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Black Swan Terrace

location:
Upper Spon Street, Coventry

Black Swan Terrace is a unique community-led restoration project which tells the story of 550 years of Coventry's industrial and domestic history. It is also a sustainable, mixed-use development in a deprived pocket of the city.

Introduction

Black Swan Terrace is a Grade II listed terrace of six cottages built in 1454 with various later additions to the rear. It was restored between 1998 and 2007 by the Spon End Building Preservation Trust with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage, Coventry City Council and others.



The terrace (119-123 Upper Spon Street) is situated at the junction of Upper Spon Street and Barras Lane in the Spon End area of Coventry.

Key features of the project are:

The conservation policies adopted by the Trust, which have retained many of the changes and additions that have taken place during the life of the buildings

The creation of a mixed use development of homes, shops, offices, community facilities and a visitor attraction and educational resource

The incorporation of sustainable technologies.

Design process

The architect for the last, and most sensitive, phase of the project and the conservation advisor on the earlier stages, was John Goome of Evesham. Project manager was Max Harban of IGH Consulting Engineers. The professional team were supported by the Trustees who brought considerable and varied expertise to the project including medieval history, timber-frame construction, sustainable technologies and business planning.



The buildings that make up 119-123 Upper Spon Street and 1 Barras Lane were used as shops and homes until the late 1970s or early 80s. By the 1990s the buildings were derelict and two local residents formed a Building

Preservation Trust to restore them. Coventry City Council allowed the Trust to work on the restoration of the buildings and (at the appropriate time) to grant a long lease. As the freeholder the council had a duty to maintain this Grade II listed building and the Trust offered them a relatively cheap way of fulfilling this duty.

The project was completed in three phases.

Phase 1 was to stop the buildings falling down, to treat the dry rot and keep out the rain.

Phase 2 restored No. 123, the double unit on the corner and the buildings behind it in Barras Lane. This was completed in 2002 and let as office space to voluntary organisations and small businesses. This part of the terrace had relatively little medieval structure left and so the conservation issues were not so critical and the Trust commissioned a local architect who was supported by a conservation architect. However, examples of medieval lath and daub were preserved behind glass in one of the rooms and a medieval well was found in another.

The Trust were then able to go to the Heritage Lottery Fund (and other funders) and submit a bid for **Phase 3** to restore the other four cottages and Court 34 to the rear and to create a new building on the site of Court 33. This £1.4m project was completed at the end of 2007.

No. 122 had more of the original medieval structure surviving and able to be seen than any of the other buildings which would have made it extremely difficult to bring it in to use for any modern purpose. This meant that the aim of the Trust to tell people about the history of the site could be achieved best by restoring it to something to show off the history, as opposed to turning in to an office or workshop.

Various changes have been made to the Weaver's cottage, and the restoration tries to reflect this. It has been reinstated to its medieval appearance (circa 1540). Because there is limited space in the Weaver's House the Trust decided that the next cottage along, No 121, was best used as an activity centre for the Weaver's House. This house was mainly Georgian (18th century) in its alterations and finishes, so it has been restored to mainly reflect that period.

No. 120 presents a 19th century shop-front and the ruin of Court 34 has been rebuilt (also 19th century).

No. 119 had already had the roof raised and a 20th century shop-front installed so that was left to be an honest interpretation of the early 20th century. Behind No. 119 the Trust have built a modern extension on the site of the old Court 33 building. This has allowed the Trust to provide toilets for visitors and the shops, and to create a viable third apartment. This, together with the solar water panels and rainwater recycling, represent the 21st century part of the development.

For Phase 3 where the conservation issues were more sensitive the conservation architect, John Goom of Evesham, took the lead. A project manager, Max Harban of IGH Consulting Engineers, was also contracted who oversaw the procurement of various sub-contractors. The main contractor, Pittaways, did not have a strong conservation record but was chosen because of their enthusiasm for the project and in order to build local capacity.

There was also a difference of approach in the tendering process. Phase 2, where European funding presented a tight deadline for completion, was commissioned on the basis of a fixed-price, competitive tender.

The conservation plan was drawn up through detailed discussion between the trustees and their professional advisers. It reflects a policy of retaining, as much as is practical of the accretions and adaptations of the buildings' 555 year history.

The business plan reflected the trustees' commitment to community regeneration, providing a mix of uses which provide facilities for community organisations and small businesses and these effectively enhance the streetscape and create a safer environment.

Evaluation

Access to the interior of the Weaver's House and the rest of the Terrace is by appointment only or at one of the regular open days held approximately monthly on summer Saturdays (see website for details).

The best starting point when visiting Black Swan Terrace is to stand back on the other side of Upper Spon Street in order to view the terrace. The mixed use nature of the site can be seen from here with shops on the ground floor to the left, apartments on the first floor above, the Weaver's House and Activity Centre in the middle and community and voluntary sector offices to the right.

Discounting the double unit to your right (No. 123 which was restored during phase 2 of the project); the remaining four units have been restored to reflect the buildings' history and this is exemplified by the roof coverings (looking right to left):

Above 122 (The Weaver's House) are hand made, pegged roofing tiles (16th century)

Covering 121 (The Activity Centre) are machine made, nailed tiles (18th century)

Over 120 are slate tiles (19th century)

Over 119 with the raised roof the most modern style of tile (20th century)

Behind No. 119 is a new-build extension which, together with the sustainable technologies, represents the 21st century.

Entrance to the development is normally through the Activity Centre (121). From the back of this building access can be gained to the Weaver's House to the right which has been restored, together with a working loom, to show how a narrow-loom weaver would have lived in 1540.

Key design features to look out for

The differing level of restoration work reflecting the differing richness of medieval structure/evidence within the separate properties.

The balance struck in the approach to the refurbishment - allowing the buildings to be occupied and function as modern buildings - and the heritage requirement to preserve/restore/reinstate the original character of the 15th century style.

The differing roof details across the terrace, reflecting the change in building technology.

Link and downloads

Trust website - www.sebpt.org.uk

CWN website. Various Articles - <http://www.cwn.org.uk/heritage/organisations/spon-end-building-preservation-trust/2001/11/0111110-well-discovery.htm>

Robert Donald (Student) Website. Animated 3D Virtual Restoration - <http://www.robertdonald.co.uk/Degree.htm>

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