

20 January 2021

Palmerston North City Council

Hearing: Partial Demolition and Additions and Alterations to All Saints Church

Summary of Section 42a Report– Urban Design Assessment

Morten Gjerde

I've been invited by Palmerston North City Council to provide an assessment of the urban design outcomes that would arise with the proposal to partially demolish and add to the All Saints Church, situated in the southwestern corner of The Square, Palmerston North. My report is dated 4 December and can be summarised as follows.

The All Saints Church building makes valued contributions to the townscape in and around Palmerston North's Square and to the more immediate streetscape around the site in Church Street. However, these effects and the potential contribution the site could be making to the vitality of the Square through use are limited because of the poor structural properties of the building. It remains unoccupiable.

The project addresses the structural and other current deficiencies of the building with a view to enabling it to once again be used as a church. Moreover, the applicant would like to make changes that will help them achieve their organisational objectives more effectively. This would include opening up the street facing façade of the building to enable access, through a new lobby space, on the long axis of the nave. Making this change would demolish fabric of the building that has recognised heritage value.

The new work also includes a single storey addition to the west of the existing building, extending around to also sit in front of the lower portion of the street façade. This additional volume is designed in a contrasting architectural style to the existing building in that it

- incorporates organic plan shapes and structural elements
- has a largely horizontal emphasis
- has extensively glazed perimeter walls

This addition would extend out across the site boundary with Church Street, encroaching into the footpath space. The building currently sits well back from the boundary to form a small open space.

In assessing the urban design outcomes, I have organised my thoughts under four headings; the functional and visual relationship between the building and adjoining street, aesthetic perceptions from a distance, aesthetic perceptions from close by and perceived sense of place. I have derived these headings through analysis of the relevant objectives and policies of the district plan.

In terms of the relationship between the building and adjoining public space I note that the existing building does a poor job of this, particularly when it is not being used. The east, west and north facing façades, which are those that can readily be seen from surrounding public spaces, are closed and solid. Even when the church is in use, these facades remain inactive.

The seismic strengthening and weathertightness changes would do little to change this relationship. However, the addition to the west and north has the potential to create stronger links between the street and activities taking place on site. This is because of the transparency of the new facades and the footprint of the building, which would be closer to the flow of pedestrian traffic past the site.

However, some aspects of the proposal would diminish this relationship. Firstly, by encroaching as it does out over the street boundary, the new addition would be seen as an appropriation of public space, as comparisons would be made with the building alignment to the east and the west. The projected volume would impede or direct foot traffic around it. In conjunction with the sculptural trees proposed at the outside edge of the footpath, a potential bottleneck would be created for pedestrians, particularly at times when the church is in use.

When viewed at a distance (corresponding to townscape views), the proposed additions would have little effect, positive or negative, on the townscape. The church building is distinctive at these vantagepoints largely because of its silhouette and cladding surfaces – warm red brick colour and texture. These qualities would remain evident despite the addition. Certainly the approach to seismically strengthening the building can be commended for doing little to disrupt these positive qualities.

At closer range (streetscape view) the proposed addition would significantly impact the coherence to the architectural form of the existing building. This is because the addition extends from the western side of the building onto the north (street) elevation. This would cause views of the existing church building to be blocked and interrupt how the three dimensional form of the church is able to be perceived.

The design approach for the addition contrasts with the design style of the host building. While such an approach is quite common when adding to a recognised heritage structure and in many cases can work very effectively, in this case the contrasting approach would not lead to a successful building composition. There are simply no cues in the design of the addition that would serve to link the two forms. The horizontal emphasis of the addition clashes with the vertical emphasis of the church.

Sense of place could be positively and negatively affected. There is little doubt that a return of the church activities, and extension of these activities to include a wider community, would enhance sense of place. The physical form of the additions would also appeal to some, just as it would be seen negatively by others. I believe that many people would perceive the encroachment by the building into the footpath poorly.

In principle, it is difficult to fault a development proposal that would enable a valued building to once again be used by the community. However, I am also firmly of the view that it is important to ensure that such changes do not unnecessarily diminish the value of what is already there on site. Overall, I believe that this would be the case here, at least in urban design terms. The form and location of the addition would lead to diminished perceptions of the existing church and intrude unnecessarily into public space.

While this assessment does not anticipate that a perfect solution is necessary, or even possible, my experience as an architect leads me to believe that there are other approaches that could meet the needs of the church and fit more coherently with the qualities of the existing building.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Morten Gjerde', written in a cursive style.

Morten Gjerde

