

Planning Committee

Meeting date	5 th October 2021
Officer	James Chettleburgh
Agenda Item	Proposed listing consultation from Historic England
Proposal	Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Historic England is currently considering whether the following has special architectural or historic interest:- 1) Scenes of Everyday Life by William Mitchell, Park Place underpass; and 2) Former Co-operative house (now Primark) including mural by Gyula Bajo of CWS Architects' Department.
Reference	N/a
ADDENDUM INFORMATION	

The Council has recently received a 21 day consultation from Historic England on behalf of Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Historic England as to whether the two sites of interest detailed in the "Proposal" have architectural or historic interest. Therefore, officers considered that this would be an important item of interest for the Planning and Development Committee to be made aware of.

The following sections of this report will provide a background to the two items of potential architectural or historic. In addition, it will also set out what the Council's next steps will be in response to these consultations.

Mural by Gyula Bajo – Primark, 6-8 Town Square, Stevenage

Background

During the construction of the Town Square, a number of key companies, such as the Co-Operative House which fronts the Town Square, designed their buildings through in-house staff or consultants; these designs were then modified by Leonard Vincent and his team.

As detailed in the Stevenage Corporation journal in 1955, all multiple stores were built under a common contract in order to 'secure uniformity in design and construction'. An advertisement of 1959 noted that the Co-op – visited by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in August that year – was 'remarkable for its architectural style embodying the spirit of the New Stevenage', adding that it was 'regarded as one of the outstanding stores in the co-operative movement and has been the subject of praise from all parts of the country'.

The north elevation, facing Town Square, features a colourful tiled mural which measures 27ft by 20ft. The mural was designed by Hungarian-born Mr Gyula Bajo of the C.W.C Architects Department. (See figure 1). The mural symbolises the 'spirit and activities of the Co-operative Movement', showing figures at work. As Lynn Pearson has noted, the mural incorporates 'Stevenage-related images of buildings into a composition based on romanticised figures representing industry, commerce, transport and agriculture'. It is the earliest of the four major co-op murals of the 1950s and '60s, the others being in Ipswich, Hull and Scunthorpe (all of 1963).

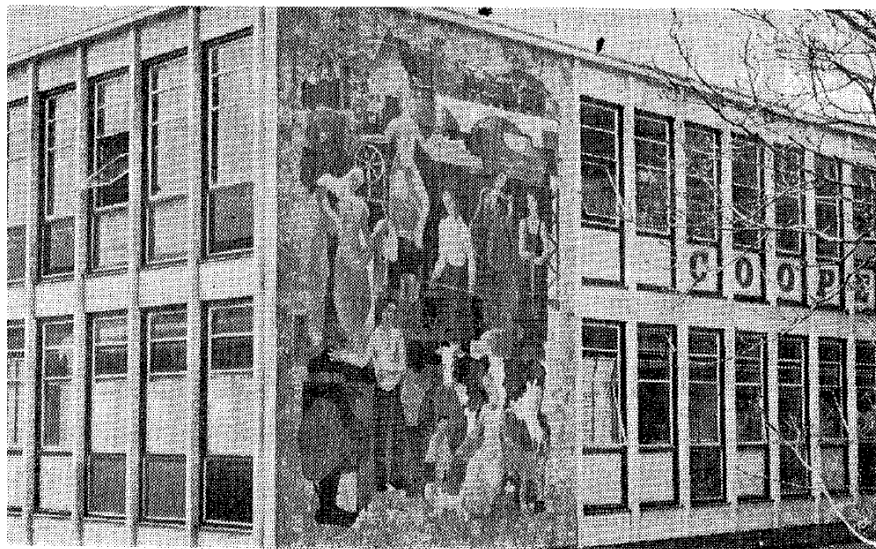


Figure 1:- Image of the Co-op mural from an article in 1958 (SBC Planning Department Archive Files).

The mural itself has some very interesting features, in the upper part are contemporary buildings and structures and are typical of the "spring-like" architectural atmosphere of Stevenage as a new town. The mural also represents the four cornerstones of a balanced economy as seen at the time, industry, commerce, transport and agriculture and these are all symbolically represented by the figures. The spinning-wheel and finished products represent textiles and consumer goods, whilst the steel worker of heavy industry is beside a teaching figure which stands for science and technology. The lower part of the mural shows agriculture, which was seen as the primary branch of production and is a background to the fundamental social unit, the family (Co-operative Architecture, 1959).

The Council's Town Square Conservation Area Management Plan SPD (2012) identifies that public art was a prominent feature for post-war design, and includes statues and sculptures, such as the listed Belsky's Joy Ride statue in the Town Centre, which are prominent to the town's cultural heritage. In addition, mural art is also prominent within the town; boosted in popularity by the Festival in Britain in 1951 which encouraged artists to experiment with different materials such as concrete, ceramic metals. This led to over 1000 murals being commissioned during the period of 1945 to 1980 which includes the mural by Gyula Bajo which comprises of painted ceramic tiles (Figure 2). As such, it is identified as a key piece of public art within the Town Square Conservation Area.



Figure 2:- Gyula Bajo Mural (Town Square Conservation Area Management Plan SPD, 2012).

Next Step

Given the history behind the mural and what it represents in the way of cultural heritage and history of the New Town, combined with the fact that it is an original feature and adds real placemaking to the Town Centre, it is a piece of public art which is worth celebrating. In addition, I understand it is potentially only 1 of 4 Co-operative murals left in the country. As such, given the damage which has been caused by the fixing of the Primark vertical sign and slow deterioration, officers consider this mural should be preserved as it of historic interest. Furthermore, it forms part of the architectural fabric of the building which is also seen as a key feature of Town Square and the wider historic character of the Conservation Area.

Due to the significant importance of the mural as detailed above, officers will be liaising with Councillor John Gardner and Councillor Richard Henry (for cultural strategy) to prepare a written response to Historic England to ensure the most appropriate protection can be put in place for the mural.

William Mitchell Relief – underpass under St George’s Way, Stevenage.

Background

William Mitchell (1925-2020), whose first works were the murals he painted on club and canteen buildings during the Second World War, remained largely unrecognised among 20th century British sculptors. However, his work is increasingly appreciated, with English Heritage recently awarding 13 of his public sculptures, with Grade II-listed status.

He is particularly well-known in relation to the new town sculpture. His cast concrete relief (1973) in the underpass beneath St George’s Way to Park Place depicts scenes of contemporary life. The Stevenage Museum, who have been advising officers, have recently included it in their 100 objects project. They have his drawings for the work (See Figure 1).

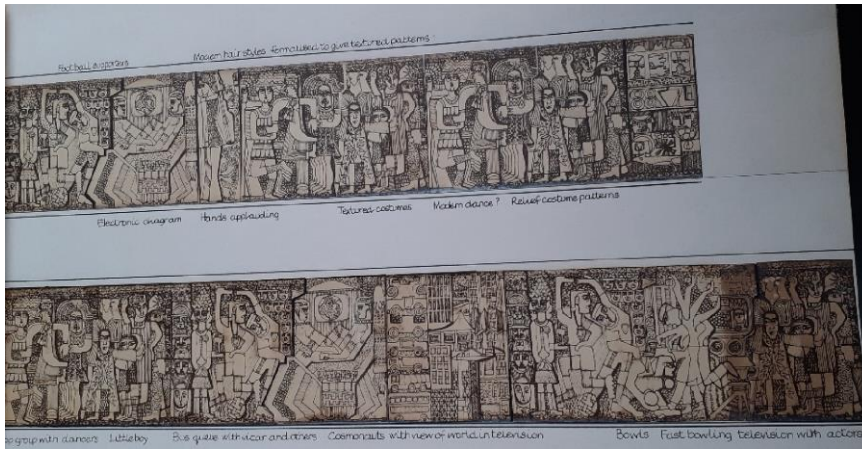


Figure 1:- Copies of William Mitchell drawings at Stevenage Museum.

There is also a video on YouTube (Underpass relief by William Mitchell) which provides a really good depiction of the underpass relief by William. Officers have also been provided some history from the Museum about Will Mitchell:

William George Mitchell, born in London in 1925, trained at the Southern College of Art, Portsmouth, and at the Royal College of Art where he won a scholarship which enabled him to study at the British School in Rome. He established the William Mitchell Design Consultants Group, and produced abstract sculptures in concrete, wood, plastics, marble and brick across the world.

Among his other public sculptures are the abstract relief decoration of the porch and belfry of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King Liverpool, and wall reliefs for Watergardens in Harlow New Town, 1963. The art work as you enter the underpass provides a great sense of arrival as you enter the town centre from the Town Centre gardens and vice versa.

Next Step

The relief is a very good and well preserved example of William Mitchells art work and is a key part of the town's heritage. It is also a highly accessible piece of art work which can be enjoyed and appreciated by the local community and creates a welcoming environment in the underpass between Park Place and the Town Centre Gardens. The relief itself depicts representations of the local football team, popular fashion and 1960's hairstyles. As such, due to the significant importance of this piece of art work, officers will be liaising with Councillor John Gardner and Councillor Richard Henry (for cultural strategy) to prepare a written response to Historic England to ensure the most appropriate protection can be put in place for the relief.