



HERTFORDSHIRE DESIGN REVIEW PANEL MEMBERS
Bircherley Green Design Review 18/04/17

Chair: Peter Studdert, Peter Studdert Planning
Mehron Kirk, BDP
Mike Osman, Planning and Regeneration
Yasmin Shariff, Dennis Sharp Architects

Mark Harris
Barton Willmore
7 Soho Square
London
W1D 3QB

3rd May 2017

Dear Mark,

Hertfordshire Design Review Report: Bircherley Green, Hertford (fourth review)

Introduction

The Hertfordshire Design Review Panel met on 18th April 2017 to review proposals to redevelop Bircherley Green in Hertford. The list of attendees is attached as an appendix to the report.

At the pre-application stage discussions have taken place between the design team and East Herts District Council (EHDC), and previous iterations of the proposals have been presented to the Herts Design Review Panel on 23rd June 2014, 19th November 2014 and 8th January 2016.

The proposals are now at the full application stage and a planning application has been submitted for determination by EHDC.

Site Visit & Presentation

Panel members have previously visited the site and a formal site visit was not deemed necessary for this review.

The Panel Chair invited Tim Hagyard (EHDC) to provide an update regarding the planning context.

Since the previous design review, EHDC has produced a Hertford Town Centre Urban Design Strategy (HTCUDS) that sets out the key urban design principles for the area and has been used to help shape the evolution of the masterplan. The HTCUDS has been adopted and will form part of the Local Plan.

A full planning application has been submitted and the public consultation period has closed. Overall EHDC view the proposals for Bircherley Green positively and are satisfied that they deliver a lot of the key principles set out in the HTCUDS. EHDC are keen to hear the Panels' views and wish to positively engage with the Panel on matters including the quality of spaces within the scheme and its architecture.

Mark Harris (Planning Consultant, Barton Willmore) was invited to provide an overview of how the proposals have progressed since the last design review panel meeting. Since the publication of the HTCUDS there has been considerable discussion and negotiations, and the

scheme has evolved positively in the context of the key urban design principles. Key revisions have focused on the hotel (height, scale and mass), pedestrian movement including the link between the bus station and the shopping centre, and the quality of the residential accommodation.

This overview was followed by a presentation of the current proposals by Tony Mead (Architect, Corstorphine + Wright).

Overview of the Site

The Site is located within Hertford Conservation Area and in close proximity to a number of Listed Buildings, notably the Grade II* Listed Lombard House on Bull Plain. The surrounding area is characterised by a range of land uses reflecting the Site's Town Centre location, including a mix of commercial, retail and office uses together with residential accommodation in the immediate vicinity. The River Lee is located immediately to the north of the Site beyond which is Folly Island, comprising predominantly two-storey residential properties.

Overview of the Proposals

The proposals are for a mixed use redevelopment of the town centre that seeks to address the key urban design principles of the HTCUDS, a key aim of which is to link the riverside back to the town centre, redefine key pedestrian routes, and introduce public open space and active uses at ground level.

The proposals are a 'hybrid solution' that comprises the refurbishment of the existing bus station and car park, the redevelopment of the Bircherley Green shopping centre with two principle blocks Block A and Block B (both ground floor retail with residential above), and the partial redevelopment of Centurion House for a ground floor restaurant and 86 bed hotel.

The Masterplan has a retail and leisure focus, centred on a new public open space at Bircherley Square and along the riverside. The height, scale and mass of buildings increase towards key corner gateways and public open spaces, and drop down towards existing development to help visually anchor the scheme within the existing townscape.

Retail and residential units (Blocks A and B)

The redevelopment of the existing shopping centre will provide up to 4,694 sqm flexible retail floorspace, with 70 residential flats above.

The proposed retail units are larger and flexible, individual units are small enough to accommodate smaller retailers or they can be combined to create larger units to accommodate national retailers and anchor stores. The retail units are serviced by the existing service area and trolley access has been introduced to the rear of some retail units.

Residential units are provided above the ground floor retail, all apartments are south facing or dual aspect to maximise solar gain, and benefit from private terraces or balconies. In particular Block B maximises the benefits of its favourable orientation and introduces a green landscaped roofline. Residential building cores have been provided to reduce the need for corridors, and galleries with roof lights allow the influx of daylight.

Car Park

The refurbishment of the car park includes the enhancement of the façade and the introduction of ground floor active uses fronting the riverside. It is also intended to create a new separate vehicular exit.

Bus Station

It is proposed to enhance the bus station facilities as a key gateway, to create a sense of arrival with improved signs, lighting and facilities, and to create a safer space that is more welcoming for visitors. A new timber louvered façade screens the original building. The key pedestrian link between the bus station and the shopping centre has been retained.

Materials

The materials palette reflects the materials of the wider town centre, brick, render, timber and zinc are applied in a contemporary way and complementary to the wider historic setting of the conservation area.

Landscape Strategy

The Landscape Strategy aims to link the scheme into the wider town centre and provide a coherent approach to the treatment of the public realm.

The planting plan takes a soft approach, providing an organic link between open spaces, and softening the hard edges of the built environment and the riverside. A palette of high quality materials, trees and shrubs, and lighting, highlight key corners and nodal landmark features. Timber street furniture makes reference to the timber architectural detailing evident within the town centre.

Lighting Strategy

The lighting strategy employs a range of flexible lighting elements, including column mounted and cantina pendants, up/down lighters are used to highlight key landscape features such as landmark trees.

Delivery

The delivery of the Masterplan is phased to maintain operation of the car park and bus station, and town centre traders.

East Herts District Council

Tim Hagyard (EHDC) was invited to provide a summary of public consultation responses received to date

Consultees predominantly object to the scheme; however there is support in principle for the redevelopment of Bircherley Green.

Issues raised include:

- The appropriateness of the design given the historic nature of Hertford
- Scale and height of buildings fronting the riverside and their impact upon the amenity of residences at Folly Island. (A daylight analysis has not been submitted; overshadowing is a key concern and requires formal assessment.)

- Height of the corner building fronting Bircherley Square
- Public/ private split and the quantity of usable public open space within the scheme
- Access/egress from the car park and conflict between pedestrians and vehicles exiting the car park
- Shading of Museum listed building and garden
- Appearance of the bus station louvered screen
- Space available for storage of trade refuse
- Conflict between pedestrians, residents and service vehicles
- Durability of materials

Panel Observations & Recommendations

The Panel welcomes and supports the positive changes to the proposals resulting in a development that has the potential to be a significant asset to Hertford.

The proposed masterplan generally works well and responds to its challenging location within the town centre and Conservation Area. Of particular note, the removal of the surface car park as shown in previous iterations of the proposals, and the reinstatement of the key pedestrian link between the bus station and the shopping centre, has enabled the delivery of an enhanced public realm, with improved connectivity and opportunities for the enjoyment of the riverside. However, there are significant concerns about the detailed design of the bus station link (see below).

The vertical rhythm of the buildings, rise and fall in the right places, and the introduction of active use at ground floor level animate the streetscene and riverside.

The approach to height, scale and massing is sensitive to the historic setting that includes some fragile listed buildings. In particular the Panel commends the design approach to the hotel, which has improved significantly, resulting in a building that is more sympathetic to the scale and rhythm of Railway Street.

The treatment of key gateways and focal points is positive. In particular the Panel supports the proposed scale of the corner building (Building B) fronting Bircherley Square and the riverside which seems appropriate given the importance of Bircherley Square as a major new civic space for Hertford town centre.

The refurbishment of the large and unattractive existing buildings to be retained is challenging, the Panel endorses the contemporary approach to the bus station façade that is appropriate for this type of use and appears clean and crisp.

Overall the balance of residential and retail provision is deemed appropriate. With regards to residential units, the introduction of additional building cores is welcomed, resulting in the creation of stairwells and shorter corridors that allow the influx of daylight and improve the amenity of arrival spaces.

The contemporary approach to the lighting strategy is appropriate in this urban setting and has the potential to create an exemplary and exciting place.

However, in going forward, the Panel advises that there are a number of detailed concerns that need to be addressed before wholehearted support can be given to the scheme.

Pedestrian link between the bus station and the shopping centre

While the Panel is fully supportive of the reinstatement of the pedestrian link between the bus station and the shopping centre, as currently proposed this space feels like a long and unattractive corridor. This link is a major point of arrival from both the bus station and the car park, and needs greater generosity of space and light.

The link should be considered as a street, and should emerge from under the car park into a more generous space open to the sky between retail units R7 and R8. This would require the division of Building B into two separate buildings. This new space should be designed as a significant focal point along the main pedestrian route to Bircherley Square, and would also provide a more prominent indication of the entrance to the bus station and the car park from the pedestrian street.

It is appreciated that this amendment to the application would require a small reduction in retail space and residential units above; however the Panel believes that their loss is outweighed by the improvements to the character and quality of the built environment at this crucial point in the development. In addition, this amendment seems to fit with the proposed phasing strategy and may even make it easier to deliver.

Building B – Riverside Walk

The Panel recognises the corner of Building B fronting Bircherley Square and the Riverside Walk as a key focal point. Their only concern relates to materials and the use of brick to first floor level with large areas of render above. For such an important building the Panel believes that stone, rather than render, should be used as the principal facing material to reflect the civic importance of Bircherley Square.

Car Park, Bus Station and Hotel

There is an opportunity to further improve the route between the bus station and the eastern end of the Riverside Walk, although it is accepted that this route has to cross the vehicle exit from the car park, and pedestrian safety and visibility will be of paramount importance.

There is concern over the prominent and poor appearance of the lift overrun, and its negative impact upon views from the wider townscape. The opportunity to explore its removal, or redesign, is therefore supported.

With regards to the bus station, whilst the introduction of the proposed louvres is fully supported as a design element, there is concern regarding their transparency, and their effectiveness as a screen to views of the unattractive original building behind. Detailed design should ensure that the louvres hide as much of the original building as possible, without compromising ventilation.

The Panel commends the design approach to the hotel and suggests that the strong vertical element at the southeast corner of the building (restaurant entrance) would benefit from the addition of a lantern or cupola to highlight the corner and to reflect similar corner treatments within the Conservation Area. In addition, the mansard roof appears quite boxy, and whilst the

use of zinc is supported in principle, it does not have the same textural qualities as the slate that is evident in the wider townscape, so careful and crisp detailing will be important here.

Retail units

A key principle of the scheme is to create a varied and active retail frontage. The Panel supports the provision of flexible retail unit sizes to accommodate a range of retail options, and encourages measures to ensure that the optimum range and mix of retail offers is successfully delivered.

There is concern that retailers could potentially blank out large areas of the shop frontage turning their back on the streetscene (particularly along the Riverside Walk). The Panel encourages measures to prevent this from happening and supports the suggestion for the production of a shop front Design Guide.

The proposed Café (R1) fronts the public realm on all sides and should therefore have an active frontage on all sides; this can be achieved through clever design.

Residential units

There is concern over the arrangement, in some, of the residential units where residents are required to walk through the bedroom to access the roof terrace or balcony. In all cases living/kitchen areas should have direct access to balconies and terraces.

With regards to single aspect southwest facing units there is concern about overheating. Effective cooling measures should be integrated into the detail design and consider the area and specification of glazing, as well as the use of ventilation and shading mechanisms such as brise soleil.

The location of cycle parking to the rear of Building A alongside refuse storage in an area with shared access and poor security is unacceptable. Convenient and secure cycle parking should be provided for each residential block, where they can only be accessed by residents, close to key building entrances and cores.

Landscape strategy

The landscape strategy proposes too many different landscape treatments and is overly complex for this scale of development. A reduced palette of high quality hard and soft landscape features and surface treatments should be used to reinforce the distinct character of the hierarchy of public open spaces and routes, and link the riverside back into the development. It is suggested that there is an opportunity to emphasise the main public open space at Bircherley Square, and use a simpler palette of materials elsewhere.

There is concern for the treatment of the public realm within Bircherley Square and along the riverside, a range of landscape features, such as street furniture and tree planting, appear cluttered in places and compromise the usability of the space. It is recommended that the subtle rearrangement of Building R1, and the landscape features within these areas, would help free up space and provide the flexibility for these areas to accommodate different events throughout the year.

Riverside Walk

The treatment of the Riverside Walk should strike a balance between introducing ground floor activity whilst reducing the impact upon Folly Island. The layout and design of the riverside is further constrained by its designation as an emergency access that requires a clear vehicular route to be maintained at all times.

The Panel agree that the introduction of retail units along here is the most appropriate use. This section of the riverside is overshadowed and is not likely to be an appropriate space to linger, however it is an attractive route from which users can enjoy the riverside setting.

The arrangement of landscape elements such as lighting, street furniture and tree planting is critical and needs to be well thought through and integrated with the edge treatment. For example seating and planting areas should not create barriers but enable easy access to and enjoyment of the river edge.

The potential for new moorings is supported, from an urban design point of view they add vitality and colour to the riverside. However, in order to avoid any negative impacts upon the enjoyment of the public realm, the Panel suggest that moorings should only be located towards the eastern end of the Riverside Walk, and should not encroach upon Bircherley Square. It is appreciated that there may be issues regarding impacts upon the Folly Island residences in close proximity, however these could be dealt with through the planning process or other appropriate management and licencing methods.

Conclusion

Overall the Panel supports the positive changes to the masterplan, and commends the design team's positive engagement throughout the design review process.

In conclusion, it is advised that there are still a small number of outstanding concerns, the most significant of which is the treatment of the pedestrian link between the bus station and main shopping centre. In addition, further consideration should also be given to the character and quality of the key pedestrian routes between the bus station and the riverside, and along the riverside itself.

The Panel recognises the corner of Building B fronting Bircherley Square and the Riverside Walk as a key focal point and believes that stone, rather than render, should be used as the principal facing material to reflect the civic importance of Bircherley Square.

The Panel commends the design approach to the hotel and suggests that the strong vertical element at the southeast corner of the building would benefit from the addition of a lantern or cupola to highlight the corner.

The creation of active ground floor frontages and the delivery of an optimum range and mix of retailers are critical to the success of the scheme. The Panel supports the production of a shop front Design Guide to ensure a range and mix of retail offers.

The Riverside is heavily constrained, particularly by the need to maintain emergency access. The arrangement of landscape elements such as lighting, street furniture and tree planting is critical and needs to be well thought through and integrated with the edge treatment.

The subtle rearrangement of landscape features should free up space and provide the flexibility for these public open areas to accommodate different events throughout the year.

The landscape treatment should focus on a simple and high quality palette of materials, that reinforce the distinct character of Hertford and hierarchy of public open spaces and routes, celebrate buildings and open spaces at key focal points, and reflect the detailing evident within the wider Conservation Area.

The Landscape Strategy should be treated as an integral component of the masterplan, equally as important as the built environment. As the detailed design stage progresses, it will be important to ensure that the landscape vision is not compromised. In particular lighting is a critical aspect of the landscape strategy, and provides an opportunity to make this scheme an exciting place to visit.

Yours sincerely,

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Peter Studdert
on behalf of the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel

cc. Tim Hagyard, East Herts DC