The Eye of York: Statement of Significance

The Eye of York, comprising the early medieval castle of York’s and the later prison site, is the symbolic epicentre of York and Yorkshire and at various times the North of England. Since Roman times York was considered the second capital of Britain, it has its own Archbishopric and this authority became centred and consolidated on York Castle from the early medieval period. The establishment of a Castle in York by William the Conqueror was a direct result of the Harrying of the North and his need to suppress the northern population. Two motte and bailey castles were constructed either side of the river – the only place where this happened - and the existing Anglo-Scandinavian settlement on the Castle site was eradicated to create the Castle. The Castle site remained under royal control until the 1960s, only then becoming part of the modern city. The Castle has come to represent the exercise of royal authority, the power of civil and legal authority and conversely the fight against oppression and the struggle for increasing social justice. It is a place of strong communal value and commemoration.

Situated at the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Foss, the landscape, topography and geography of the Eye of York, sometimes changing dramatically, help us understand the very origins of the city and its development as a local, regional, national and international centre.

The now buried former water defences of the Castle contain the potential for significant evidence of the Castle outworks, whilst the Castle site itself includes evidence of earlier and significant Roman and Anglo-Scandinavian remains. Archaeological evaluation of the site has revealed that the prison cemetery still survives and includes evidence of post mortuary examination.

The Eye of York illustrates the clear exercise of the Royal Prerogative and the State’s administration of power and legal authority. The changing form and function of the Castle illustrates clearly the changes in York’s position as a centre and a focus for the region. It also illustrates changing methods and approaches to the dispensation of political and civil power, and ultimately can be seen to represent repression, protest and celebration.

The place has had a direct impact on people. There is a profound link between power, space, buildings and people at York Castle, made more dramatic because so many of the ‘players’ are named individuals whose lives, and in many cases their final moments can be recreated. The names range from the great and good to the humble and express the drama of conscience, belief, social justice, protest - and the criminal. The gradual recovery of the space for public use has introduced greater opportunity for celebration and commemoration but its function as a place of protest continues.

Understood as a designed set piece, the extant buildings, both individually and as a group, are an expression of power and control in built form, designed as a message to provoke a response. The range of buildings formed by the Assizes Court, Women’s Prison and Debtor’s Prison are, along with the survival of Clifford’s Tower, an entity and have very high group value. The loss of the Governor’s House and Felon’s Prison has diminished this expression of power, but that story is recoverable through other sources and it has resulted in a space that has been gradually regained by the public. The Eye of York has a deliberate, distinct and different character when compared to the rest of the city. This difference is intentionally emphasised through the quality of the architecture and the arrangement of the buildings around the space and is a direct consequence of the Norman imposition of the castle in the 11th Century.

In summary, the key to the significance of the place is the social and communal value of the site derived from the history and events that took place there. The place is about people and the values imbued and attached to it: this gives the Eye of York its overriding symbolic communal value. Some of the stories and associations of the site are not brought out to their full extent and these should be developed and enhanced as part of any work in the future. The loss of the prison buildings and replacement with a large and anonymous car park affect the ability to appreciate the space, its evolution, architectural quality and its stories, and can only be considered a negative intrusion on the Eye of York to be removed as soon as practicable.

**Elements of the Place that Contribute to Significance of the Eye of York**

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| **Elements critical to significance which need to be retained and enhanced** | **Elements which should be enhanced through new work** |
| **Clifford’s Tower**Landmark, prominence, symbolic | **Setting - Car park site**Key element of story and spatial arrangement lost |
| **Courts/ prison buildings**The strong aesthetic composition of the 3 principal building both as individual building and collectively | **Intellectual access/ telling the story** The story of people and how they connect to the place |
| **Open Space - Eye of York**As represented by the space between the Debtors Prison and the former Governors House | **Understanding role of water.**Links to river and the former water defences of the Castle |
| **“Shield” shape of group as a whole**The space occupied by the medieval castle and Victorian Prison – the Eye of York as a whole | **Physical Access- Access points**Understanding the potential to enhance the former Gatehouses of the city and enhance key routes |
| **Scale and density different to rest of York**Illustrating its imposition on the CityThe Grandness and formality of the site – it is set piece | **View into and out of the Eye of York**Enhancing the visitor offer at Clifford’s Tower and the ability to appreciate its place within the wider City and the story of York. |
| **Relationship between buildings and spaces between**Formal arrangement of buildingsRelationship to Clifford’s Tower | **Understanding the importance of the Roofscape of the City**Reducing the impact of the roof of Coppergate |
| **Views to St Marys Coppergate and York Minster, from Clifford’s Tower to the City Walls and Baillie Hill**The setting of the Eye of York within the wider city |  |