



warrington  
town centre  
ideas #1





- 1. Sankey Street**
- 2. Eastern Gateway**
- 3. Cabinetworks**
- 4. Landmark waterfront building**



The Warrington town centre masterplan and its accompanying supplementary planning document have at their core the aim of creating an attractive, sustainable, green, prosperous and happy place to live.

There is a need and desire to regenerate existing buildings and develop homes in the town centre and this forms the basis of much of the masterplan. Not only is this good use of land but in the changing landscape of the high street it is a real opportunity to reimagine the area as a popular and appealing location for all demographics, with proximity to shops, services, entertainment and public transport links.

Our document contains ideas very much with the masterplan and supplementary planning document (which sets out design codes and parameters for future development in in the town centre and environs) in mind.

## sankey street

Sankey Street has seen itself presented in several forms over the years: from Victorian road lined with elegant architecture to traffic filled thoroughfare filled with well known high street shops in the 1960s to pedestrianised passageway, post 1970s and 1980s Golden Square construction.

It's hard to appreciate in its current composition but Sankey Street has a number of Grade II listed buildings, some designed by respected architects in the Victorian era. 19-21 Sankey Street, for example, was designed by architect, John Douglas and built in 1864 as a showroom for Robert Garnett & Sons, owners of the famous Cabinetworks. It later became Woolworths and then, more recently, Poundland.

There is also 23 Sankey Street – Natwest Bank, a Grade II listed building built in 1847; 25 Sankey Street – former Barclays bank - an ornate Grade II listed building on the corner of Cairo Street and the Church of the Holy Trinity, Grade II listed and built in 1758 and 1862. There are other listed buildings further along Sankey Street towards the Town Hall and buildings that are not listed but are nevertheless examples of great architecture.



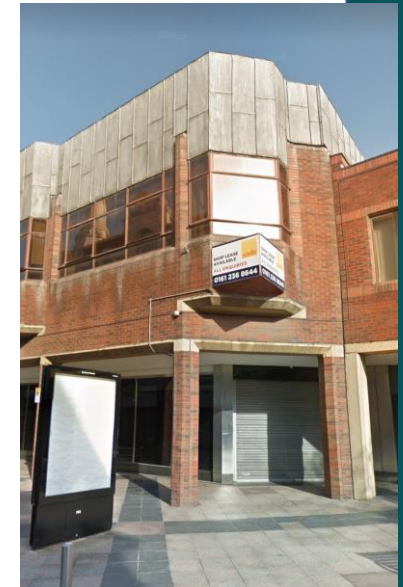


The problem is that these buildings in Sankey Street have become victims of post WWII design and are now cramped into what has become an unappealing, neglected wind tunnel - encroached upon by a construction unique in its ugliness: the perimeter buildings of the Golden Square shopping centre.

Not only is this stretch of “architecture” incredibly unattractive, it is oppressive, psychologically overbearing, hides the beauty of the Victorian buildings; you can’t even stand back far enough to appreciate their upper floors and...absolutely not in accordance with the aims envisioned in the WBC Supplementary Planning Document. In fact, the following is noted in the draft SPD: that there are-

“...areas of the town centre which lack a visual consistency, degrading the sense of place.” This encapsulates precisely the current aesthetic of Sankey Street.

There has been interest expressed in developing the old Coop / TJ Hughes building for apartments, but given the drab view from the windows, there may not be the take up one would hope. Other businesses have opened and closed within these Victorian buildings – perhaps in part because it is currently such a disappointing, bleak place. If there is a desire to create a town centre filled with homes and people there needs to be a rethink.





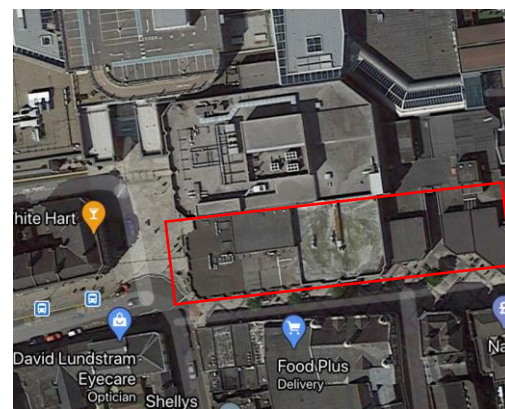
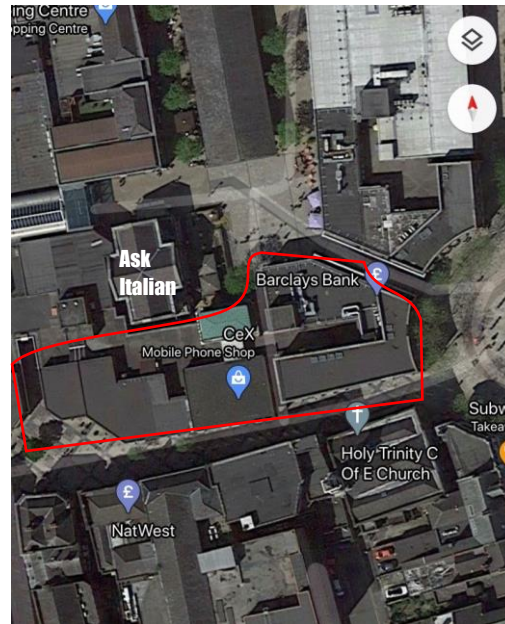
There is an environmental, social and aesthetic imperative to expand and enhance the green space in the town centre – this is a key aim in the town centre masterplan. There is also a wish to improve the standard of architectural design in any future developments – this is clearly set out in the SPD.

So as part of this drive we would propose that the buildings shown above and which form the right hand side of Sankey Street are completely **demolished**, opening up the space to create a new, attractive architectural border to the public square that holds the old fishmarket: the Victorian buildings on Sankey Street.

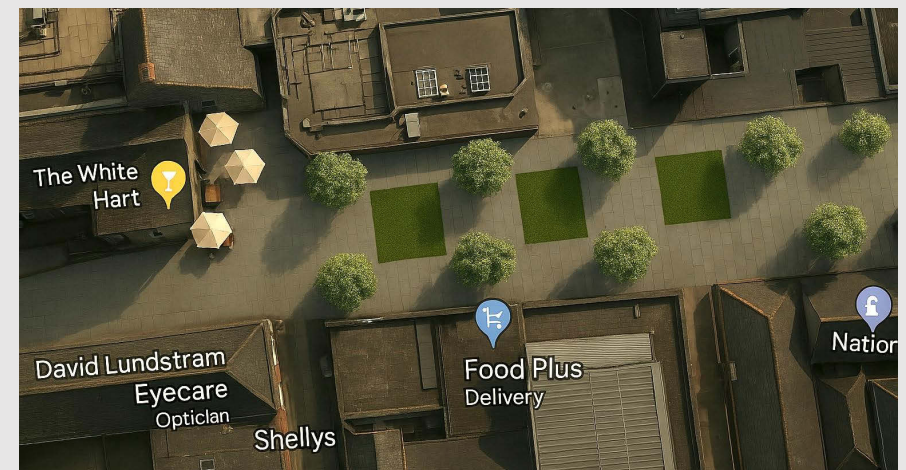
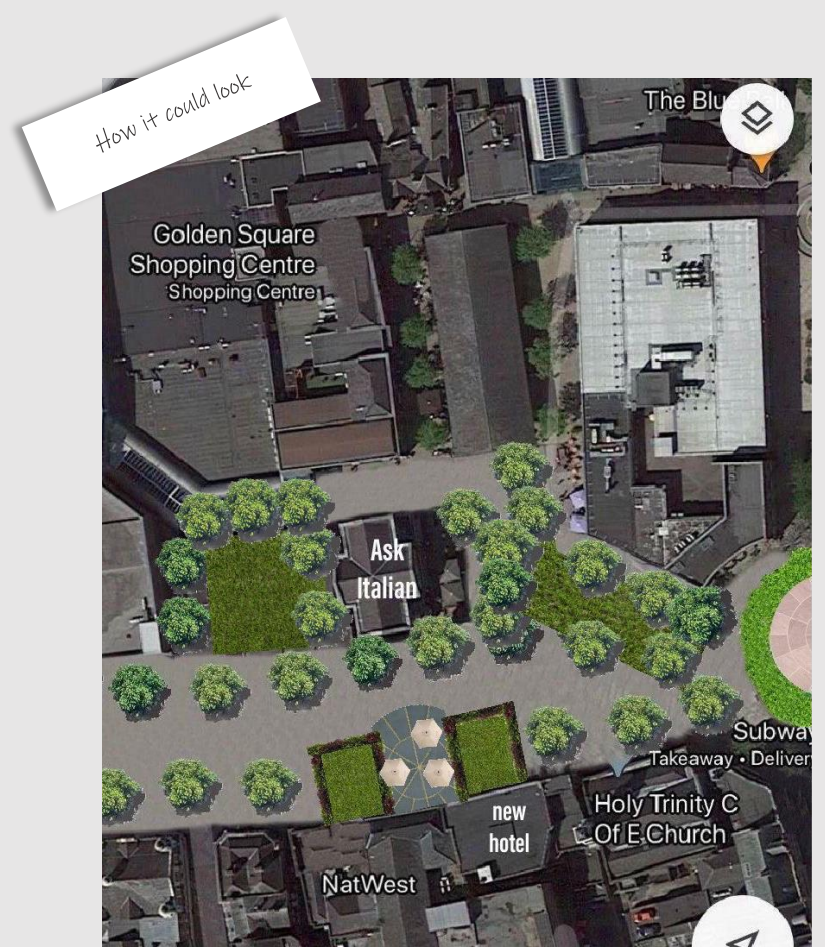
All of the present perimeter to the Golden Square on Sankey Street should go – including the building that currently houses Barclays bank.

This is a satellite map of Sankey Street in its current layout. And what it could look like with the removal of the current buildings on the edge of the Golden Square shopping centre.

This could also facilitate a more attractive frontage to the main Golden Square site.



Current layout





In its place would be a green, interesting space filled with trees, plants and grass, creating an attractive destination in the centre of town for residents and visitors to enjoy. Not only would open, public green space be beneficial for the town, but the Grade II listed buildings would be released from the shackles of the ugly architecture overshadowing them and allowed to shine. This may well have economic benefits too. Whilst we would not usually advocate the demolition of buildings, in this case we make an exception. In doing so not only is the space more welcoming and more likely to attract footfall, there is better potential for investors to realise the beauty of the Victorian buildings on the left side of Sankey Street.

There could be hotels, apartments and restaurants that look out onto a green, open square, with the fishmarket as a better exposed focal point. Further, if the current perimeter of the Golden Square was removed, broadening Sankey Street all the way to Bold Street, a tree lined wide boulevard could be developed, creating attractive green infrastructure that better links to the proposed pedestrian priority remainder of Sankey Street beyond Bold Street and better links to Bank Park and Palmyra Square.

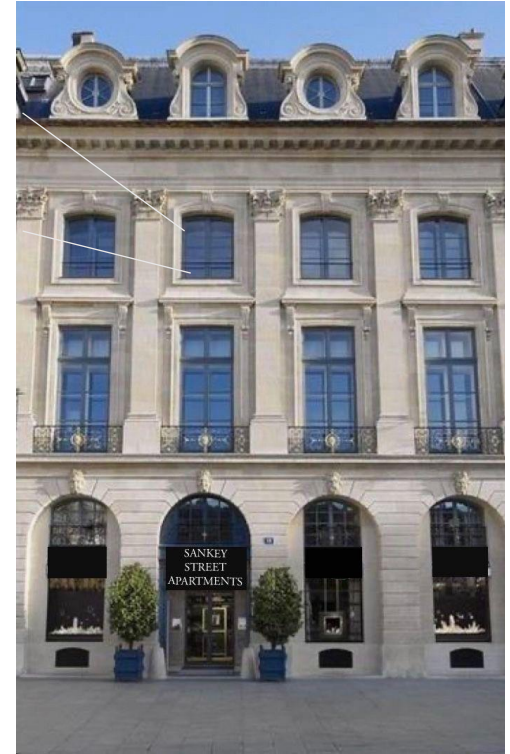


How a newly opened up Sankey Street could look



To us, this is a ‘no brainer’ – it would increase green infrastructure and green public space, help Warrington town centre become a *destination* and would increase its attractiveness to both investors and those who might consider town centre living.











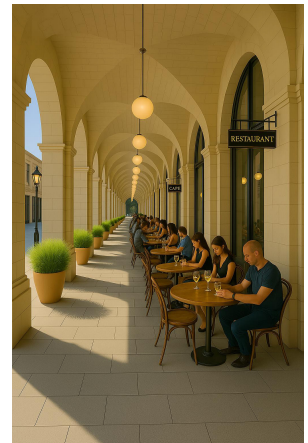


## Facade Refurbishment

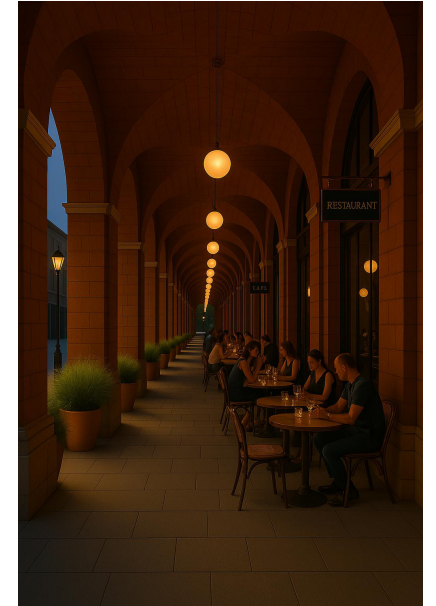
If opening up the space on Sankey Street is not feasible, then another idea would be to refurbish / renovate the rather ugly exterior of the Golden Square building. The "colonnades" could remain in place, to reduce costs / difficulties with the structure of the building - but they would be reshaped and resurfaced to better fit with the period architecture on the opposite side of Sankey Street.

These "colonnades" could be used to enlarge the existing building spaces by introducing attractive windows (image top left), or simply renovated / resurfaced to allow covered outdoor space for dining (remaining images).

Facade refurbishment is becoming more popular as a way of reducing embodied carbon (by retaining the original building). There are some great examples in Europe where this has been done.







## Facade Refurbishment

Alternative colour palette.



## Eastern Gateway

The Warrington masterplan includes the area on the Eastern side of the town centre, which as the SPD rightly points out, has become a location synonymous with large retail sheds, surface level mass car parking and has no sense of place. There are plans to demolish New Town House and develop the Cockhedge area and further east through Dial Street and Church Street with a view to creating a new, attractive urban village linking with St Elphin's Church, the River Mersey and beyond. What is interesting is that in the Dial Street / Church Street area there are already a number of characterful buildings and homes that speak to an aesthetic and architectural vision that would be desirable in this area. It is in fact a conservation area in Warrington, with important heritage. The buildings here are predominantly Georgian and Victorian and there is a significant industrial history, with former mills and factories that dominated the landscape.

While it would be tempting to simply fill the area with blocks of eight storey apartments close to the town centre - even the newer, more attractive apartment blocks that we are beginning to see in every architect's portfolio - care must be taken not to allow the ubiquitous brick box housing estate become the ubiquitous eight storey modern brick apartment block. There are certainly areas of the town centre that could take that – but we would suggest that the Eastern Gateway is not one of them.

The key to a successful and attractive town or city is **variety** – it is more interesting for the public passing by and most importantly it is more interesting for those who live there. People need visual and psychological stimulation in their built environment: mass expanses of wall, in whatever material, can be both dull and discomfiting. Whilst we are not proposing that it be exactly copied in terms of architectural design, the principle of using different architects / architectural styles for distinct smallish blocks to provide variety in housing was successfully employed at Port Sunlight, as were “garden city” principles.

It is also important that consideration is given to the existing architectural styles and scale in this area – again, this has been clearly expressed in the SPD.

For the Eastern Gateway we think that there should be a mix of architectural design for interest but with a traditional slant; sensitive to the existing buildings, but with room for new ideas that are harmonious with the area.





There are some lovely existing buildings in the Eastern Gateway / St Elphin's area, along with mature trees and potential to expand green areas. Once New Town House has been demolished and the Cockhedge area cleared for development there is a real opportunity to create a vibrant, elegant urban village with green links into the town centre, Padgate, Woolston and across to the River Mersey.





## homes

The Warrington town centre masterplan envisages this area as a place for “*high density development [with] town houses and apartments set as a formal network of streets and green squares.*”

If the aim is to attract a wide demographic to the area and transform the town centre and its near neighbourhoods into a desirable place to live, the homes built there need to be *attractive*. It is perfectly possible to create an appealing place to live at medium density close to a city or town centre – if one considers the “Georgian Quarter” in Liverpool this has transformed itself very successfully over the last thirty years to become a lively and appealing neighbourhood. Some of the townhouses there are single family dwellings and others remain converted as apartments. This could work very well in the Eastern Gateway area, moving from medium height and density in the town centre to more traditional terraces in keeping with the Victorian homes opposite St Elphin’s Park.

We would also say that there should not be a discernable difference between housing types and their terms of occupancy. In other words – it should not be possible to differentiate between social and private housing – to do so perpetuates division and inequality – and can affect self esteem. Although no doubt they mean well, there is something quite distasteful in viewing architects’ “vision” of social housing developments that they clearly wouldn’t dream of living in themselves.

Similarly – not sure who needs to hear this but – flat roofs on houses is *not new*. It’s not some edgy concept that will have the public falling over themselves to enjoy. Most people *do not like flat roofs* on their houses. It is possible in *some* circumstances to create attractive housing with roof gardens or terraces – but this was tried decades ago and it is this type of housing considered “modern” at the time that is often synonymous with areas of neglect and decline. It also “dates” quickly. So it should be the exception rather than the rule.

We’re not against modern architectural styles – there is ample scope for this in the town centre - but this area needs a sensitive and attractive built environment if it is to thrive and draw in a range of demographics.

And finally – the area does not lend itself to more of this:



No





## what it could look like

### – new town house and scotland road area

Our idea for replacing New Town House is not quite at the full scale of eight storey apartment blocks but is nevertheless reasonable density accommodation. We have suggested two ideas – each featuring a range of design and materials to avoid the dullness of one mass block. Please forgive the slightly iffy graphics – it is just to create a suggestion of the types of architecture and scale that would enhance the area. This is an important gateway through a conservation area into the town centre, and would be worth developing in a way that respects this.





As well as the architecture we have suggested for the site of New Town House, apartment blocks could continue along Scotland Road on the western perimeter of the Cockhedge Centre, the site of the former Cockhedge Mill. As is suggested in the SPD, the apartments would be dual aspect and sit in interesting interconnected green space with communal squares, urban allotments and easy walking / cycle routes.







new town  
house / scotland  
road aesthetic



## what it could look like

### -St Elphin's / Dial Street / Church Street and north

As we move away from the town centre towards the established settlements around Fairfield and Howley we would propose town houses, mews houses and terraces sensitive to the conservation area around Church Street and which respect the residential areas already present. This could comprise two and three storey homes with village squares, greens and pedestrian and cycle links to town and to the River Mersey. We think a mix of modern period design would fit well. The important thing is that there should be a wide mix of design types, as would be the case with a village or town that has grown organically. It helps to create a sense of place – rather than living in one of many hundreds of generic boxes. There is also a bank of shops on Dial Street that could benefit from a little updating – but they are in a nice setting with green frontage and with some careful regeneration this could be a great village centre.





## public space

This area has a strong heritage, with Cockhedge Mill, Rylands wireworks, Lockers, Florence Mill and Stub's all forming significant industrial history and landscape in the area. They were all prominent employers and in the past contributed substantially to the town's economy. There are some remarkable photographs of Church Street with its original architecture and images of the town centre with Cockhedge Mill in the distance on social media. It is also quite close to the River Mersey, with access available via Napier Street and Farrell Street (there may be others!). The girders from Cockhedge Mill were actually reused in the roof of the Cockhedge Shopping Centre. To add to the sense of place in this new development it would be great for some of the street furniture, street art and public space to reflect this.

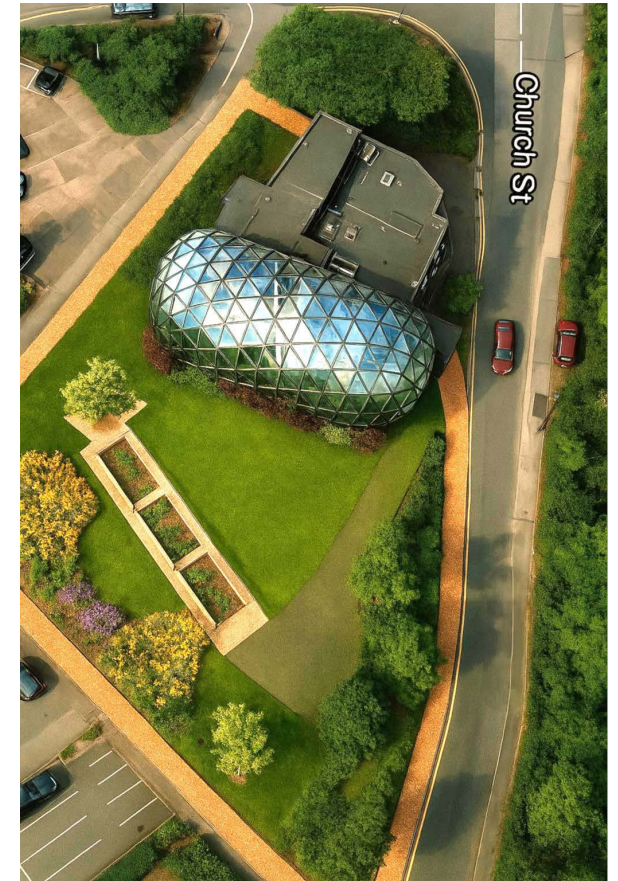


One idea we had was to regenerate the handsome but rather lonely former C J Bent and Son Ltd building by extending it and adding gardens, to be used as a hub.

With the plan to develop the section of Sainsbury's car park that abuts Church Street with appropriate architecture there could also be an opportunity to adapt the existing mature planting at the front of the car park and create a green pedestrian and cycle path that would take you into the hub.

We have also created a walled garden, which would be in keeping with the architectural style of the hub building and would also complement the conservation area. The walled garden would be a safe place for relaxing, art, kitchen gardening or using the café and other facilities in the main building.

The extension to the building could incorporate the Cockhedge Mill girders, or they could be used as edges for raised flower and vegetable beds, or as arches. There could be a history hub inside celebrating the area's past – but ultimately what it would be used for would be up to the residents.







eastern gateway ideas  
for public space







St Elphin's /  
Eastern Gateway  
aesthetic



## cabinetworks

It is unclear whether or not a final decision has been made about what will become of the former Cabinetworks area, but the aim is to create an impressive destination within the town centre. Suggestions have been made for the development of a hotel or apartments, or a mixed used complex. What will be important is that there is at least an acknowledgement of the former factory, given its significance. The signage style on the former building and the Italianate water tower would be great reference point, as would the notion of Garnett & Sons' furniture making itself. It is possible to view online (and buy!) their furniture even now.

We think a mixed use site would be really interesting, incorporating some of the surrounding Victorian buildings into a more modern complex. Brigade Court in London is an excellent example of this and could be a model for development of the Cabinetworks. Brigade Court celebrates and enhances an original fire station on the site. While the Cabinetworks itself is no longer there, there are plenty of images and reference points to use if one wished to remember the building itself and the era in which it thrived.



Brigade Court

We thought the “furniture” element could be reflected in some oversized furniture as sculptures in a central courtyard. On the right are amazing outsize chairs – a similar design could work really well.

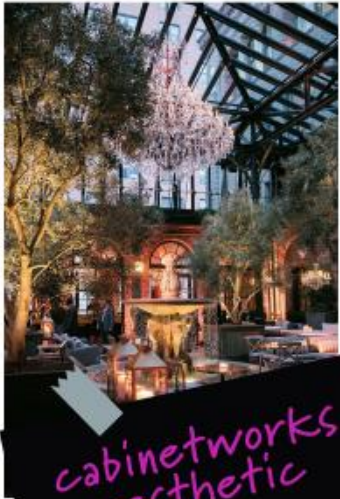
Also, inspired by the wonderful Alchemia bar in Krakow, there could be a giant cabinet or wardrobe serving as doors to the entrance to one of the buildings.

There could be an outdoor / semi outdoor “living room.”

Other ideas include small, hireable cinema spaces, indoor “streets” and outdoor art gallery.







cabinetworks  
aesthetic



## Landmark waterfront building

With the goal of more town centre living and the development of green infrastructure for pedestrian and cycle use to and from the town centre we thought an excellent amenity for all would be a public swimming pool and spa – located on the waterfront for all to enjoy. We imagine its location at or near the site of the former Mr Smiths.

It would facilitate exercise and provide entertainment in the town centre whatever the weather and could benefit the town economically, via admission receipts and increased footfall in the town centre.

We see a large public swimming pool, spa / thermal baths / massage therapy, café and outdoor games.

