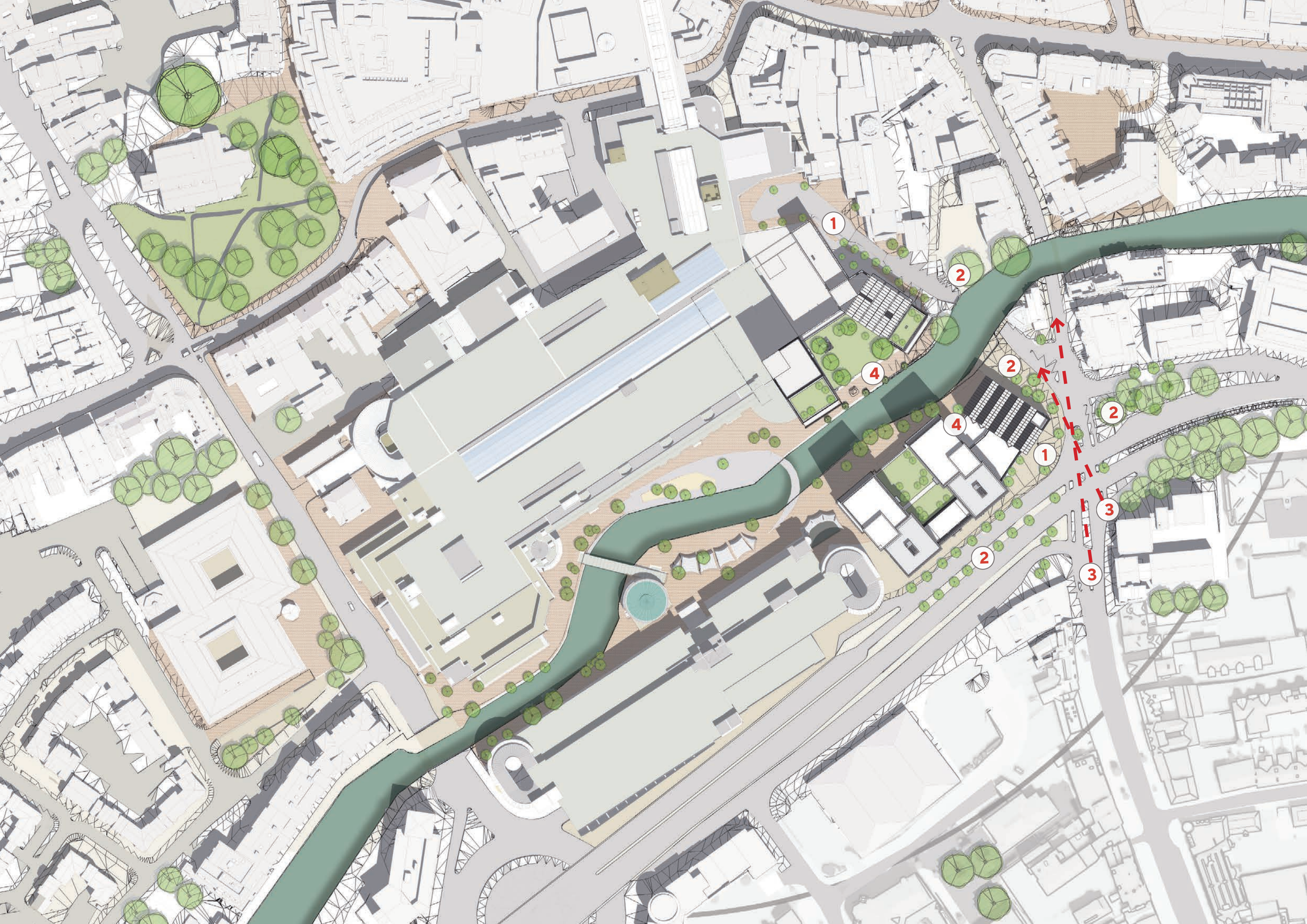
CONORA

1.9 Design Team

Client	Hammerson
Development Manager	Packaged Living
Architect	CRTKL
Planning/sustainability/ EIA/Built Heritage and Townscape/ Communications	Turley
Landscape	LDA
Transport & Highways	Stantec
Cost Consultant	Arcadis
MEP Consultant	Rolton
Structures & Civils	Byrne Looby
Fire Engineers	Jensen Hughes
Principal Designer	Brian Bulfin Associates Ltd
Ecology	HDA
Acoustic/ Air Quality	Hydrock
Arboricultural	TMA
Daylight/ Microclimate	GIA
Verified Views	Ambient
Legal	Eversheds
Valuations	CBRE
Retail	MMX Retail

2.0 Masterplan Approach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2.1 A Masterplan Approach

Great design is required to deliver Hammerson's ambition for the proposed development, one that will evolve and support The Oracle's role as a multi-use, inclusive, heart of town asset. As such, the applicant's proposals focus on excellent placemaking, and the exploitation of the opportunities afforded by The Oracle's position within Reading, its riverside location and its relationship with neighbouring areas.

The proposals include a wider masterplan for The Oracle. This takes into consideration the sites' relationship with its neighbours, (including the conservation area) and creates high-quality retail, leisure and living spaces. This reinforces the sense of affection and identification with which shoppers, visitors and the local community hold The Oracle.

All of this is required to ensure that The Oracle will be a sustainable multi-used development with community and placemaking at its heart.

The masterplan for The Oracle is underpinned by an urban design strategy that creates a hierarchy of connections to the surrounding context including:

1. Improved pedestrian experience of crossing the IDR and enhanced feelings of safety, security and attractiveness of passing though Yield Hall Place
2. Enhanced greening of the site and areas of public realm impacted by the development
3. Ensures good visual connectivity from the south of the site, notably from London Street, looking north towards the town centre
4. Residential uses that will generate another layer of extended footfall and vitality across the quarter and with neighbouring areas

Detail of the masterplan, urban design and landscape strategy is included in the landscape architect's drawings and design statement. It is a coordinated approach that integrates the new development with better placemaking, informed by a clear understand of the existing urban conditions, the area's strengths and weaknesses as well as the policy context for redevelopment.

2.2 Policy Context

The design has been informed by legislation and planning policy including:

1. National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2021) and NPPG – in particular its guidance on achieving good design that responds positively to its context.
2. Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as its relates to the protection of the setting of listed buildings, and the character and appearance of conservation areas;
3. The local Development Plan for Reading Borough Council, including the Local Plan (2019):
4. Policies EN1 (Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment)

- EN3 (Enhancement of Conservation Areas)
- EN4 (Locally Important Heritage Assets)
- EN5 (Protection of Significant Views with Heritage Interest)
- EN6 (New Development in an Historic Context)
- CC7 (Design and the Public Realm)
- CR2 (Design in Central Reading)
- CR10 (Tall Buildings).

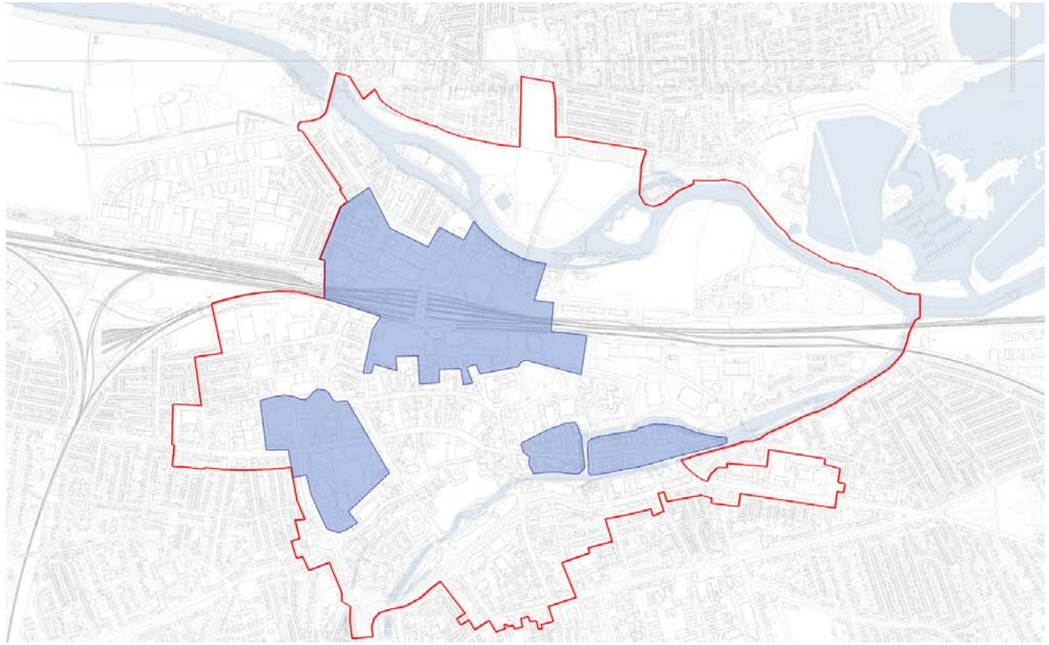
In addition the design team has considered: Supplementary Planning Documents / Guidance / background evidence and the National Design Guide: Planning practice guidance for beautiful, enduring and successful places (2019).

The Development Plan is supportive of new residential development, including build to rent, within Reading Town Centre. This is addressed fully in Turley's planning report.

Key issues that have been addressed during design development include:

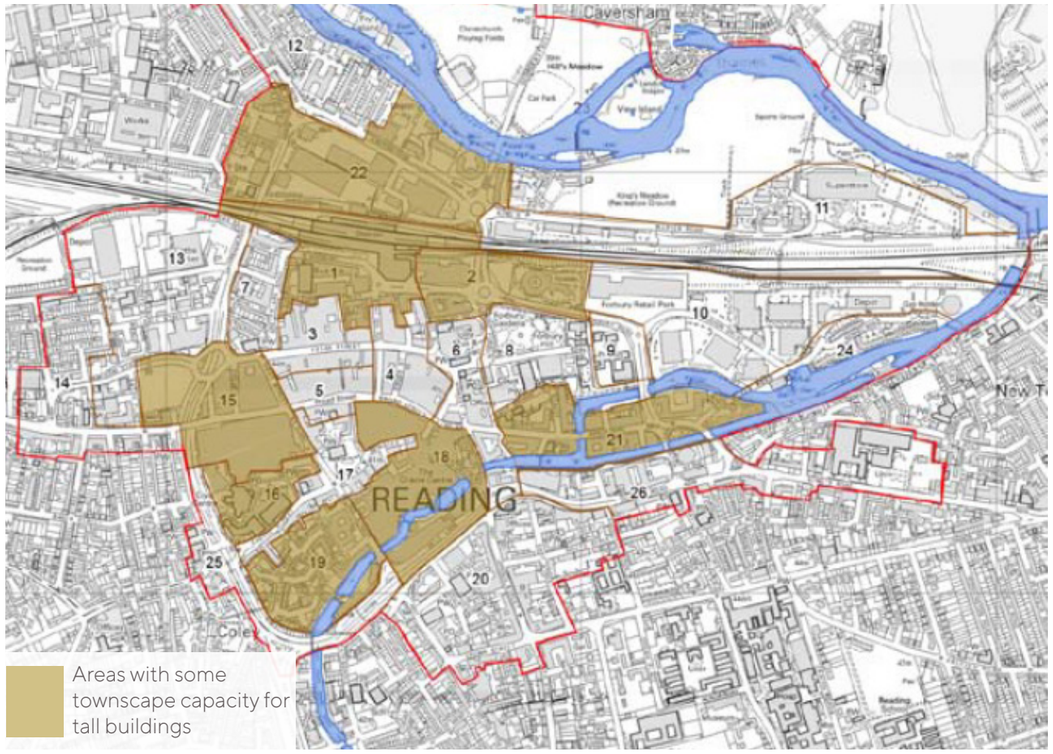
- Design including height, scale, massing and appearance;
- Micro climate including sunlight / daylight and wind;
- Impact on Heritage Assets, including the Conservation Area and Listed Buildings;
- Impact of additional height on Reading's townscape;
- Use, including retention of an element of commercial use at riverside level
- Sustainable Transport.
- Enhanced public realm

Whilst the application sites sit outside the Designated Tall Building Zones noted in Reading Local Plan, they are within an area identified as having capacity to accommodate Tall Buildings identified in Reading's Tall Building Strategy. That document also identifies significant views, distant and more local. This issue will be addressed further in this document.

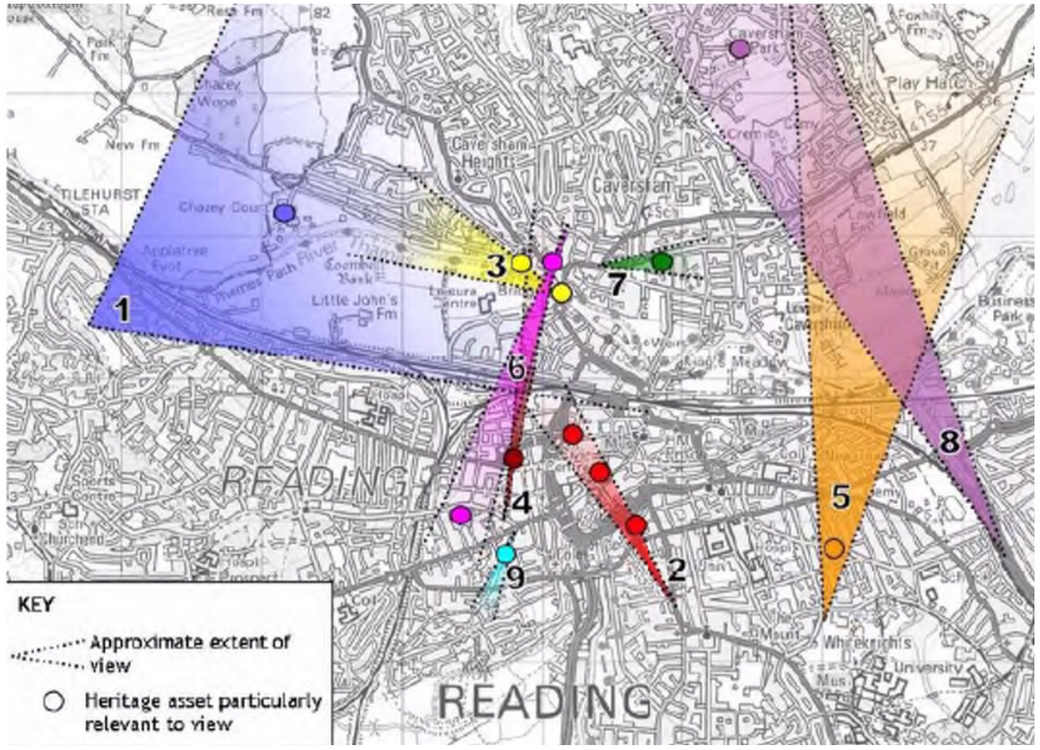


Tall building locations mapping

Tall building strategy



Townscape capacity for tall buildings



Overall plan of views (Reading Local Plan)

2.3 Character of Neighbouring Areas

The urban form of central Reading is dominated by a generously dimensioned east-west streets that intersect with the north-south London Street/ Duke Street/ Market Square/ Blagrave Street axis. Given the strength of commercial development in the town over the last two centuries these streets are faced by compact urban blocks and flat fronted elevations, sometimes richly detailed and full of architectural interest.

The streets north of the River Kennet are commercial in character with a variety of shop fronts of variable quality. Those to the south have a more residential and domestic feel. The streets are generally pleasant to walk, albeit some of the crossings could do with improvement to reduce conflict between vehicles and pedestrians. The riverside walkways along the Kennet & Avon Canal provide pleasant routes to access the centre of the town from east and west.

The Oracle, associated multi-storey car park, the Vue cinema and the civic centre to the west all have a larger grain and scale of built form than those areas to east and north and to the south of the IDR. There is a significant shift in urban character across the estate which the proposal for the new development will enhance.

London Street

Bridge Street

IDR

Broad Street

Market Place Square

St Mary Butts

2.4 Conservation Areas & Historic Buildings

Within the Market Place/ London Street Conservation Area is a group of historic buildings that retains legibility of the former finer grain and lower scale at either end of the High Bridge crossing. These include the statutory listed buildings No.s 2&4 London Street (London Street Brasserie), Coroners Court and the bridge itself.

Along the river, 20th century development was of a larger and taller scale. The George Hotel is a statutory listed building located nearby to the north of former Debenhams site, and it forms a group with the adjoining listed buildings to its rear and Yield Hall Lane.

To the south of the site is the statutory listed building Church of St Giles on Southampton Street. It is a recognised landmark in longer and local views looking north and south along Southampton Street and Bridge Street.

St Marys Butts/ Castle Street Conservation Area is located to the west of the site and includes the listed St Marys Church. Its role as a local landmark and key views to it are considered to contribute to the character and appearance of the area.

It will be important to ensure that the proposed layout and massing and overall scale of new spaces built form mediate with and respond to the different scales and character of the existing townscape at the bridge.

1. Coroners Court

2. High Bridge

3. 2&4 London Street

4. The George Hotel

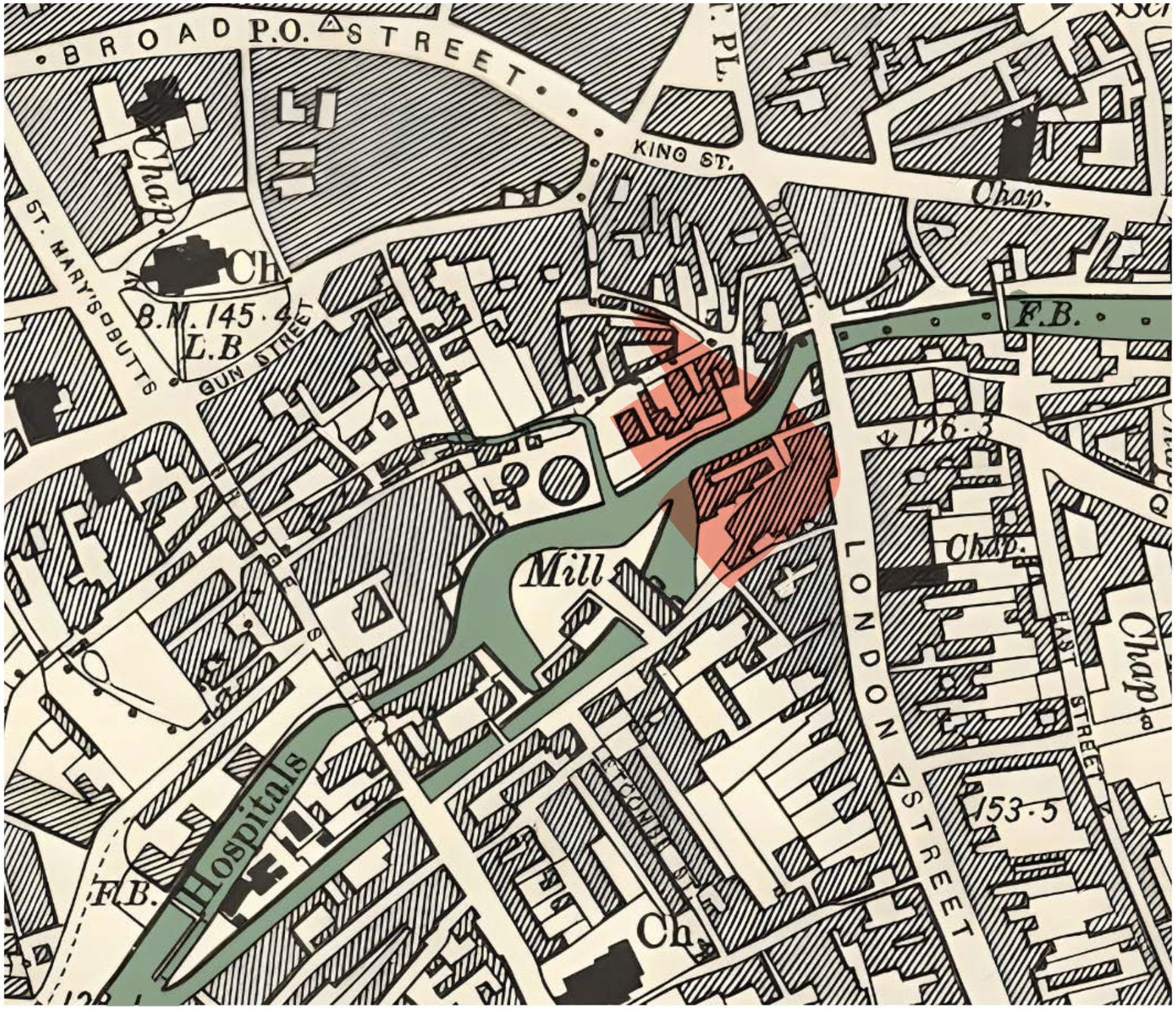
5. St Marys Church

2.5 Site History

The sites are located on what was once commercial and industrial lands either side of the Kennet. Over the centuries they have been part of, or immediately adjacent to larger complexes that included The Oracle Workhouse, Simonds Brewery, mills, a pumping station, a timber yard, tram, and bus stations and, more recently the shopping centre with a Riverside food and beverage and leisure offer, and car parking.

The maps illustrate the historic built form and pattern of streets and, shows how development was related to their underlying topography and status as islands in the fast-flowing Kennet.

The sites are immediately to the west of the ancient north-south route of London Street / Duke Street which crosses the Kennet at High Bridge and leads into Market Place. The late 20th century saw significant change with the development of the IDR and construction of a bridge along the line of Yield Hall Place. This established a new pattern of movement as well as a larger grain and scale of built form, infrastructure, and spaces. The development of The Oracle centre in 1998 provided a new character and public realm along both sides of the Kennet.



1890's map with application sites highlighted in red

Oracle workhouse

Tram depot power house

Brewery cooperage

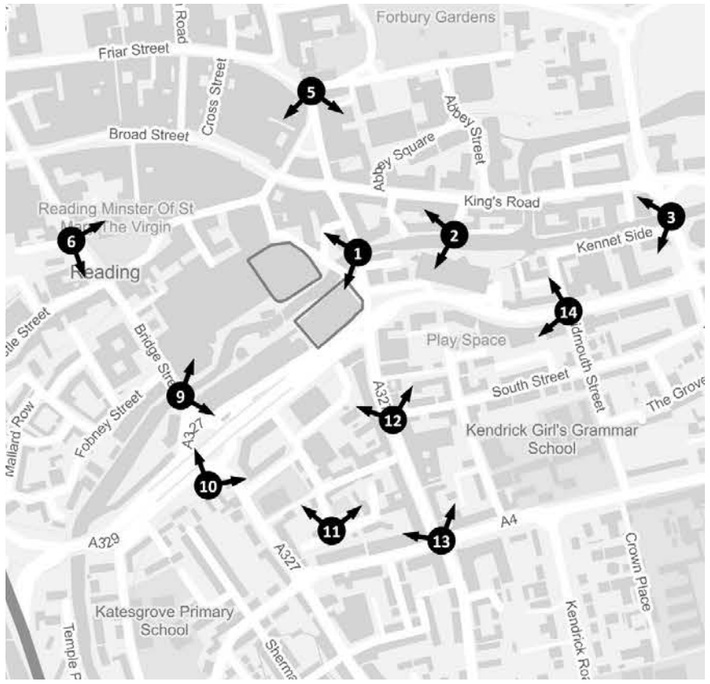
Timber yard, pumping station and mill

Pump station and Mill Lane water course

2.6 Key Views

The views opposite are a summary of the key Townscape Visual Impact Assessment (TVIA) positions and other views considered. These have been discussed with Reading Borough Council as key vantage points from which to assess the design.

They have formed the core of our massing analysis when considering different forms and design approaches for The Oracle.



VP 01

VP 02

VP 03

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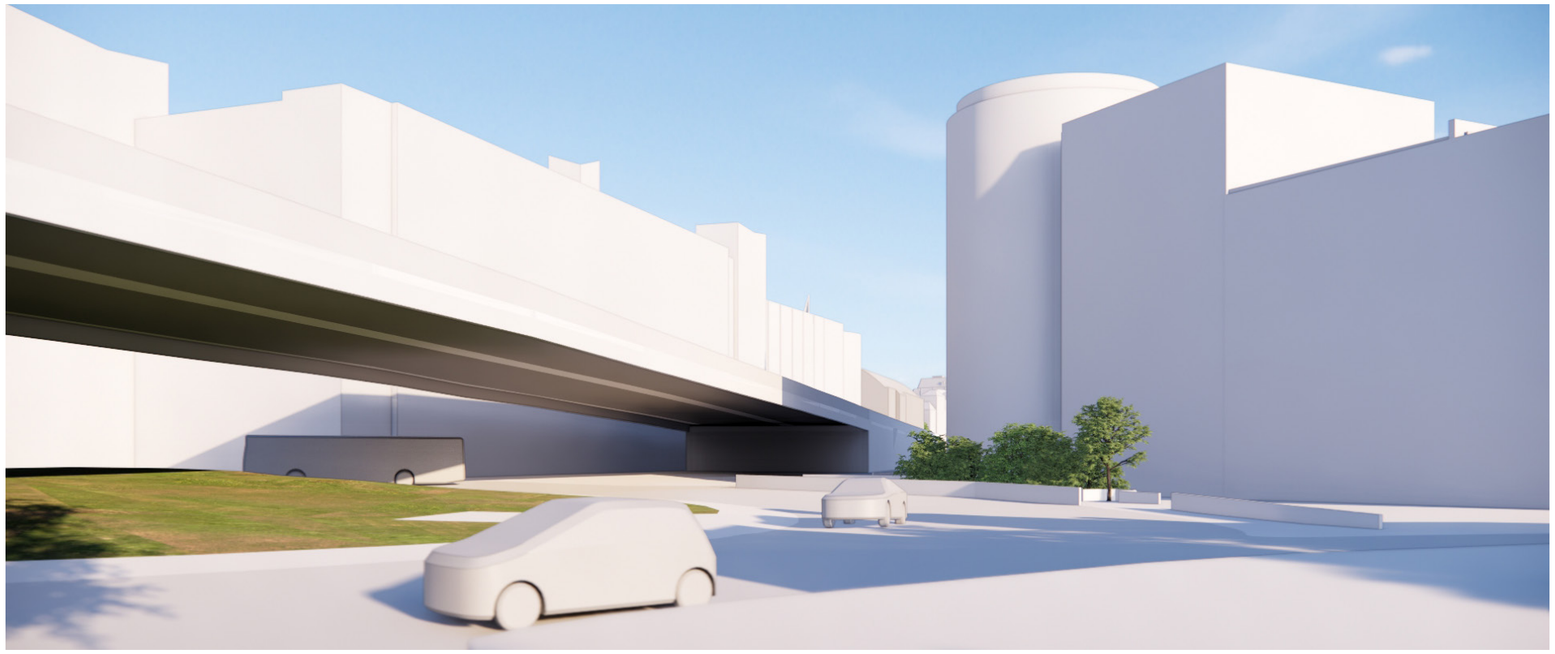


VP 10

VP 11

2.7 Permeability

Historically, the riverside location of the application sites, their island conditions and their development for industrial uses were not supportive of pedestrian permeability through this part of Reading. The construction of the IDR in the 1970s severed the relationship between the town centre and London Street and made pedestrian movement more difficult. The experience of moving between the town centre and neighbouring areas was and remains unattractive. However, the development of The Oracle in 1999 introduced new east – west routes through the site and opened the river front to the public. New internalised mall connections were provided though the shopping centre and, Yield Hall Place was made to feel more attractive and safer. The existing routes and connections are shown on the diagram. The cinema presents a blank façade to the IDR and London Street and Debenhams a fortress like façade, above ground, to the Riverside and Yield Hall Place. Both are cold and unwelcoming with poor physical and visual permeability.

The redevelopment provides further opportunity to increase permeability, to enhance connections to London Street and to improve the pedestrian experience of using existing routes. It provides the opportunity for The Oracle to be better integrated with the town centre, through more seamless transitions.

It provides the opportunity for The Oracle to be better integrated with the town centre, through more seamless transitions with the different parts of the centre.

The proposed routes shown on diagram 2 set out a longer-term the intent to:

1. Create better connections from the lower mall within the centre to the riverside
2. Reopen the entrance at the corner of Minster Street and Yield Hall Place
3. Improve the experience at the junction of Minster Street and Yield Hall Place but reducing the visual clutter and improving the visual experience of passing through the archway
4. Improve the environment along Yield Hall Place from north though to London Street as set out in the landscape architects' drawings
5. Creating an improved public realm at the junction of London Street and the IDR, with a series of interventions to improve the pedestrian experience and to enhance visual permeability from south towards the town centre
6. Providing an internalised connection though Yield Hall Place 2 building from this improved public realm to the riverside

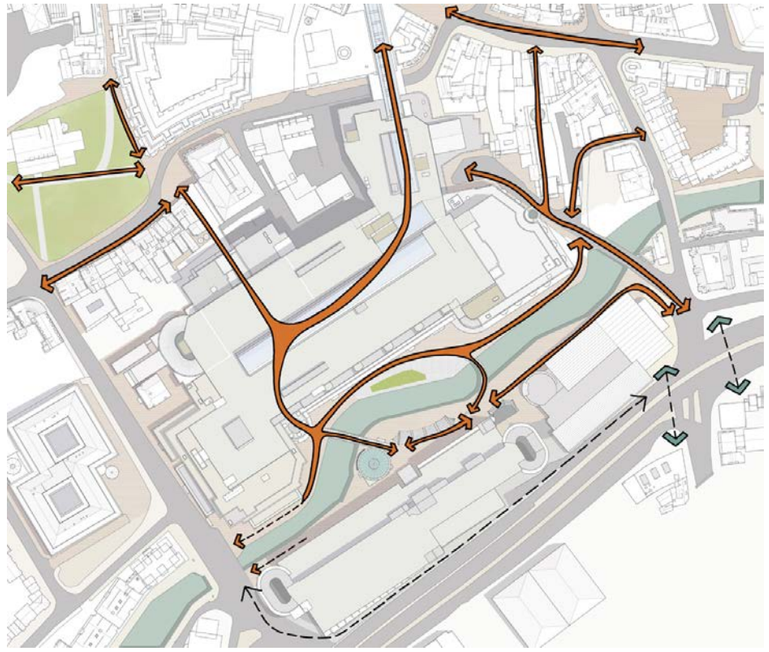


Diagram 1 - Existing permeability

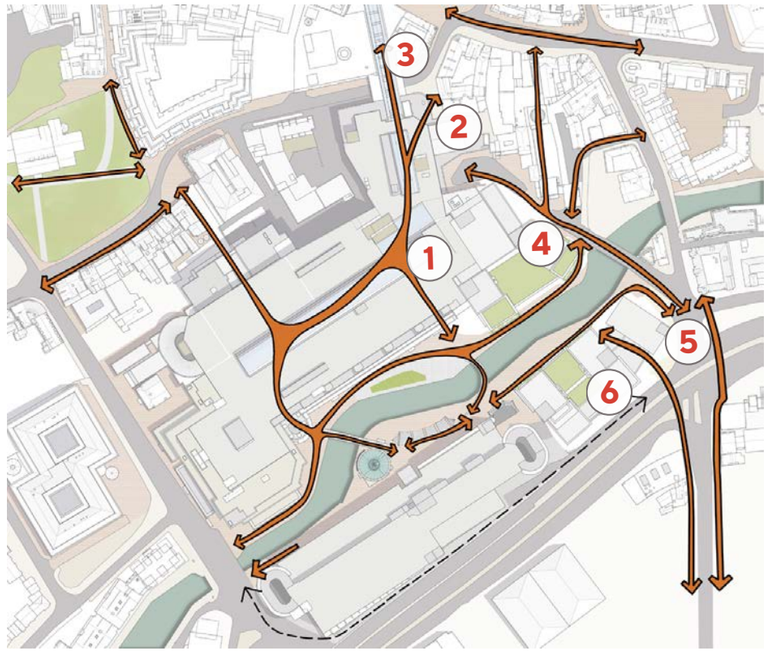
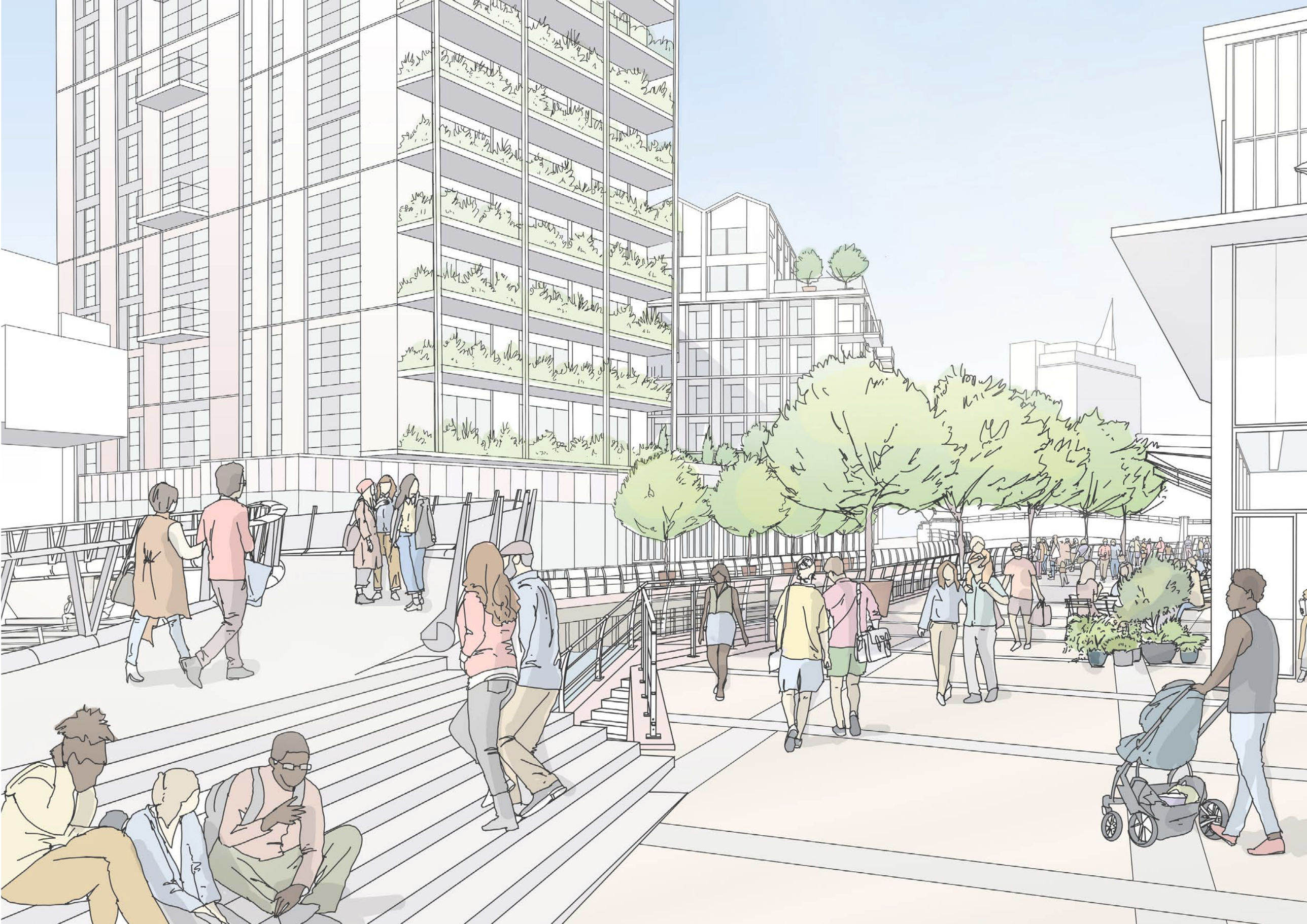


Diagram 2 - Proposed permeability

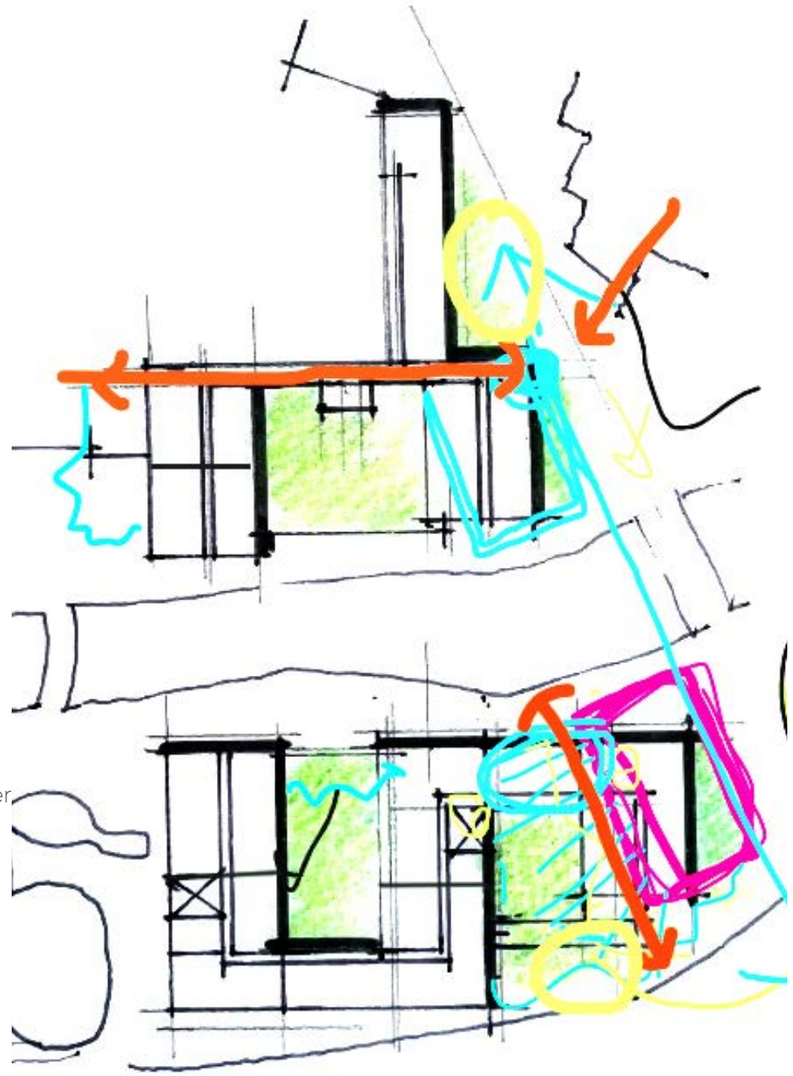


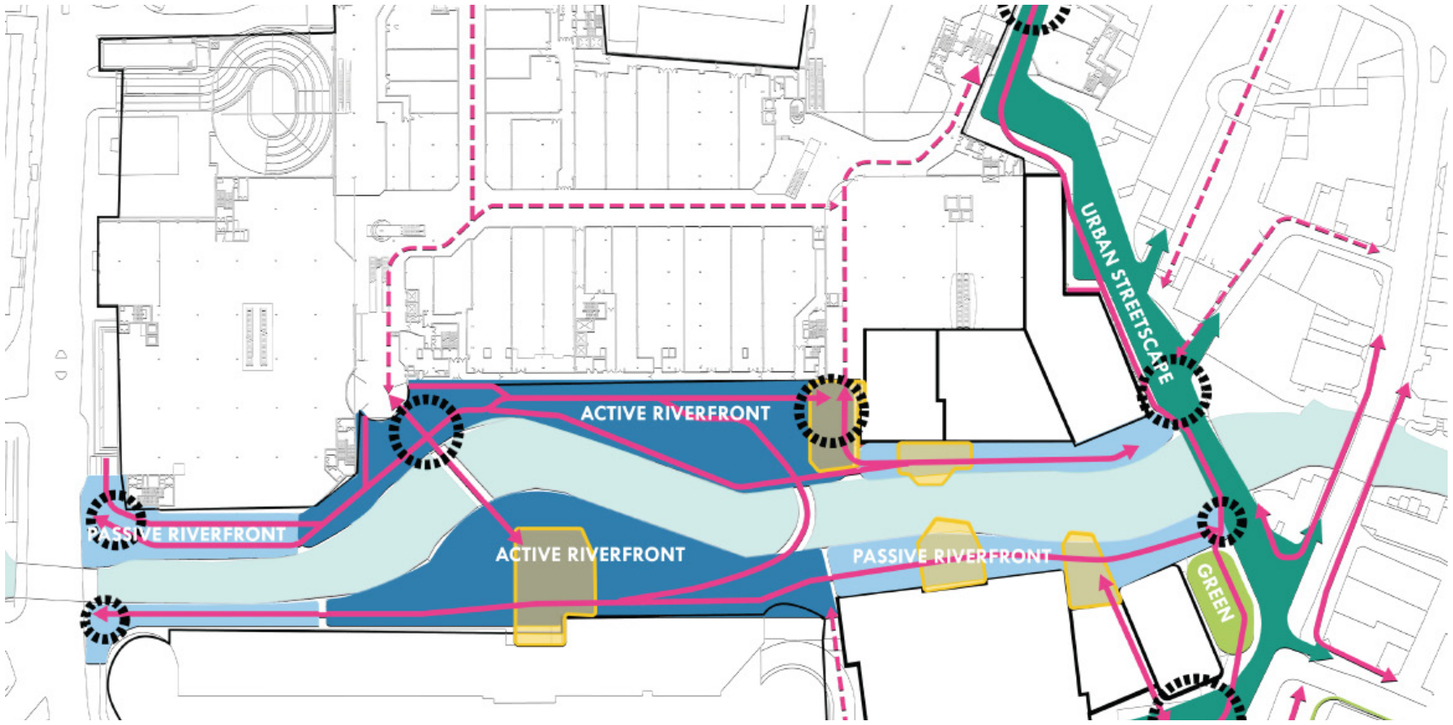
2.8 Conclusion

The design for the buildings have been developed in response to an understanding of the wider context of the development and been informed by the masterplan process worked through by the applicant in conjunction with the local authority.

The applicant's and the design team's understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the retail market, planning policy and the urban context. These have been reviewed and tested with the local authority and with the public during the pre-application stage. The key issues addressed and reflected in the design include:

- The wider market changes in shopping habits and customer expectations and, the impact of those changes on The Oracle now and in the future.
- The threat to the success of The Oracle and the wider retail offer in Reading town centre if these changes are not implemented.
- The need for The Oracle to evolve as a destination and a place to be.
- The benefits of investment in transformation and placemaking.
- The requirement to diversify the uses within The Oracle, notably along the riverside where the former department store and the outdated leisure offer requires new investment.
- The opportunity to deliver a mix of uses sustaining The Oracle as an attractive and welcoming environment which continues to be relevant to its local catchment needs.
- Aligning the mix of uses and setting adjacencies so that each use acts as a good neighbour to the other, and that the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.
- Understanding the types of homes, tenure and mix that will be attractive to residents and that will be appropriate within a town centre environment.
- Setting building height, scale and massing so that the overall size of the development accommodates the mix of town centre uses including residential, required to deliver a viable development.
- Addressing the heritage context with sensitive design that places height towards the centre of the site and uses architectural expression that is sympathetic to its neighbours.
- Deliver benefits to the wider context expressed and seeking to deliver public realm enhancements to create a liveable and attractive space for both residents and users of the The Oracle, and town centre visitors more generally.
- Meet the applicant's aspirations in terms of creating a highly sustainable and green development both environmentally and socially.



The applicant, working with the local authority has placed the proposals within a masterplan for the site that integrates the buildings for the individual sites with each other and with the wider neighbourhood. The masterplan will:

1. Improves connections with London Street to the south, Yield Hall Place to Minster Street and Riverside to Bridge Street.
2. Enhance feelings of safety, security and attractiveness along to the surrounding streets and Riverside.
3. Delivers an improved public realm with welcoming landscaped spaces.
4. Greens the sites and public realm impacted by the development.
5. Ensures good visual connectivity from the south towards the town centre.
6. Landmarks the site as a new southern gateway to central Reading.