3.0 Concept

3.1 Introduction

The ambition for the developments proposed on this eastern quarter of The Oracle is to continue to evolve and support The Oracle's role as a multi-use, inclusive, heart of town asset.

The design concept exploits the opportunity of delivering 449 homes across both sites by carefully massing the development from lower scale buildings on its eastern edges to a taller landmark building on Yield Hall Places 1's north west corner. This will be a highly visible tall building, that will signal The Oracle and the river front and provide a positive identify to the new residential quarter within the wider town centre. It will enhance urban legibility and open the southern and eastern edges of The Oracle to its neighbours. It will have a better connected and more integrated public realm along Yield Hall Place, the IDR and London Street.

The following section sets out how the concept has been developed.

3.2 Options Considered

As part of the design development process, a number of initial massing models and scheme proposals were brought forward. The approach facilitated testing and validation of the final preferred solution.

A summary of explored design alternatives is provided adjacent. In addition to varying geometry, each option has been assessed across a range of different heights.

Option 01: A balanced composition, with a generous space between the towers on the southern but tighter on the northern site. Significant massing and bulk presented to London Street.

Option 02. Two perimeter blocks provide strong definition of the public realm and private courtyards for residents. Overshadowing of the public realm and, the impact of noise on the south facing are strong negatives.

Option 03. L-shaped blocks allow light to reach the courtyards, provide protection form the IDR and reduce the extent of overshadowing of the Riverside, though the latter remains a significant problem.

Option 04. Two river facing courtyards and a smaller south facing courtyard facing London Street define the plan shape, though the quality of the courtyard environments are a cause of concern.

Option 01 - Three towers

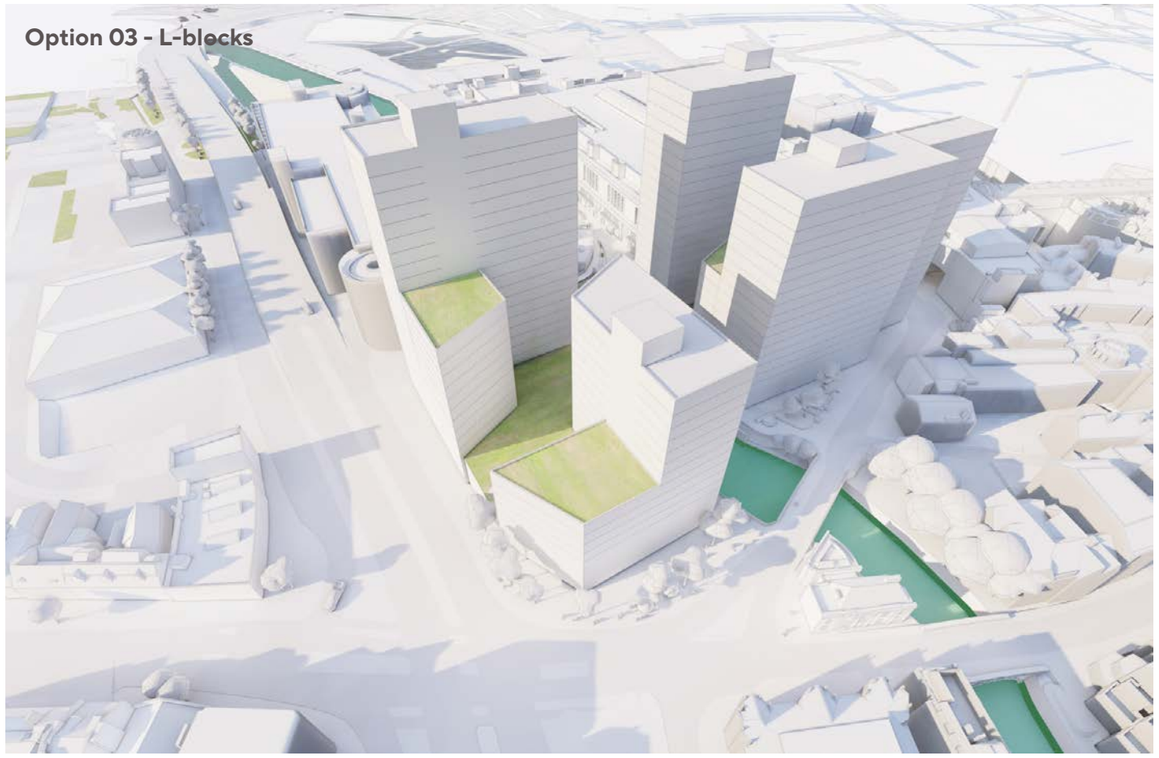
Option 02 - Hard edge to riverside

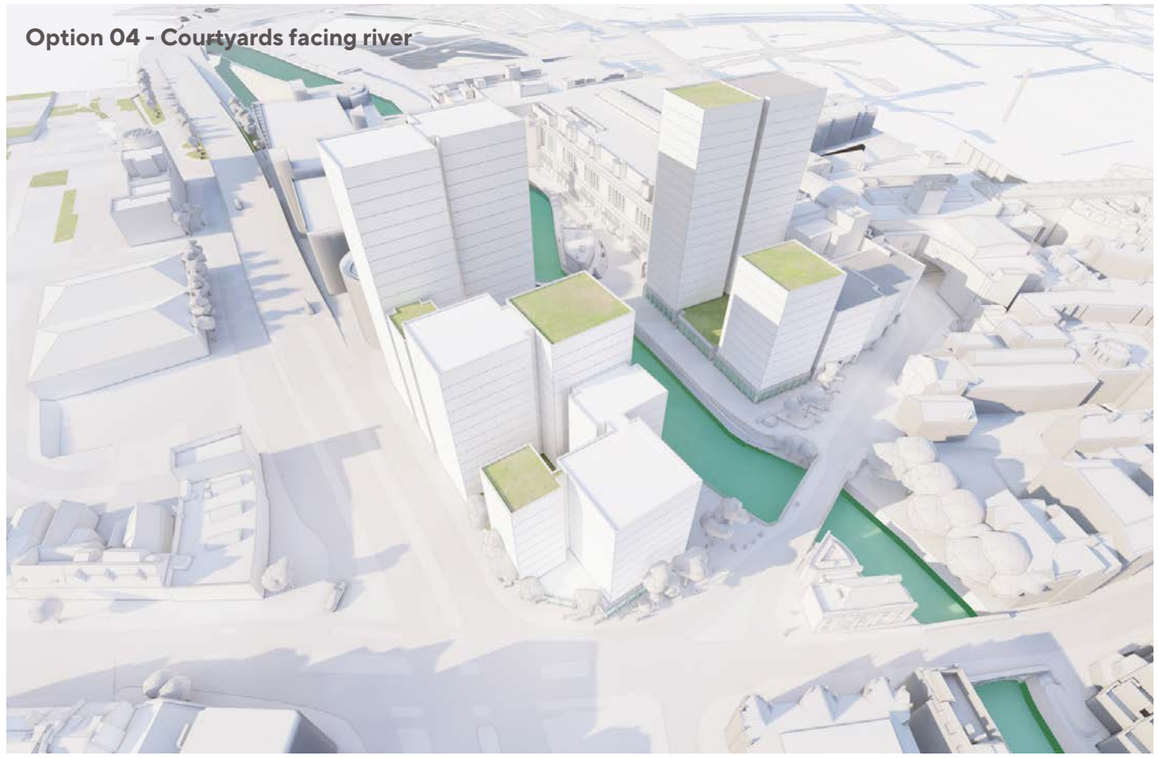
Option 03 - L-blocks

Option 04 - Courtyards facing river

Option 01 - Three towers

Option 02 - Hard edge to riverside


Option 03 - L-blocks


Option 04 - Courtyards facing river

3.3 Selected Approach

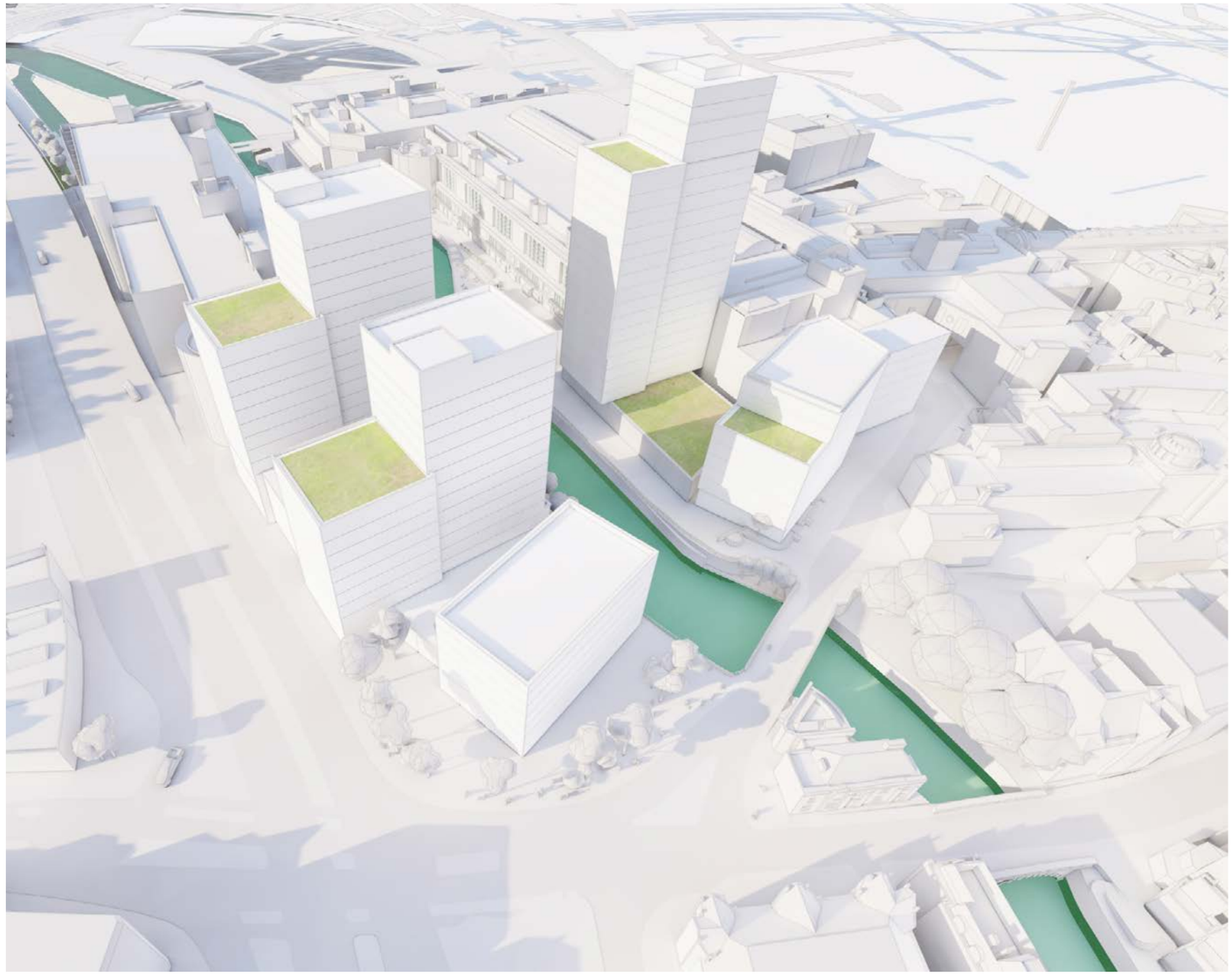
Bar blocks are set at ninety degrees to the river, an orientation that allows sun to penetrate the courtyards between the blocks and provide all homes with east-west or southern light.

It presents a lighter aspect to the Riverside than the perimeter blocks ensuring the Riverside gets good light throughout the day.

The ground floors allow for active uses and frontage to the public realm.

The blocks are articulated in plan and form to place height towards the centre of the site and lower buildings to the edges.

The low-rise block at the junction of the IDR and London Street is rotated to create public space and to allow visual and physical connectivity.



3.4 Big Moves

1 **Activate Ground Floor**

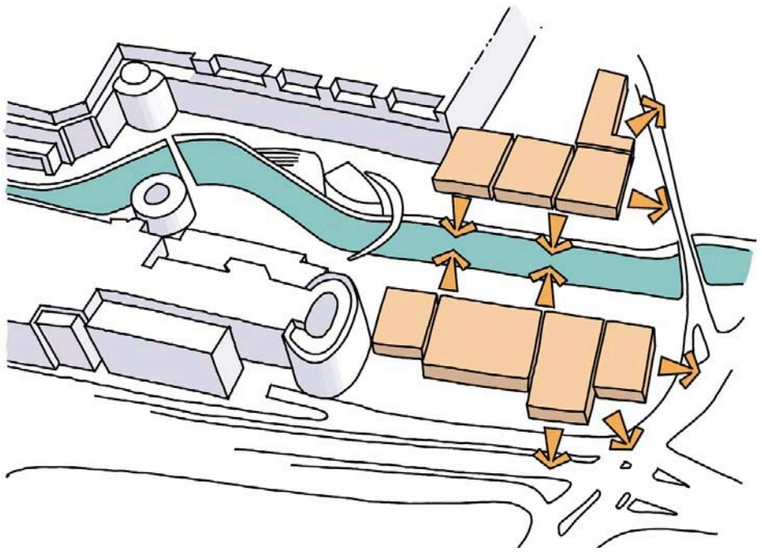
Both sides of the river will have a greater mix of uses including restaurants, leisure, upgraded cinema, co-working, maker spaces and active residential entrances. The latter will include concierge, resident amenity, and lounge spaces.

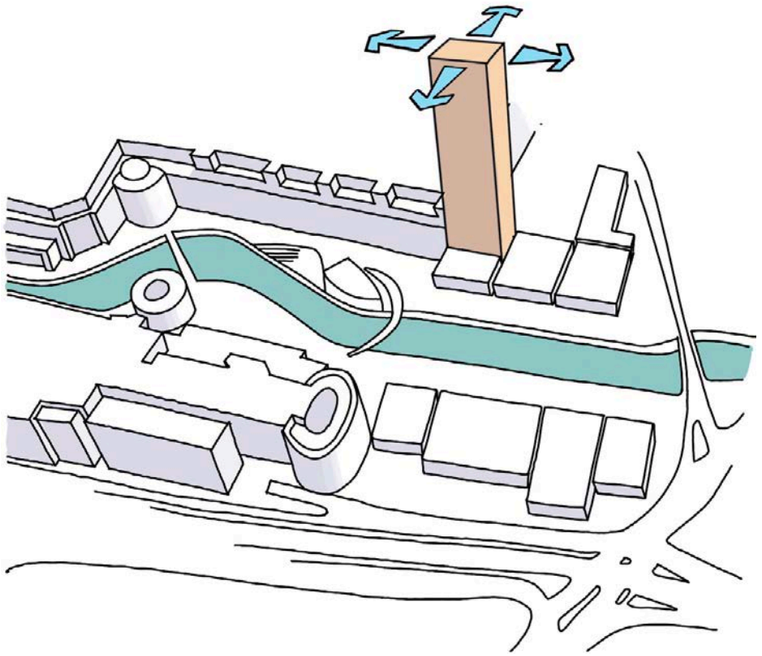
2 **Landmarking the site**

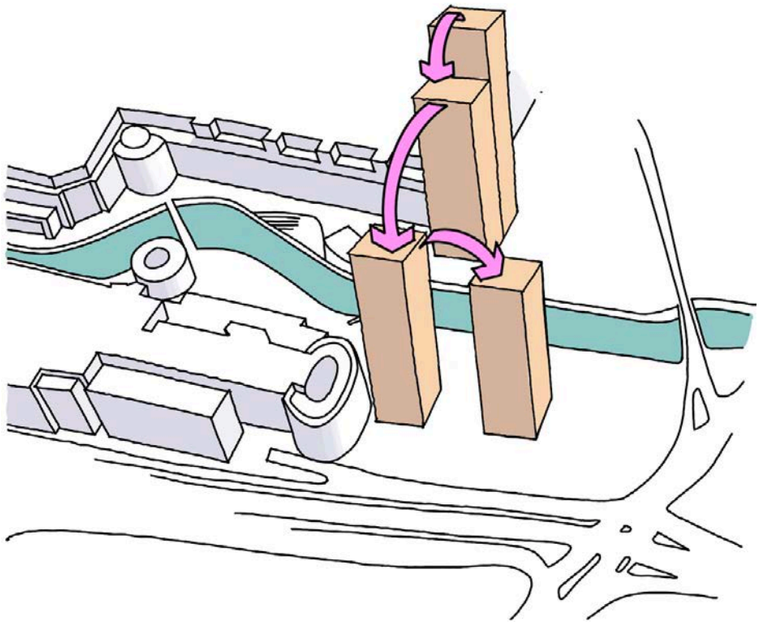
The tallest building on the sites is positioned on the north west corner of the development abutting the shopping centre. It will be visible and landmark The Oracle and the riverside, and this southern gateway to the town centre.

3 **Stepping down towards the perimeters**

The development's massing steps down from the tall landmark building towards the edges of the sites in deference to the neighbouring contexts. This creates a visually interesting composition with a clear geometrical hierarchy.

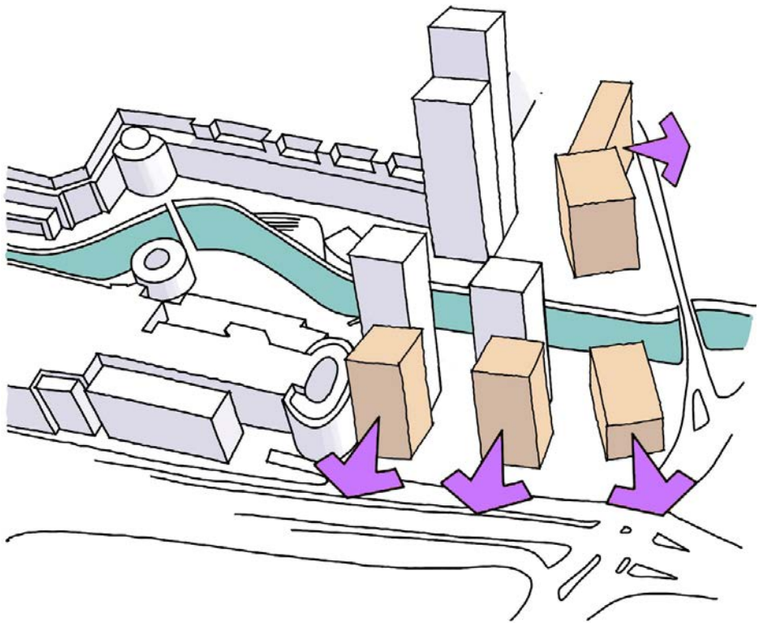






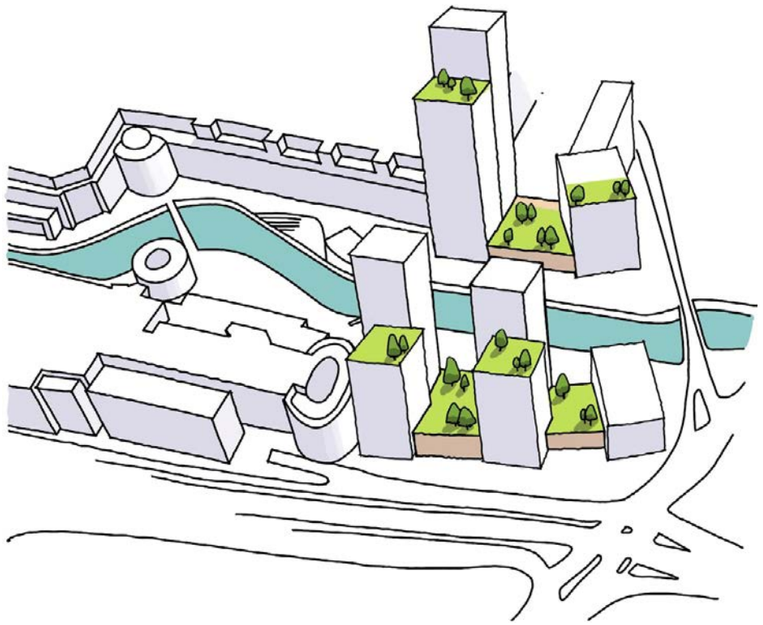
4 Relating the buildings to neighbouring contexts

The development's identity is derived form the specificity of its location, the site's history and its unique position transitioning between the conservation areas and the shopping centre. Geometry, material, and detail are chosen to relate to immediate neighbours and to create a human scale architectural expression.



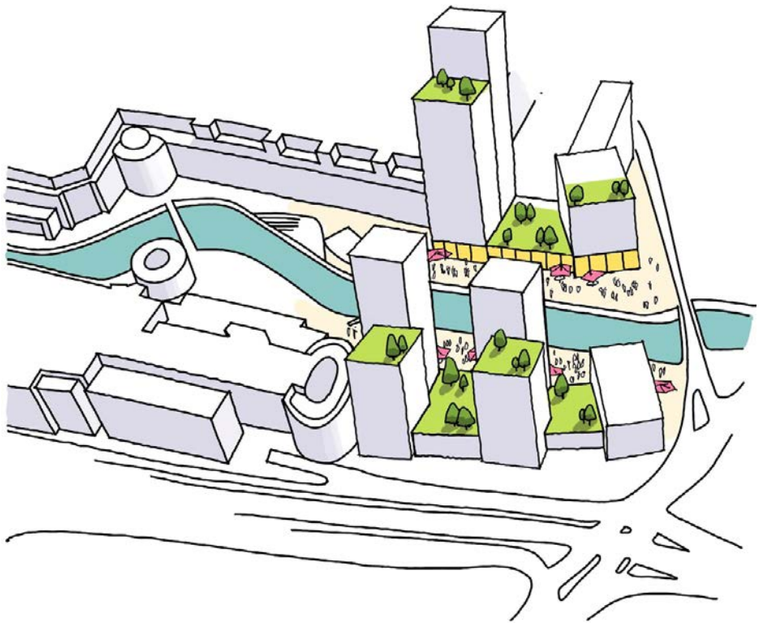
5 Courtyards, terraces and balconies

Residential courtyards, terraces and balconies express the ambition of the development to provide residents with great outdoor amenity. The blocks are orientated and the building geometry set to maximise sunlight and, to provide views over the river and the landscape to the south of Reading.



6 An extended public realm

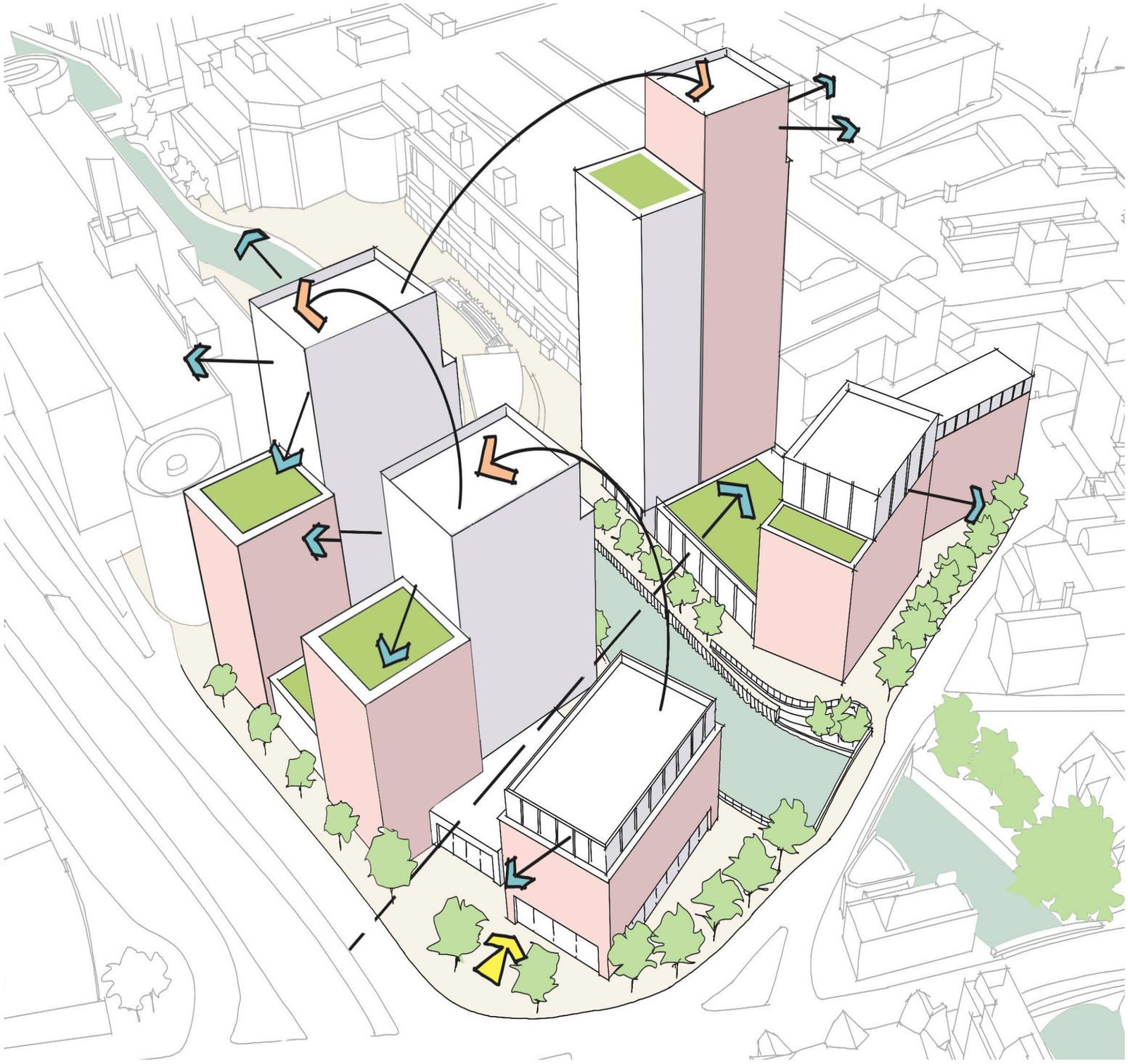
Proposals for enhancing the public realm go beyond the immediate site boundaries, with improvements to Yield Hall Place and the IDR brought forward to integrate the scheme with neighbouring areas and, to green and soften that currently hard and hostile roads and pavements. It is intended to create a space to be enjoyed by all users of the town centre.



3.5 Concept

The overall concept is for:

1. A well-connected place that encourages movement along London Street across the IDR and through Yield Hall Place. In addition it will enhance the pedestrian experience on both banks of the river with a greater mix of ground floor uses, new places to dwell and improved landscape. The site's layout will improve visual connections between the riverside and neighbouring areas.
2. A scale of development that is responsive to a hierarchy of scales, from the wider scale of the town centre to its adjacent neighbourhoods and finally, its immediate context.
3. The geometry of the development to create an elegant and stepped massing that focuses height on the river, with lower rise buildings on the site's southern and eastern edges where they face the conservation area.
4. To create an exciting and identifiable architecture with the building's expression referencing the site's heritage whilst looking optimistically towards the future. Reading's pallet of red, grey, and beige bricks, stone and terracotta dressings are used and reinterpreted to create a modern take on the towns' rich legacy of ornament and decoration.



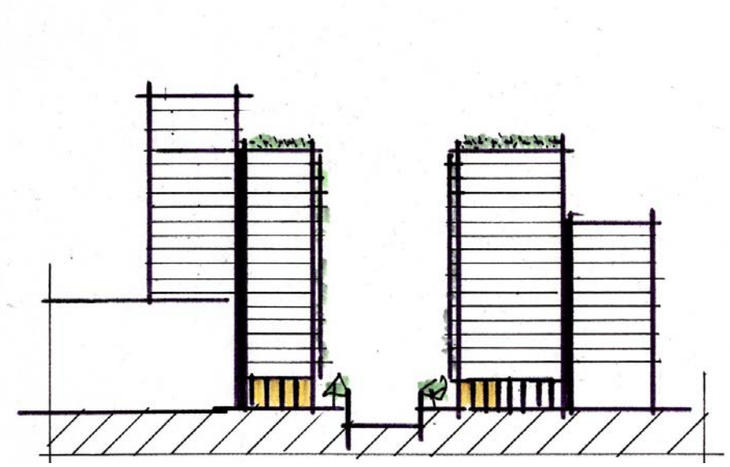
3.6 Elegance of Form & Geometry

The buildings' articulated geometry reinforces the overall strategy of creating a distinctive, stepped development that rises from the southeast towards the north west. This design tactic is made explicit in the three tallest buildings by the stepping the height over several storeys. In addition, on Yield Hall Place 2, the two taller buildings are cranked in plan to break down the buildings' bulk. The shift in plan aligns with the stepped massing. On Yield Hall Place 1 a deep reveal is introduced to the same effect. These are the first moves in creating elegant and vertically proportioned massing on the taller blocks. (1)

The second move is the identity of the stair and lift cores on the elevation and to define another point where the massing can be broken vertically.(2)

The final move sets the parapet heights to the stair and lift core in such a way that they become points to focus and visual arrest on the elevation. On the Yield Hall 1 site they provide an opportunity to create a landmarking crown for the development. (3)

The same approach to verticality and elegance is taken on the shorter elevations to the tall blocks and to those on the lower blocks facing Yield Hall Place. (4)



(1) Elegant and vertically proportioned massing.

(2) Identifying the stair and lift cores.

(3) Stair and lift cores become points of focus

(4) A similar approach is applied to the Riverside elevations.

3.7 Architectural Influences

The sites have a long history of large-scale buildings including breweries, mills, tram and bus stations, generator buildings etc. They will now be home to a large-scale development with mix of residential, leisure, retail and work uses.

The design challenge is to find an appropriate architectural language that allows these new uses to be married together successfully and sensitively address its immediate contexts.

We look to the history of the site to inform the design response to this challenge and use an interpretation of historic industrial building typology to deliver a human scaled scheme.

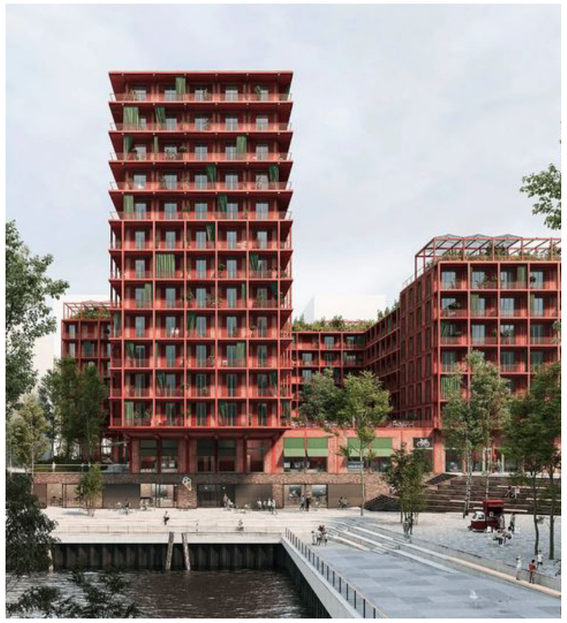
3.8 Architectural Expression

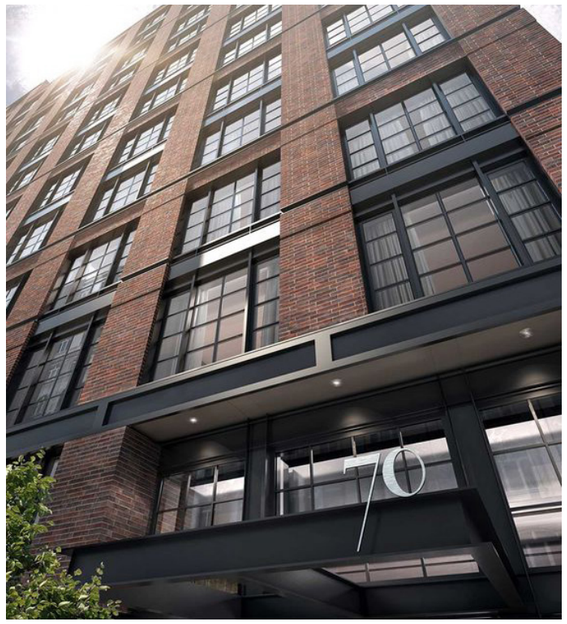
The development will contribute and reinforce Reading town centre's unique identity and sense of place whilst creating an exciting and attractive set of buildings that address one of the key public realms in the town centre. This will be achieved by marrying four strands that respond to the site and its context:

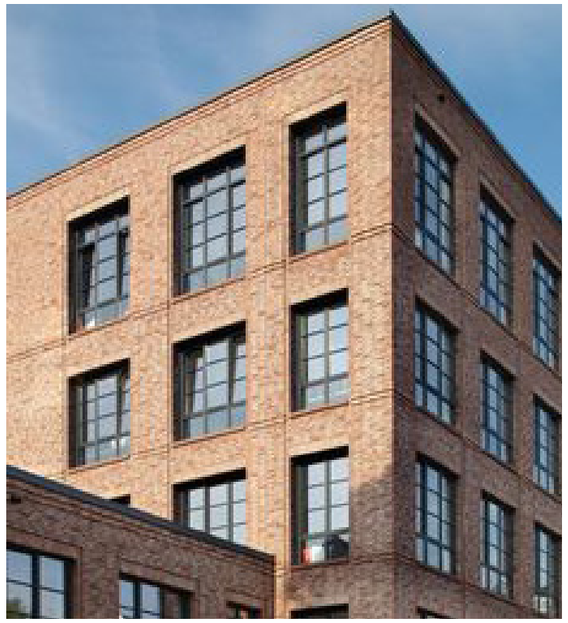
1. The site's manufacturing and commercial heritage. The design team have looked to Reading's past to find examples of buildings that can mediate large scale uses with more residential scale neighbourhoods.
2. Reading's long history of using brick (red, beige and greys), stone dressings and decorative terracotta trims and edges.
3. The colour, vibrancy and excitement of retail and leisure architecture particularly at the lower levels facing the riverside.
4. Greening the buildings with landscaped podiums, terraces, balconies, and green edges.

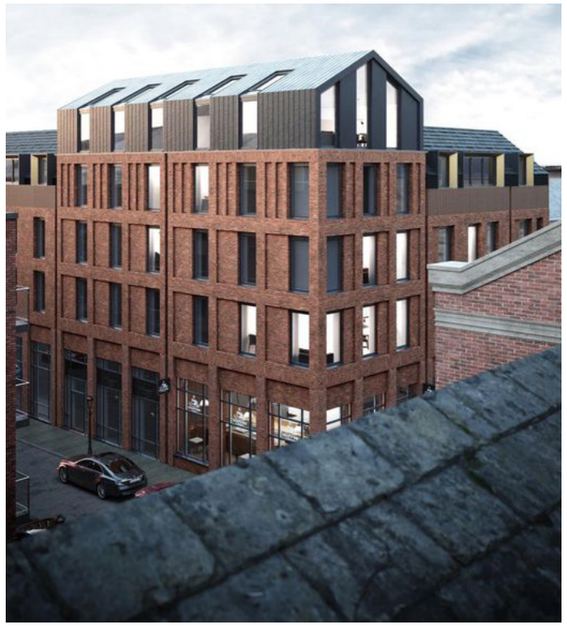
By marrying these three components together the development will be integrated with its immediate neighbours from the conservation area to the southeast and shopping centre to the west.

The building geometry illustrated on the previous sections has been modulated to deliver a sense of identity to each building, one that relates specifically to its context. The block on the south eastern corner has been rotated to reinforce its specialness and to open up the southern approach to the Oracle.









3.9 Architectural Expression

The buildings will be simple, elegant, and well detailed, with elevations organised to give a vertical emphasis. Windows are stacked to carry the eye from low to high levels.

Windows are fenestrated with a complementary dark panel to give the appearance that the window assembly dominates the relationship of solid to void, lightening what could otherwise appear to be heavy set façades.

The proportions of the windows have been set out to relate to the overall composition of the façade.

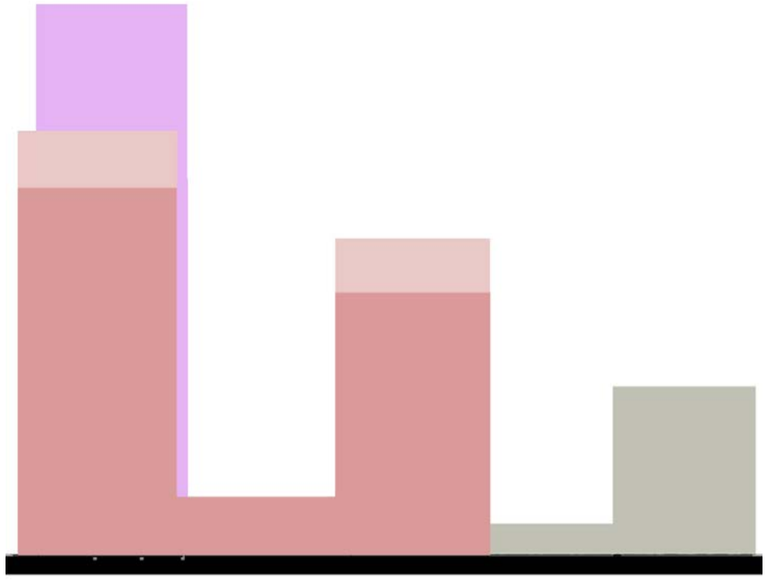
Coursing is introduced at each floor level to provide a balance of horizontals and verticals to deliver a visually restful façade and a residential scale that relates the buildings to context.

The images on the opposite page show how the buildings' geometries are further articulated though modification of roof profiles and contrasting brick. All of this helps to create a family of buildings, each with their own identity, but each related to the larger group.

3.10 Massing & Scale

The proposed buildings are higher than those of its immediate neighbours to the south and east. There are larger scale buildings to the west and north though still lower than the proposed development. As already noted, the massing steps down towards the perimeters of the site but will not be seen from all the surrounding streets. The scheme is more than 50m from sensitive areas such as London Street and Market Square. The distance and the stepping down will make for a smoother transition from high on the site to the lower scale of these street.

The massing of the building has been articulated by shifts in plan and geometry to break appearance of bulk. The architectural strategy was developed to ensure that the scale of the building is appropriate to its neighbourhood. The design team have looked to Reading's architectural legacy for appropriate architectural typologies that transition larger scale buildings to more residential and lower scale contexts. They have found inspiration in the Victorian and Edwardian works buildings that were once on The Oracle site and along the Kennet. These buildings used common façade materials, solid: void relationships; proportions and fenestration that gave a common reading and relatable scale to diverse building sizes and typologies – and provide inspiration for this development.



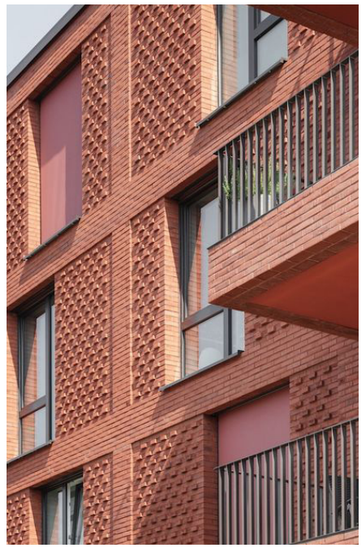
Massing of proposals as they elevate towards the IDR, with the tall building of Yield Hall Place 1 in the background (in purple) and the stepped buildings of Yield Hall Place 2 in the foreground, showing how massing is stepped towards the IDR.

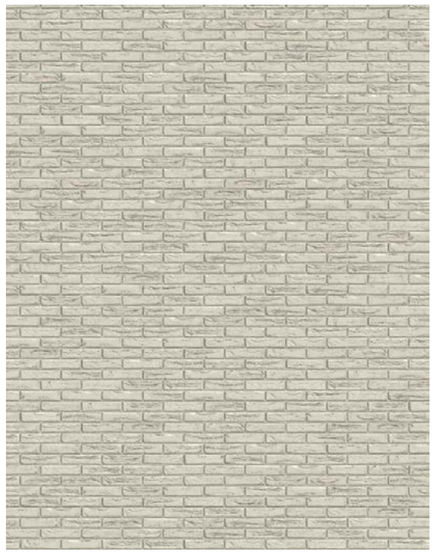
Photographs of recent developments at (top) City Island and (below) Canada Water both in London, where a use of fenestration within windows that clearly relate to residential uses help give scale to large residential buildings.

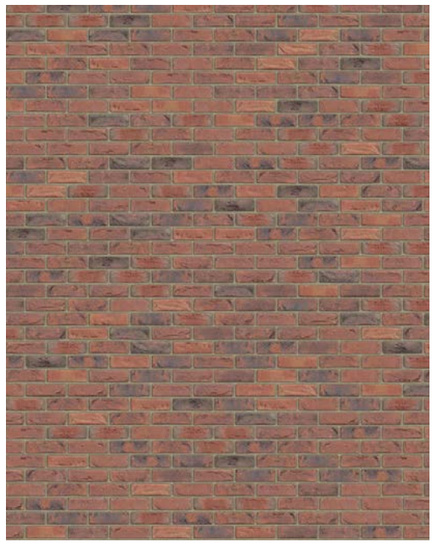
3.11 Materials, Detail & Ornament

Good quality façades that use materials, colours and details that develop the overall design concept whilst acknowledging the heritage of site are proposed as a way of developing a high quality architecture and integrating the buildings with their contexts.

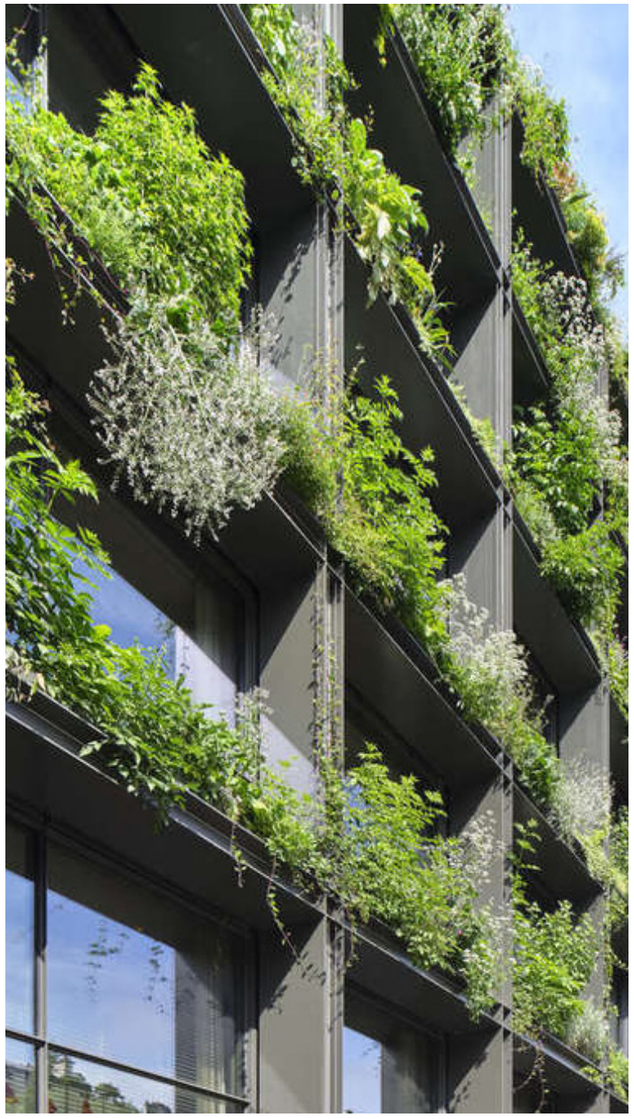
The materials will be used to ornament key locations in a way that adds interest and vitality to the façades. This ornament will be a modern interpretation of Reading's heritage of decorative brick and terracotta work so distinctive in the town centre.







HOUSE OF FRASER
THE ORACLE

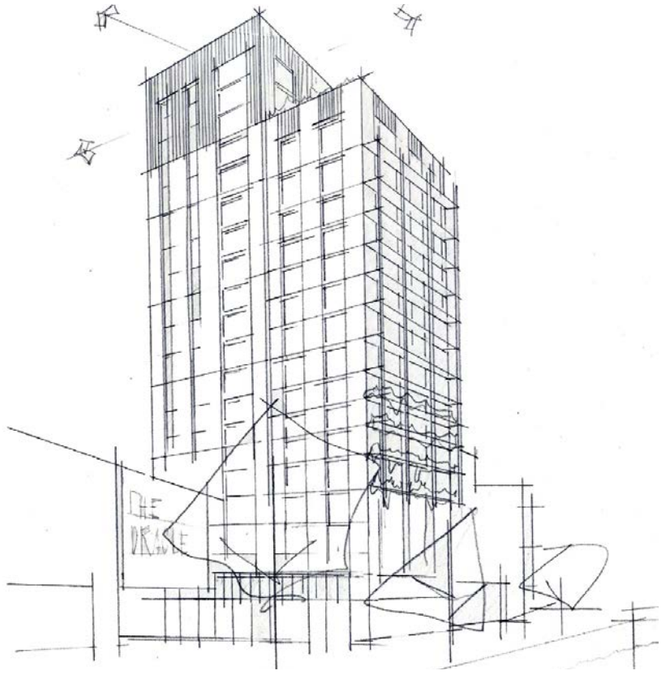


Fire exit
Keep clear

3.12 Bringing it All Together

Key issued address in the concept for the buildings include:

- Active ground floors to the Riverside, the southern end of Yield Hall Place, London Street and at the cross over of London Street and the IDR.
- Balconies overlooking the Riverside and the courtyards.
- Vertical greening of lower level Riverside facing balconies.
- Elegant geometry and articulation of massing to break down the massing and to create a vertical emphasis on the elevations.
- Brick buildings of a variety of colours that relate to context.
- An architectural character that gives the development a distinct identity and a sense of place that is uniquely Reading.

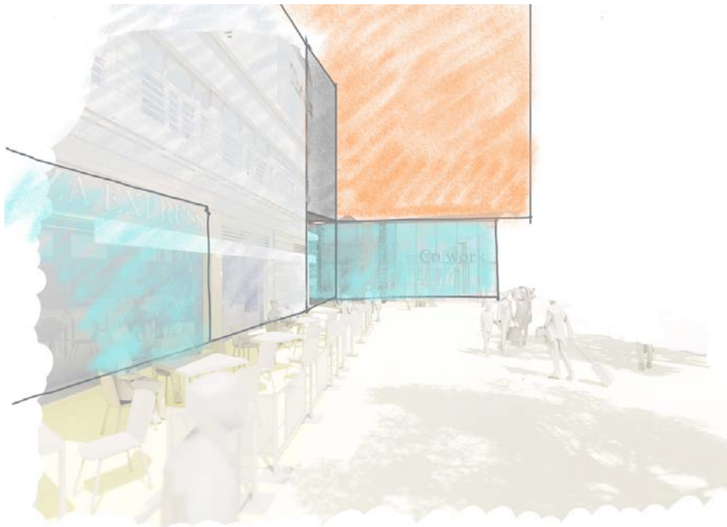


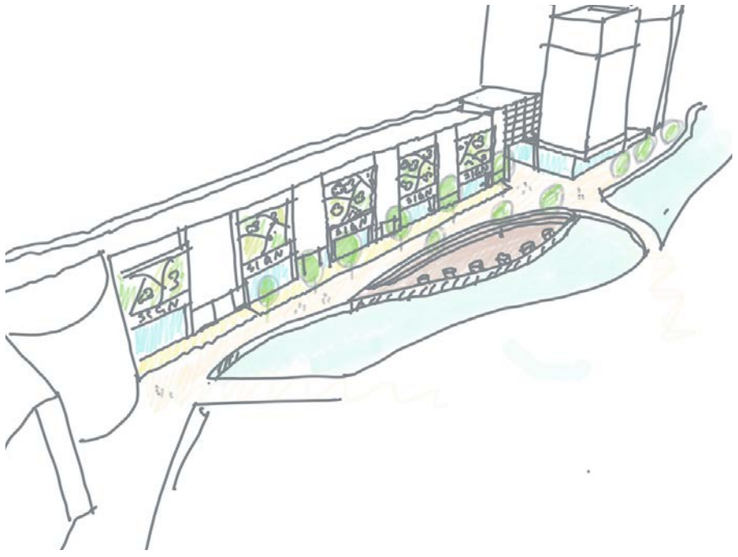
3.13 Active Street Level

The proposals will enliven the public realm with a new and varied mix of economically sustainable uses including leisure, cinema, restaurants, working and access to the reception area and ground floor amenity of the residential blocks.

The proposal will provide access to the retail at the lower mall level of the The Oracle via escalator and encourage additional movement and accessibility between the lower mall retail provision and the Riverside.

The existing character of the Riverside at this end of the estate which is somewhat 'cold' in terms of attractiveness to visitors to The Oracle with be changed to 'warm '.





Studies of how the new entrance to the leisure space and the mall could be used to activate the Riverside.

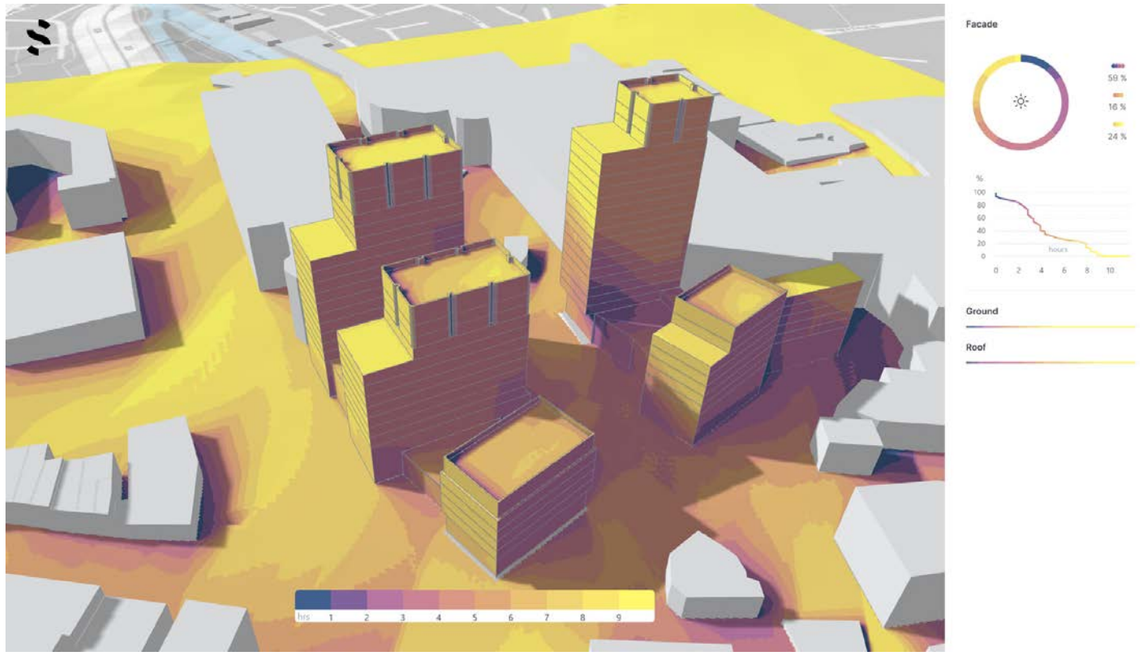
3.14 Solar Movement, Micro climate and Sustainability

The design objective to deliver a highly sustainable development is met by taking a hierarchical approach to 1) form 2) fabric and 3) on-site energy generation.

1. Blocks are of simple form with good wall to floor ratio. They are orientated in a general north-south direction that maximises east-west daylight to all homes and to minimise glare and overheating.
2. Façades have good window to wall ratio and are 600mm + thick to allow for high levels of insulation. Green/blue roofs deliver increased insulation and support water attenuation and increased biodiversity.
3. On site water source heat exchanger and PV's will be used for generation and the detail of this is set out the sustainability and MEP submittals.

Green courtyards over look the river and are open to the south, as are the terraces at upper levels where buildings are stepped in section. These and the balconies will deliver a green scheme that supports biodiversity, biophilic living and wellness.

During design development the impacts of built form on the local micro-climate has been assessed, and the form adjusted to minimise any negative impacts as shown on the diagrams on the opposite pages.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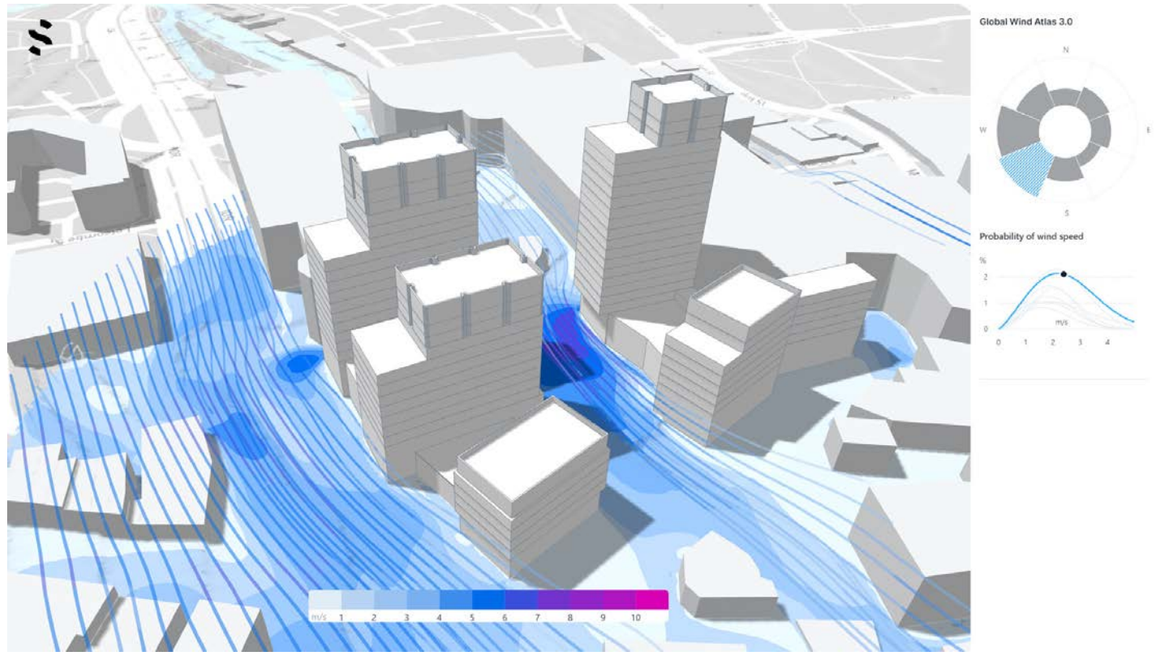
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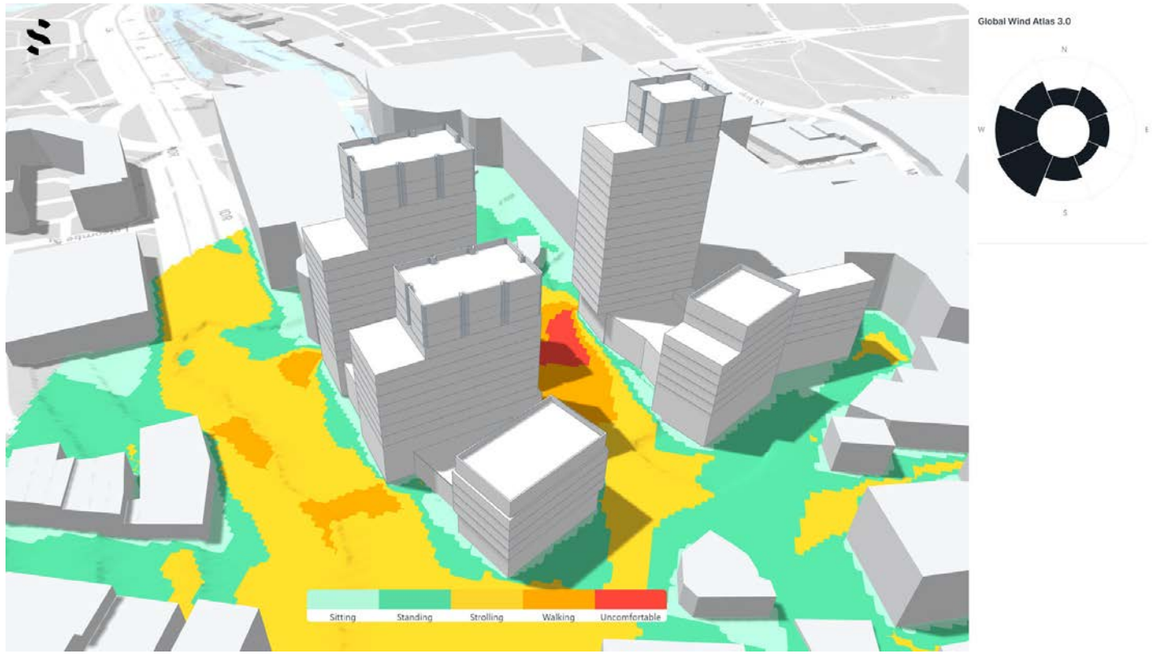
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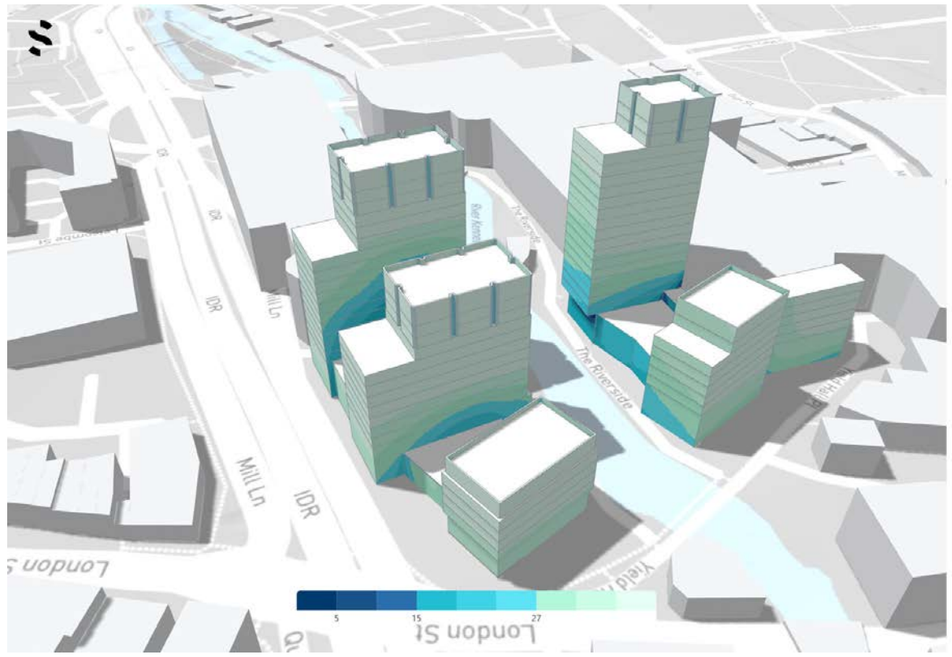
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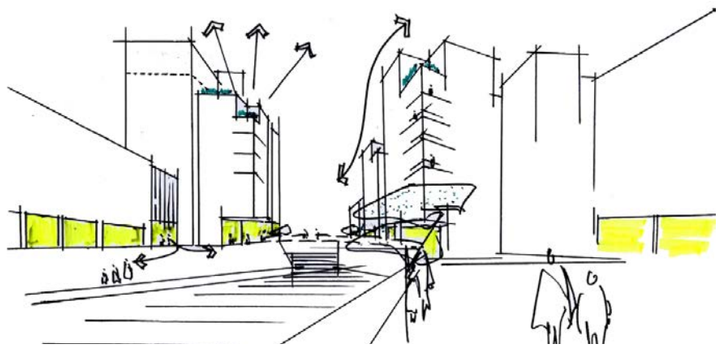
Between 5 and 15% 8 %
Between 15 and 27% 21 %
Above 27% 65 %
IDR
Mill Ln
The Riverside
London St

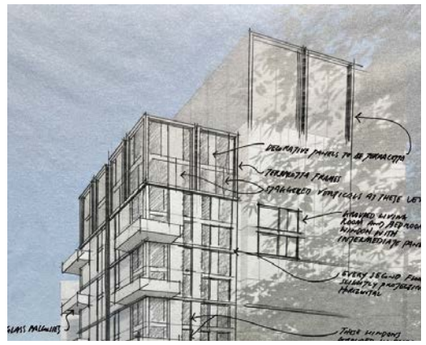
3.15 Design Evolution

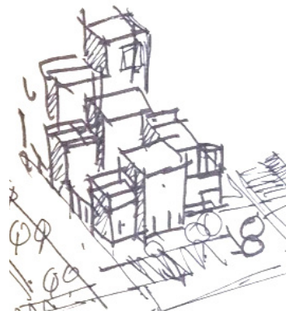
Design development has been subject to extensive dialogue and engagement with stakeholders, council officers and a design review panel which has informed the design thinking resulting in reappraisal or redesign. The images are taken from key presentations and are snaps shots of the evolution of the scheme. Key dialogues centred around:

- The mix and distribution of uses in relation to activation of the public realm and how uses would improve the quality of the public realm to the Riverside, Yield Hall Place, and the IDR
- The extent and the detail of the public realm strategy. The applicant responded positively to the authority's appetite to improve connectivity and for enhancing the public realm beyond the site's boundaries
- The location of height, distribution and articulation of massing, and scaling of the buildings to their context was heavily informed by the outcome of the first design review panel and its suggestion on the need for a clear hierarchy in relation to height. The second review encouraged elegance and simplification of the architectural response
- The maturing of the architectural strategy to create elegant elevations was reviewed with the officers and scheme addresses many of their concerns on proportions, balance and verticality

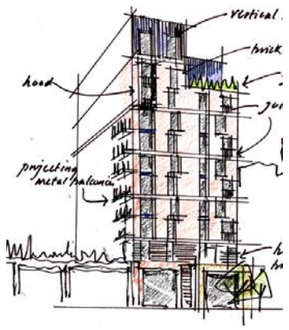
March Pre-application







April DRP1



June Pre-application

August DRP2

October Pre-application