

Proposal to locate the New Zealand School of Music on the Circa/Ilott site in the Civic Square Precinct

Submission from the Wellington Civic Trust

27 August 2004

1. The Wellington Civic Trust [the Trust], founded in 1981, is a vehicle for people who care about the city, to channel their energies and combine their resources into collective contributions to the city's development. The Trust provides a forum for discussion on civic matters and aims to make Wellington the best of all possible places to live and work.
2. Jack Ilott Green [the Green] is a very important piece of inner-city real-estate, formed for the statutory (1879 Reclamation Act) purpose of "public utility". It is important because it adjoins, and is potentially part of, Civic Square, and because of its proximity to and visibility from a popular gathering point on the waterfront. It is also one of the few open spaces left in the down-town area: at the Trust's seminar in 2002, on inner city living, it was made clear that, with the rapid increase in the number of residents living in the down-town area, appreciation of these spaces is increasing.
3. Given the value of this site and the potential impact (positive or negative) which any development of it will have on the surrounding public spaces, the Trust is concerned about the haste with which the proposal for a National School of Music is being considered. Having originally (December 2003) noted that the universities had 18 months to prepare the music school proposal, the Council later decided to compress the process to fit the universities' funding date of early October this year. This has inevitably meant that opportunities for the public to canvass ideas and options and discuss the merits of this proposal have been limited and conducted within a very short time-frame. Given the strong feelings which citizens are known to have towards their city, harbour and Civic Square, this is not the way such an important decision should be made.
4. To help ensure that the full range of possibilities for the development and use of this public space were publicly debated, the Trust held a public forum on Saturday 21st. August on the topic of "Development Ideas for Jack Ilott Green". The ideas canvassed included the Council's proposal for a National School of Music. The programme for the forum is attached. Attended by 90, the day generated a wealth of ideas and confirmed that any development proposal must be considered in relation to wider harbour, Civic Square and city green space strategies, and not just in terms of the merits of a music school. This reinforces the opinion of the Council's Urban Design Team, conveyed in its report to the Council July 22, that "the view shaft through Ilott Square [sic] is a useful link that establishes connections from the city to the waterfront and supports the character of the city-to-sea bridge".

5. It is the Trust's view that there is no lack of support for the concept of the National School of Music in the city. A music school on this particular site is another matter and if it is to be built in this location the Trust believes that it must earn its right to be there by providing a facility that provides for public access and use and which is of outstanding quality. The architecture must be iconic and distinctive, addressing the waterfront and the Civic Square and providing public spaces (in the form of an auditorium and places for views out) as well as its academic function.
6. The argument that a building is needed to complete the Civic Square is debatable. This was clearly demonstrated by the ideas that were given light at the Trust's forum by Clive Anstey, Chris Kelly and Neil Plimmer. Their design ideas highlighted the distinctive qualities of the Square, with its potential to have a much stronger relationship to the waterfront and the potential for this site to become an integral part of the Square. A building such as that proposed for the music school would see the evolving sense of connection between Civic Square and the sea curtailed, and the character of the Square shifted irreversibly towards a structured and constrained space.
7. A questionnaire was distributed to all attendees and returned by 76. The main findings were:

To the question "what would best describe your view on the significance of Jack Ilott Green to the City"

34% responded: a green space providing visual relief from the built environment

29% part of the built edge around Civic Square

28% a visual link between Civic Square and the waterfront

From this it can be seen that among those who attended the seminar and listened to the various presentations over a full day, only about a third considered that developing this site in a way that provided a built edge to the square was the way to go.

When asked to rate the potential uses for Jack Ilott Green from a wide range of possibilities, more than half (52%) considered that landscaped (largely green) open space was a 'very appropriate use'

34% put sculpture garden in this category

31% considered a medium/high rise building with public open space was a very appropriate use and

26% gave a low rise 1-3 storey building with public open space that rating.

Support for the type of development was inversely proportionate to the loss of green space and the height of the building i.e. the higher the building and the less open space, the less public support.

The Council has chosen to consult only on the music school; no other options are presented to enable the public to decide the best use for this site. Those who attended the forum were asked if they thought the Council should be considering options other than a National School of Music for this site. 67% said yes, 25% said no. This does not mean that 67% opposed the music school option but rather, they would have liked to have more options to choose from.

When asked if they thought that the information provided by the Council as background for the consultation on the music school was adequate or appropriate, 59% thought not. Explanatory comments included “the proposal appeared out of nowhere”, “it’s hard to find on the Council website”, “too little too late” and “absence of any reference to Jan Gehl’s reports commissioned by the Council”.

8. In summary, the Trust’s submission is:
 - 8.1. Jack Ilott Green is a link between the Civic Square and the waterfront. Any change to its status quo needs to reflect and enhance that linking function.
 - 8.2. The views of Jan Gehl on the absolute importance of the City improving its outlook to, and linking with, the harbour are endorsed. Many eminent speakers at the forum used Gehl’s thoughts, which are already endorsed in other Council thinking. The music school proposal does not sit outside of this policy context.
 - 8.3. The 600-800 seat Auditorium is a confirmed need; yet the provision of this facility within the music school is dependent on obtaining sufficient funding. If the required level of funding does not eventuate, then the justification for locating the School on this public land, as part of the civic square is, in our view, lost.
 - 8.4. Two main approaches to the re-development of the Green were highlighted by speakers at the Trust’s recent forum. The first were approaches which included a building but also emphasised the need for any building to relate to the Civic Square, bridge and harbour and to include imaginative development of surrounding green space. The second approach was re-development of the Green as a landscaped area, probably with sculptures, and preferably enlarged and elevated. Details of various imaginative schemes will be included in the Proceedings of the Forum to be published shortly.
 - 8.5. The Council’s Property sub-committee noted at its October 2002 meeting that “the development of the Circa site will significantly impact on the

functioning and quality of the Civic Square as a public space and that this impact may be either positive or negative depending on the bulk height and quality of the building design." Building design is therefore crucial. The Trust recommends that a professional advisory group be established to provide guidance on any development and that this group should include Chris Kelly, Clive Anstey and Neil Plimmer- three of the speakers at the Trust's forum. These people have spent a great deal of time and creative energy thinking of alternative ways to respond to the challenges posed by the civic square and it would be a shame to waste this potential source of inspiration

9. The Civic Trust does not have a mandate to recommend one way or the other on the location of a music school on this site. However, should the proposal go ahead we are quite clear that in order to justify being located on central-city public space certain conditions need to be guaranteed.
 - 9.1. The Auditorium is part of the approval; this ensures that public space in, and public access to and within, the area continues in order for the site to retain its historical "purpose of public utility".
 - 9.2. A building – and its surrounding spaces - must be of real quality. Given the public hostility to the rather bland indicative model, and lingering public resentment over the Queens Wharf Events Centre building, an architectural competition may be appropriate. Certainly a professional Advisory Group and/or peer review process will be essential to maintain confidence in the quality of the architecture and the way the building and its surrounds are integrated into the Square.
 - 9.3. The memory of the late Jack Ilott is continued through naming. According to Council's Archives report on this site, in 1988 Mayor Blumsky gave an assurance to Jack Ilott that his name would be retained and associated with whatever development occurred on the site
10. Finally, the Trust wishes to make clear in the strongest terms that it does not support a building on this site per se. Should the universities fail in their attempts to raise the necessary funds for this building, the council must undertake fresh consultations on whatever alternative use they propose.
11. The Trust does wish to appear (in the form of the Chair Person) at the hearing process on 1 and 2 September.

Di Buchan
Chair Person