depicting silhouettes of locals by the church, and boats at Leith harbour, to remind people to “hold all seafarers in

their prayers”.

It was intended they would be reinstated, however due to the discovery of “natural deterioration” from “years of exposure to harsh weathering,” the tram project team said this was no longer possible.



Old/new artwork panels

The replacements include a “colourful depiction of the peaceful scene on the church grounds” and a “cartoon depiction of the many people of Leith”.

Plans submitted for new murals stated: “This project is in collaboration with Vue Arts, an Edinburgh-based organisation, and aims to introduce street art along the route aligning with the ‘less is more’ philosophy envisioned through a design brief developed working with South Leith Parish Church.

“The parish community agreed that the focus of the new interpretation panel murals wall should centre on the church community, its local mission, and the serene graveyard, with

an emphasis is on the present rather than historical aspects.

While the proposals were shared with the church congregation, Leith Links Community Council said in May this year after the new designs emerged they “have not impressed (indeed rather horrified) some local people”.



It said on its website: “The Tram Team says it consulted on new designs with some members of the church congregation, although we have so far been unable to find anyone that was consulted.

“There is certainly no evidence of any wider community engagement – which would have been appropriate since the wall is public-facing to the roadway, not inward facing to the church.

“Perhaps people more widely should have a say in what replaces the former mural boards which included historical information about Leith, the layout of the area in 1770s, and a reference to the shipping/port/trading heritage of Leith.”

The application to replace the panels received 37 objections and one letter of support.

Issues mentioned by objectors included the artwork being “of a poor quality and is not in keeping with the historic character of Leith”.

Concerns were also raised there had been no community consultation, however planning officers said there was “no statutory requirement for community consultation for an application of this type”.

After reviewing plans they granted listed building consent, concluding the proposals had “special regard to the desirability of preserving the building” and would “not adversely impact on its special architectural and historic interest”.

They said: “The four replacement artwork panels are to be located in the same positions as the previous installations within the corniced arches of the south-facing Constitution Street wall.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter