

# Monument to greed and commercialism

Although Richmond has managed to hold off many of the threats to its architectural heritage – and in particularly alarming areas like The Green and Lanes, listed building protections have kept Regency facades more or less intact – conservation can often be skin deep.

A sad example is to be found on Richmond Green, where the first residents will shortly be moving into flats that have been built inside the shell of the old United Reformed Church. An important exterior has been preserved but with a totally inappropriate new use.

The kirk, which opened in 1885, was built in what was known as a 13th century Gothic style, nested elegantly around the perimeter of the former medieval jousting ground alongside Richmond Palace.

It was an ideal centre for meeting and socialising, the purpose for which 19th century churches and chapels were designed.

It fitted comfortably alongside the Georgian terraces and the Edwardian theatre and library buildings. When it came under threat in the 90s – congregations shrunk and the church faced financial constraints – this newspaper campaigned for its preservation as a public building, backing plans by Richmond Museum to move in with an internet café and restaurant on the ground floor to help subsidise the project.

This would have been an ideal use, as it is next to the theatre and library. A new site could have been found for the tiny band that remained in a less expensive location.

No vast sums of public money would have been necessary as the council had restrictive planning laws to prevent profitable offices or luxury flats being built within the bank.

Unfortunately, the affluence the borough has enjoyed in the last couple of decades means that private capital is mainly directed at new residential units and so it was not surprising that developers plunged for this option.

The then Lib Dem administration took the easy way out and instead of using the listed building regulation to ensure continued use for the community, bowed into speculators' pressure – just as it had done over the ice rink.

Had they pushed for the sturdy Edwardian industrial building on the riverside to have been given the listed protection it merited,

the skating facilities could have been retained.

A town centre needs meeting places for the community – halls, bars, restaurants, theatres, museums, libraries. To preserve a crime-free, vibrant community, the mix needs to be constantly reviewed and maintained.

Richmond is one of London's most popular and attractive towns and it is essential to retain the fine balance of public and private buildings.

Inserting apartments inside the Gothic exterior in this prominent location was inorganic, inappropriate and unsuitable.

Granting planning permission to St George was an appalling surrender to Mammon. Despite the desperate efforts by swish architects to adapt the interior for

residential use, the result is shoddy and insensitive.

The graceful grade one structure with its cathedral like interior and soaring tower and lofty windows is not suitable for apartments and the attempt to squeeze homes inside was doomed to aesthetic failure.

It may be true that the facade has been retained for future generations but at what cost? The nine new homes that have resulted do not even enjoy views of the Green or pavement facilities.

Instead of sending out a message that Richmond is a centre of culture and learning – as would have happened if the library, theatre and museum had dominated the town's most elegant open space – it stands as a monument to philistine greed and unprincipled commercialism.