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Shaping the future of Phibsborough

Residents are driving an agenda to revamp the northside village through a design review that includes a revamped Dalymount park and redevelopment of the shopping centre

Frank McDonald

Like many of Dublin's urban villages, Phibsborough has got a raw deal for decades – not least from all the traffic that trundles through it in every direction. But local people are fighting back – and, more importantly, putting forward their own solutions.

This is also happening at a crucial time, with the truly awful 1960s Phibsborough Shopping Centre slated for redevelopment and plans being hatched by Dublin City Council for a complete remodelling of Dalymount Park as a municipal soccer stadium seating 10,000 spectators.

Phizzfest, the local community and arts festival now in its third year, teamed up with the Royal **Institute of the Architects** of Ireland (RIAI) to organise a “design review” focused on regenerating the public realm and built environment in and around the shopping centre.

This was Phizzfest's response to “the decades of neglect of our village” and coincided with the collapse of a revised local area plan for Phibsborough, initiated by the city council; essentially, it happened because not enough councillors were present on the night to adopt the plan.

Rather than taking this lying down, Phizzfest sprang into action with the clear objective of setting its own agenda for the area – in essence a vision statement to “re-imagine Phibsborough” that would galvanise the community, business interests and the city council. The energetic organisers are determined to reinvigorate what is currently a down-at-heel village, where even some of the bargain shops have closed down, and turn it into a much more people-friendly place, with a redeveloped shopping centre and new-look Dalymount Park as its “anchors”.

Based on previous design reviews in Kilkenny, Drogheda and Castlebar, the Phibsborough exercise has involved such experienced professionals as architects Ralph Bingham of MÓLA and Urban Agency's Andrew Griffin as well as transportation engineer Tiago Oliveira, of Arup.

Architect

The team also included landscape architect David Kirkwood of Mitchell + Associates, William Hynes of Future Analytics, urban designer Stephanie Fy STET, Dáithí Mac Domhnaill of Áit landscape architects, and Emmet Scanlon, Lawrence Lord and Ciarán Long of the UCD School of Architecture.

Indeed, the school will be collaborating

with Reimagining Phibsborough over the next two years, as a living project under the “Communiversity” model, which will involve 4th and 5th year students coming into the community and working with local people to realise a vision for change.

The most radical proposal to emerge from the review process was an idea to sink the “feeder routes” for the N2 and N3 in tunnels so that traffic-choked Doyle's Corner could become a pleasant urban space for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. No price tag was put on it, however.

Inevitably, much of the focus was on how the 1960s shopping centre could be redeveloped, opening up new pedestrian routes into Dalymount Park from Phibsborough Road and North Circular Road by getting rid of an existing terrace of shops with surface car parking both in front and on the roof.

Village square

The consensus view among the design review team was to retain the deeply unloved eight-storey tower, but re-clad it in a glazed external skin as student housing, and demolish the rest to make way for a new “village square” flanked by shops and cafes at ground level with some 50 apartments on the upper levels.

This month's unveiling of the plan in the Scout Hall drew an enthusiastic response from local people; at last, they could see the possibility of real change. But there was dismay that only one councillor (the Green Party's Ciarán Cuffe) turned up.

The next phase will be to “identify short, medium and long-term goals and create strategies to achieve them”, engaging with Dublin City Council and the National Transport Authority as well as developer Peter Leonard, who recently bought the run-down shopping centre for €17 million.

If Reimagining Phibsborough succeeds in realising its vision for the area, it will be a lesson for other inner urban communities facing similar problems.

The results of the RIAI design review are on display at DarcSPACE Gallery, 26 North Great George's Street, until Saturday, July 9th

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■ The shopping centre in Phibsborough, which was built in the 1960s, and (right) artist's drawing of the proposed redesign. PHOTOGRAPH: AIDAN CRAWLEY