



Hexagon Studio Theatre  
Design and Access Statement  
October 2024

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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

# 1.1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

This Design and Access Statement presents an updated proposal for the new studio theatre and sister venue to the Hexagon Theatre in Reading.

The scheme was previously submitted for planning approval in January 2024, under application no. 240173, and approval was granted in April. The scheme was then developed to Stage 4 detail and issued for tender in May 2024, which unfortunately came back over budget. Consequently, since August, the design team and client, Reading Borough Council (RBC), have undertaken a redesign of the original proposal and brief, and have now developed a more compact and energised scheme, which still delivers on the key aims of the original proposal. This revised scheme will be resubmitted under a Section 73 application.

The design has been developed in close collaboration with the client and the end-user stakeholder group, which includes executive and technical staff from the Hexagon Theatre and South Street Arts Centre.

There has also been consultation with statutory and stakeholder groups, including Hexagon staff, lead councillors, and RBC planning officers, as well as interest groups and the wider community. A public exhibition was held at the Hexagon Theatre throughout December 2023, which yielded positive feedback. Discussions have also taken place with the neighbouring Queens Court student accommodation managing owners, and MacLaren, the Broad Street Mall (BSM) developers. The scheme has been developed in response to all comments received.

The preparation of this Design and Access Statement has been led by Haworth Tompkins, with contribution from the project team, as listed at the start of this report.

## CONTEXT

Located in Reading Town Centre, the Hexagon is a multi-purpose theatre and arts venue, designed by Robert Matthew Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM) in 1977. Hosting a range of events, including comedy, pantomime, opera and dance, the Hexagon is a brutalist landmark within the town, and is core to Reading's cultural scene.

At the time of its opening, the Hexagon formed one of four interlinked civic buildings on the site. But, in 2016, its closest neighbour - the Civic Centre - was demolished, reducing footfall along Queens Walk, and leaving the theatre increasingly isolated.

In 2022, RBC successfully secured Levelling Up Funding (LUF) for a new flexible studio theatre as part of the Hexagon Theatre Cultural Campus, within the wider Minster Quarter redevelopment plans. This new development will re-energise the existing theatre, and allow the Hexagon to deliver more diverse programming, which will appeal to wider audiences.

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

Following careful analysis of the client's brief and the spatial constraints and quality of the existing site, the design proposes to demolish and reconfigure the existing back of house block, and to relocate the get-in, to be accessed off the A329 slip-road.

The new proposal can be broken into two parts:

- *Front of house (FoH)*; a zinc clad extension to the existing theatre, accessed via a new bridge connection from Queens Walk podium. The FoH block contains the new flexible studio theatre and an adaptable multi-level foyer and rehearsal space.
- *Back of house (BoH)*; the BOH provides a new get in, scene dock, flexible dressing rooms, stage door, wigs & laundry, sub-stage and WC block at G+0. At stage level on G+1, the BOH offering includes two new accessible dressing rooms.

The new bridge link will create a vibrant and active public space outside of the new studio theatre, enhancing the Hexagon's appeal and civic value. Daytime and evening activation will animate Queens Walk and increase footfall towards the Hexagon. Constructed from an expressed timber frame, wrapped in glazing and a lightweight perforated zinc screen, the new studio will be a welcoming space to gather.

Accessibility is a key driver of the proposals. The entire building will be accessible for wheelchair users, with accessible WCs on each level, step-free connections to the existing Hexagon foyers and back of house corridors, wheelchair accessible dressing rooms, plus wheelchair positions for patrons at stalls and gallery level of the auditorium.

Sustainable and regenerative design is also integral to the scheme. Natural ventilation, a mass timber structural frame, renewable energy sources combined with a range of measures to minimise energy use and running costs, all ensure that the proposal will deliver and operate an exemplar low-carbon building. The scheme is on course to achieve BREEAM "Excellent".

## THIS REPORT

The design proposals within this report are prefaced by a justification statement describing the rationale for development and a summary of the project vision and objectives. The following section of the report provides a description of the site and context. The third section offers a summary of the consultation process that the client and design team have engaged in since the project outset. Then to conclude, the final sections of the report provide an outline of the design proposal, including a summary of the changes made to the original proposal. Existing, proposed and demolition drawings, as well as other supporting documents, are provided as appendices.

## 1.2 RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Since 1977, the Hexagon Theatre has been at the heart of Reading’s cultural scene, but since the Civic Centre’s demolition in 2016, its surrounding context has become increasingly dilapidated, and has quickly become an unwelcoming brownfield site. Falling footfall, and the Hexagon’s existing poor entrance and approach, has made the area feel unsafe and unwelcoming to many.

Located on the edge of the proposed Minster Quarter and Broad Street Mall developments, the Hexagon’s context is due to significantly change over the next 10 years. The proposed residential and mixed-use schemes will transform the wider site, which has lacked investment since the 1970s, into a thriving new community with arts, culture and learning at its heart.

Due for completion long before these developments, the new Hexagon studio theatre will be an energiser on the site. It will provide a new venue to eat, drink, connect and socialise, reinvigorating the town’s cultural infrastructure and leading to greater engagement with the arts. It will provide essential community spaces, including spaces for hire, which will aid community cohesion and ensure that there is established infrastructure in place before the new homes are complete.

Aside from the proposal’s contribution to its future context, the theatre will also meet the identified and unmet need for more performance and rehearsal space in Reading. At present, there is a shortfall of venues that can accommodate live music, which is proving a constraint on the town’s cultural growth. The success of the Hexagon and South Street Arts Centre, which are also managed by RBC, prove that there is a healthy demand for live events. However, there is currently nothing available at this scale, which is limiting programming and opportunities for local artists.

The accessibility and inherent flexibility of the proposed performance venue will also provide huge benefits to both audiences and performers, which is currently unmatched at any other venue in Reading. Step-free access throughout and wheelchair positions in all auditorium formats will enable the whole community to engage with live events, where they have been unable to in the past. This flexibility and intimate scale also enables greater programming diversity, which will appeal to wider audiences.

Providing a venue which can host these new events and welcome a more diverse audience, opens up opportunities for increased income and revenue streams, which will support the ongoing viability of the Hexagon Theatre. The new theatre is expected to increase Hexagon visitors by at least 15%, and whilst many of the Hexagon’s existing visitors are likely to utilise the new theatre, it could also introduce a new audience to the Hexagon main house. Not only is there increased commercial value in the sale of tickets, but the new building will also generate additional income through a new foyer bar, supporting a safe, inviting and enjoyable night-time economy.

The new proposal also includes a new rehearsal space for hire. Community value is central to the proposals, and will enable Reading to provide accessible spaces to their diverse and growing community. The town currently lacks space available to community and amateur groups. Local schools and colleges will be able to utilise the Hexagon studio theatre, which will not only generate ongoing income, but will also inspire a new generation of performers and artists within Reading.

Aside from the vast cultural and community benefits of the new studio theatre, the development provides an opportunity to improve public perceptions of the area. The new development will enhance the approach to the Hexagon Theatre from Düsseldorf Way and Queens Walk, making it feel safer and more welcoming. Alongside the Minster Quarter and Broad Street Mall developments, the Hexagon proposals will make the whole podium expanse more accessible for users and a place people want to spend time.

The new studio theatre also enables the Hexagon to think about their existing operations, and to create a more efficient and effective building. The existing get-in brings articulated lorries down the constrained service road below the podium, which can cause traffic to back-up. As the Minster Quarter plans come to fruition, this problem would be set to intensify. Consequently, this development enables this strategy to be reviewed, with the get-in reconfigured to provide access off the A329. The existing theatre also has RAAC present in the back of house structure, so redevelopment presents the opportunity to eliminate this risk for theatre staff.

### OPPORTUNITIES & BENEFITS

To summarise, the introduction of a new studio theatre on the Hexagon site poses the potential to deliver a wide range of benefits for Reading, including:

- Reconnecting the Hexagon to the wider town centre
- Improving the accessibility and visibility of the Hexagon Theatre
- Improving public perceptions of the area around the Hexagon
- Increasing a sense of place, identity and pride amongst the existing community
- Providing new arts, community and performance spaces for the community
- Providing a new venue to host a wide variety of performances, including live music
- Supporting learning and skills in the local community, with new accessible spaces
- Realising new income streams for the Hexagon and RBC
- Providing a focal point for new communities as the Minster Quarter develops
- Delivering an exemplar low-carbon public building in Reading



## 1.3 THE BRIEF

The brief for the new studio theatre is to meet the identified and unmet need for more performance and rehearsal space within Reading. Environmental & social sustainability and inclusion & accessibility are a key focus, and it is hoped that in introducing new arts, community and performance spaces, which hinge on these core principles, the Hexagon will be able to offer more diverse programming which will engage, encourage and inspire both existing and new community groups.

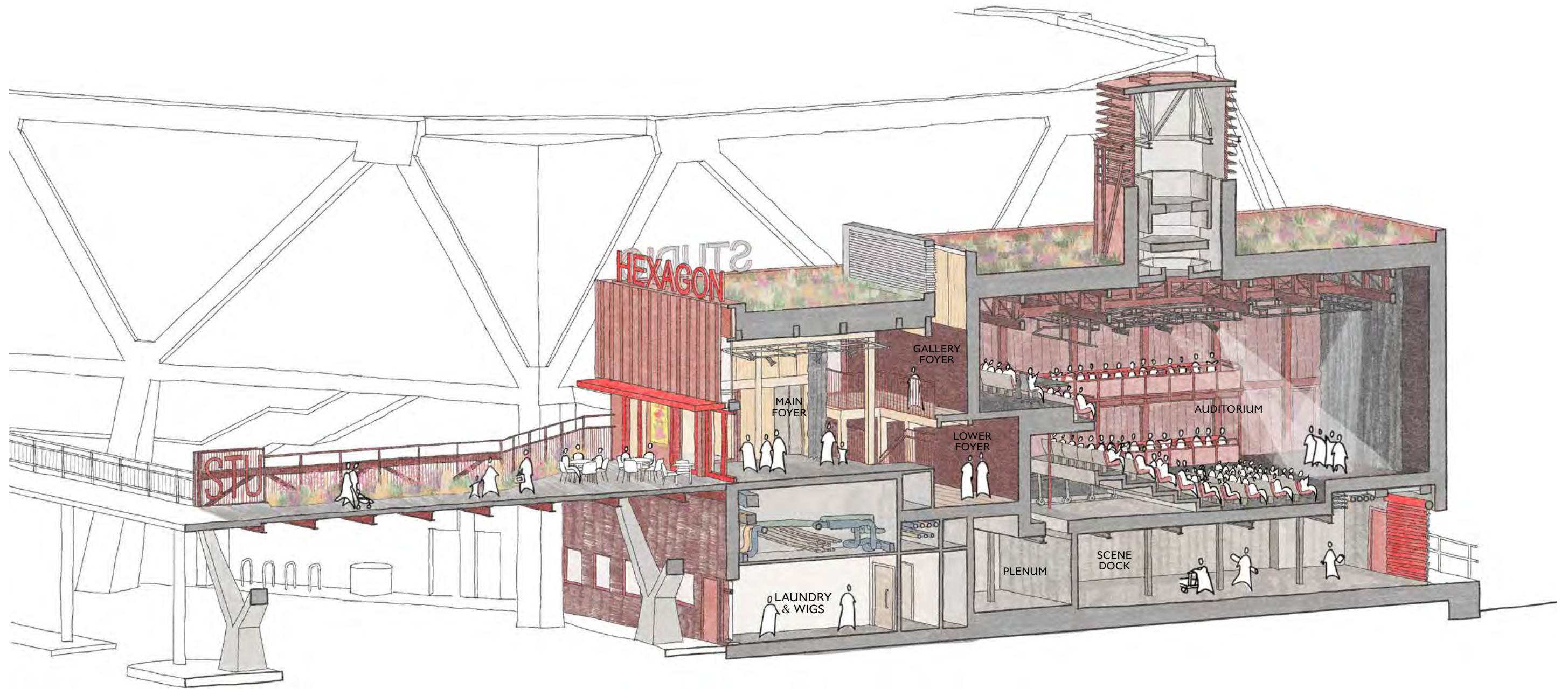
The architectural language of the new studio theatre is extremely important, and must compliment the much-admired brutalist Hexagon, whilst simultaneously shifting public perceptions of the area. As well as signaling a new destination in Reading's cultural campus, the new theatre will physically relink the Hexagon to its context, and will reactivate its presence on Queens Walk and Dusseldorf Way, which have become increasingly neglected since the demolition of the Civic Centre.

Based on regular discussions with the client steering group and detailed briefing workshops, the brief for the new Hexagon studio theatre is as follows;

- *Studio Auditorium* - a fully accessible, intimate and adaptable auditorium for an audience of up to 200 seated, or 300 standing. The priority is for a quick transition between end-on seating, to standing with a pit and raised stage. Additional formats include thrust, catwalk, in the round and flat floor.
- *Flexible Foyer & Rehearsal Studio* - the foyers are to operate as a flexible space for the theatre. During the day, they will be used as rehearsal space, utilised by performers from both venues, or privately hired by the public for community use. When a performance is on, it will transform into a welcoming, inclusive and convivial foyer, with a dedicated bar.
- *Scene dock* - a large open space to be used for set storage & construction, rather than design & production, with direct access to the get-in and loading bay. The workshop is to have easy access to both the existing and proposed theatres.
- *Back of House* - a series of support spaces, including dressing rooms, wardrobe, stage door, office, and flexible rooms for changing space, or tour catering. These facilities will be used for both existing and new theatre operations.

As the catalyst project for the new Minster Quarter, this project also aspires to be;

- *Exemplar in regenerative design* - ground source and air source heat pumps for low-carbon heating, green roofs for increased biodiversity, natural ventilation in the auditorium and foyer to minimise carbon emissions, materials with low embodied carbon and high recycled content, as well as an insulated, airtight design.
- *Exemplar in inclusive design* - wheelchair access throughout the new studio theatre extension, level access to the existing Hexagon foyer and BoH, a new accessible staff shower and accessible WCs on all levels.



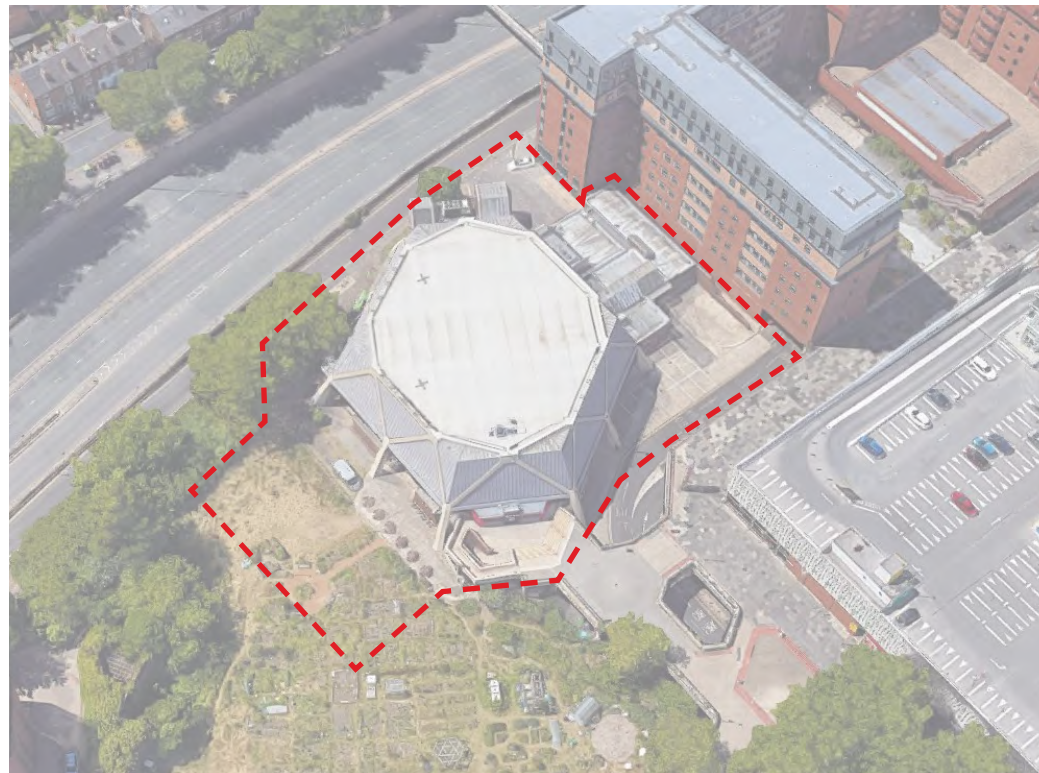
## 2.0 EXISTING BUILDING CONTEXT

## 2.1 SITE LOCATION

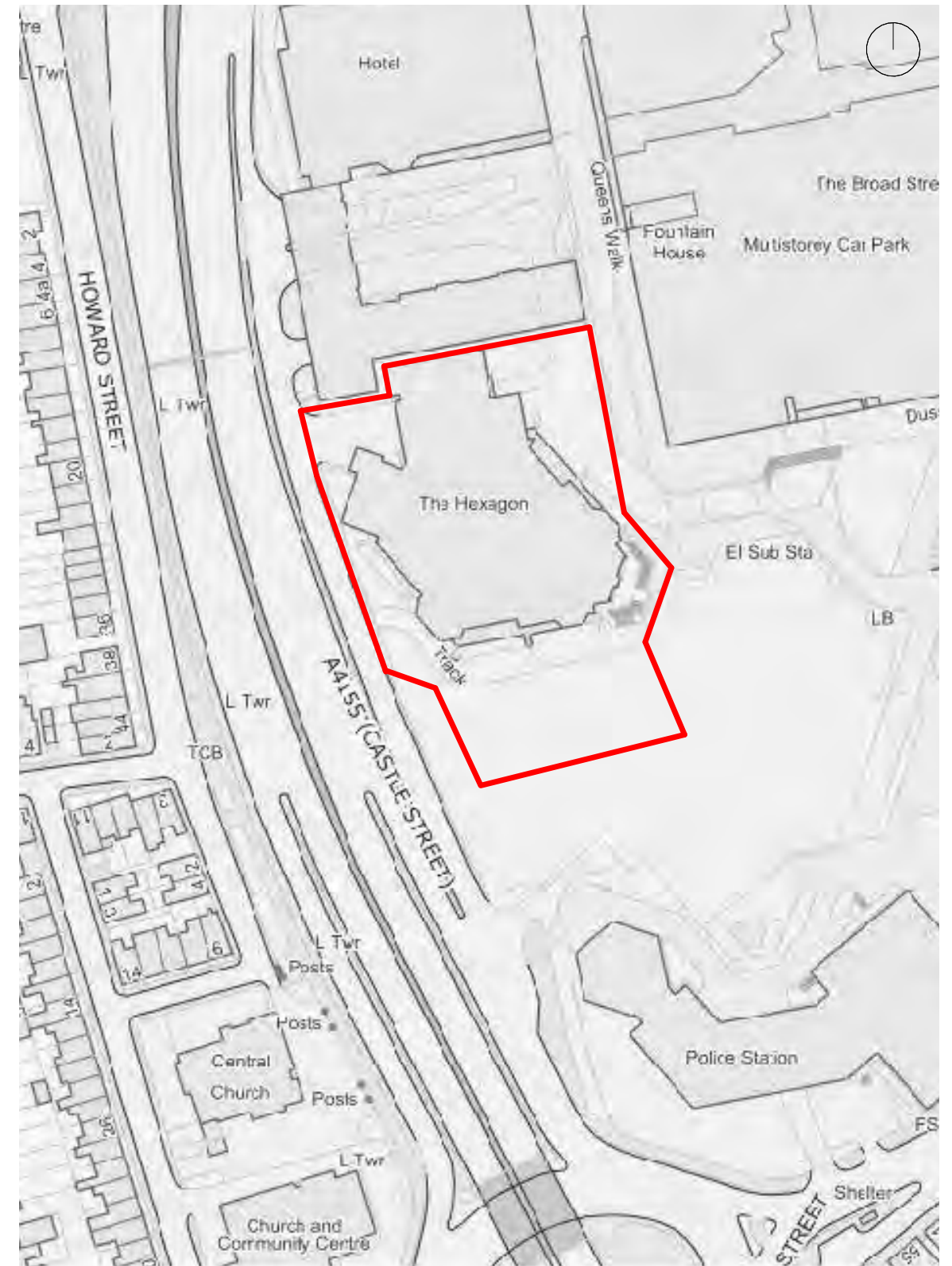
The site is broadly aligned on a north axis, with the new development proposed immediately north of the existing Hexagon Theatre.

The boundaries of the site all have very distinctive characters. To the south of the Hexagon is the aforementioned landscape, known as Lavender Place gardens. To the east, which is the main frontage of the Hexagon, is the extensive raised concrete podium, Queens Walk, providing pedestrian access to the Hexagon and its adjacent buildings. Vehicular traffic, service routes and public parking are located below. The western edge of the site is then delineated by the high-traffic Inner Distribution Road (IDR). Though it is partially shielded by trees, the IDR causes significant noise pollution on the site, but means that the new development will be very visible to passers by. Finally, to the north of the Hexagon is a masonry student accommodation block, Queens Court, which overlooks the site, and is situated just 2m from the site boundary.

The red line site boundary is drawn on the site plan opposite and shows the extents of the red line for this project.



--- Red line site boundary



— Red line site boundary

## 2.2 HISTORIC CONTEXT

### SITE HISTORY

The Hexagon is neither a listed building, nor is it located within a conservation area. Historic England were asked to consider it for statutory listing in 2021 and 2006, but after careful consideration of the architectural and historic interest of the theatre, it felt that the criteria for listing were not fulfilled. Despite this, it is a building of architectural significance within Reading, due to its iconic brutalist form. It is also located close to two conservation areas: St Mary Butts & Castle Street and Russell Street & Castle Hill.

The historic maps opposite show the Hexagon site from 1880 to present day. As illustrated by the maps between 1880 to 1960, the Hexagon site housed a cluster of terraced buildings for much of its history, before the site was cleared in 1970.

Planned to bridge the gap in provision left as a result of the demolition of the Palace Theatre in 1961, the Hexagon opened in 1977, designed by Robert Matthew Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM), for Reading Borough Council (RBC). RMJM were a major post-war firm responsible for a number of notable brutalist civic buildings, including the Grade 1 listed Royal Festival Hall.

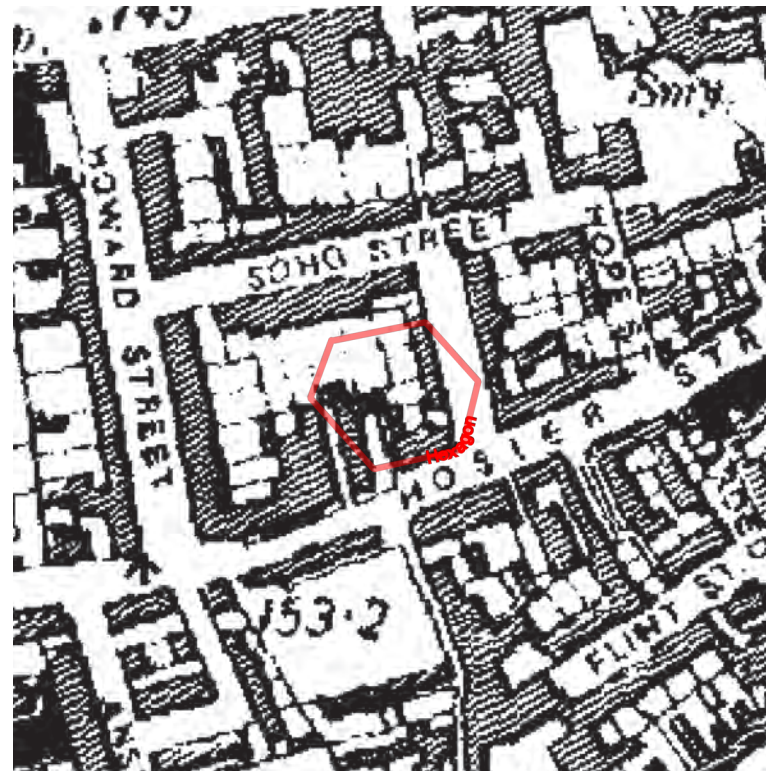
At the time of its opening, the Hexagon formed one of four interlinked civic buildings on the site, all connected via the still existent raised concrete podium. All four buildings were positioned around the southern and western sides of the podium, with the area below allocated to services and car parking.

Whilst the Hexagon, Police Station and Magistrates Court still operate from these buildings, the Hexagon's closest neighbour - the Civic Centre, was demolished in 2016, following RBC's relocation in 2014. Also designed by RMJM and utilising the hexagonal form, the Civic Centre's absence has left the Hexagon increasingly isolated, lacking its original civic context. The landscape which has been left in place of the Civic Centre is largely neglected, placing the Hexagon in an increasingly dilapidated area of the town centre.





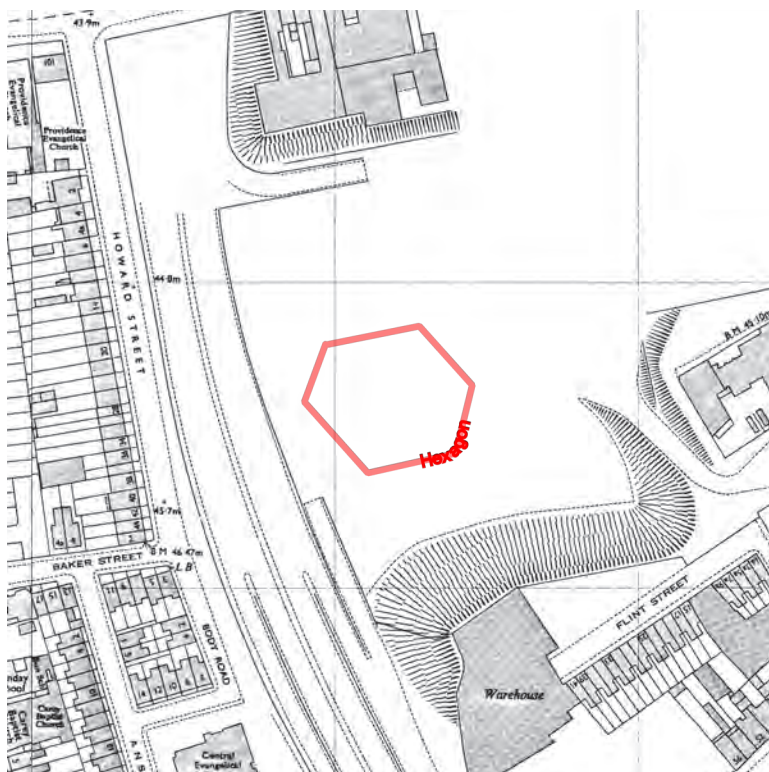
Historic map - 1880



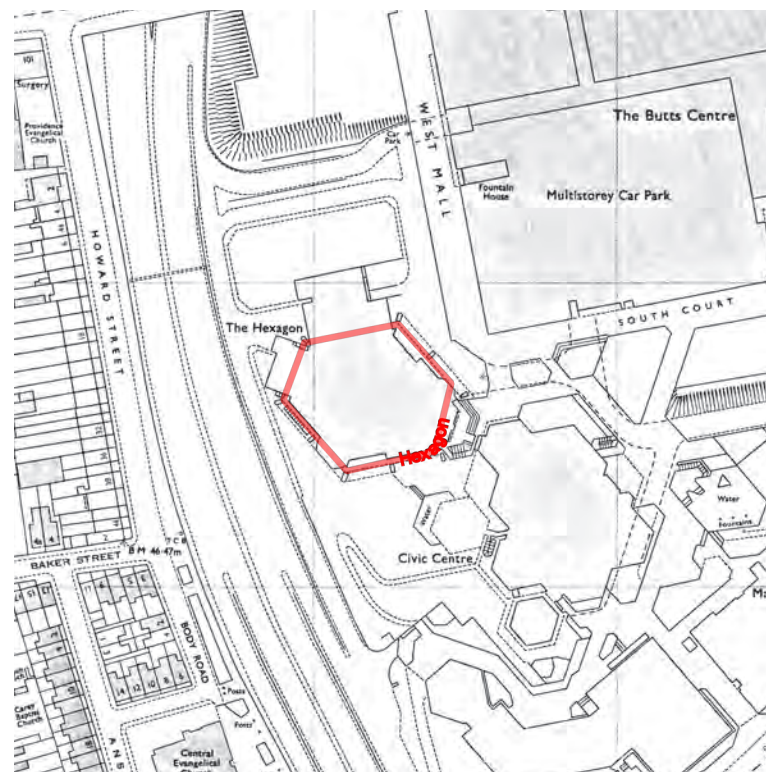
Historic map - 1915



Historic map - 1960



Historic map - 1970



Historic map - 1980



Site plan - 2023

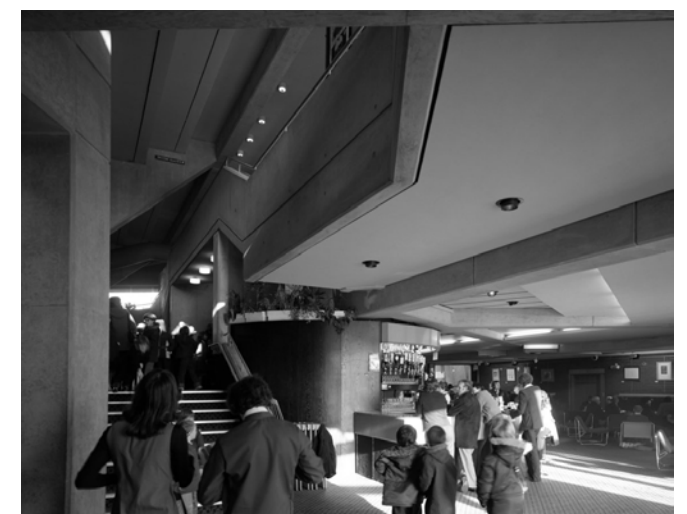
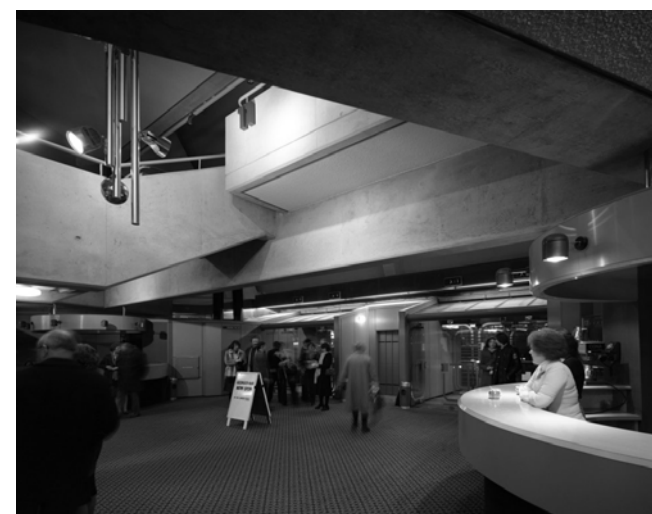
## ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Hexagon is an architecturally striking building, the name itself describing the shape of the exterior, and reflecting the form of the auditorium. Of particular architectural significance is the Hexagon's elongated hexagonal plan shape, with an expressive concrete warren truss infilled with lead standing seam cladding, overstepping a solid masonry base. The large Y-shaped cast concrete legs, connected by a concrete ring beam at the top, creates a characterful and distinctive appearance. The Hexagon is a rare example of a good 1970s multi-purpose hall, with a distinctive design, which when opened, was praised due to its radical appearance. Currently, the theatre is an established receiving house with an imaginative programme of theatre, comedy, music and panto.

The auditorium has five cantilevered balconies on three sides, with three sides of seating behind the stage. When the Hexagon first opened its doors it was intended to provide a venue for the performing arts, exhibitions and conferences, sporting and social functions as well as film. It can readily be converted from concert hall to proscenium theatre form. The width of the proscenium is flexible and the platform consists of a single lift, which can be raised to a maximum of 1m or lowered to floor level. Seating capacity can be varied to suit the production or event. The stalls, which use removable and retractable seats, allow a number of different seating configurations, with varying capacities. For performances with a proscenium arch, the capacity is 946. This increases to 1,200 for concerts and 1,686 for standing with balcony seating. However, the Hexagon has limitations as a theatre. The form of the auditorium, and arena-style seating, inevitably means that sightlines are poor from some seats that utilise the proscenium.

The foyers are exceptionally generous, but the current entrance sequence both at podium and street level is particularly uninviting. The original curvaceous reception points and bars have been replaced with space hungry counters and the clarity of the original foyers are lost under the silt of non-original accretions. Current limitations on lift access also means that not all areas of the building are accessible, including the balcony.

Adjacent to the existing hexagonal form is the current back of house support spaces; get in, workshop, dressing rooms/studio spaces, stage door and kitchen. This is a single storey brick block, with lead standing seam clad roofs which pop-up to provide volume to the workshop. This was a late addition to the plans during construction, and sits subservient to the hexagonal form.





## 2.3 EMERGING CONTEXT

The Hexagon sits within the Minster Quarter Area Development Framework. The Minster Quarter Area lies in the south west part of Central Reading. It is situated on the edge of the core retail area, and provides easy access to the Oracle shopping centre. The site is approximately ten minutes' walk from Reading Station, and offers frontage onto the Inner Distribution Road (IDR). It also bounds Castle Street and St Mary's Butts, which are historic streets that once formed part of the Saxon centre of Reading.

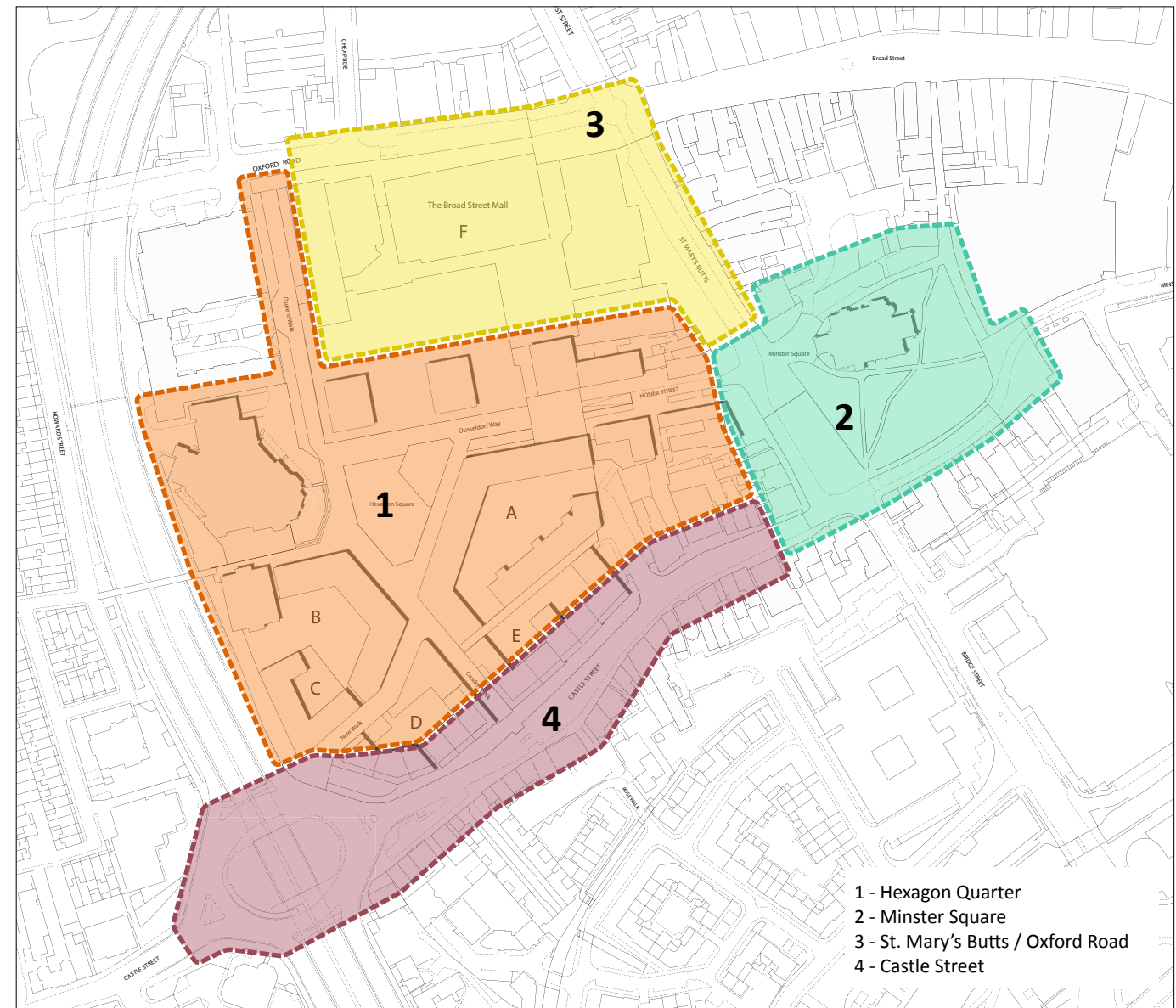
The Minster Quarter plan includes building several hundred new homes (including much needed affordable housing) in a significant area of the town centre, creating a vibrant thriving new community at the heart of the town. It will bring new commercial spaces, new areas of improved public realm, jobs and growth which will benefit local residents and the local economy. All proposals focus on improved sustainability as part of the Council's commitment to working towards a net-zero carbon Reading by 2030.

Four Character Areas for the Minster Quarter Area are

- 1 - Hexagon Quarter
- 2 - Minster Square
- 3 - St. Mary's Butts / Oxford Road
- 4 - Castle Street

The Hexagon sits within the Hexagon Quarter, which will be a distinctive, dense and high-quality urban quarter within Reading's Central Core. The site will provide a unique character and sense of place that will be unified by a high quality public realm and seek to create an inviting new gateway to and from the Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area and the residential areas of West Reading.

In addition to the emerging Minster Quarter plans is a major new development for Broad Street Mall. The Broad Street Mall redevelopment will include a range of retail and leisure uses at ground floor level, with improved frontages on Queens Walk and Dusseldorf Way with mixed-tenure residential accommodation towers above.



Indicative perspective view from Castle St. roundabout



Indicative perspective view axis between Hexagon and Minster



- 2 Thames Valley Police Site
- 3 New Minster Square
- 4 Hexagon Square - flexible events space at podium level
- 5 Tower Square
- 6 Minster Place
- 7 Gun Street Square
- 8 Queens Walk 'Greenstreet'
- 9 20 storey residential landmark tower located on IDR
- 10 Vista to Landmark / Corner
- 11 Potential Areas for Local Market
- 12 New Lane Connection
- 13 3-4 storey height set backs along Conservation Area/Castle Street
- 14 Indicative BSM Development
- 15 Private amenity space for residential units including balconies, roof terraces, garden courtyards and podium gardens on top of BSM
- 16 5 storey mixed use block (commercial on ground floor, residential on upper floors)
- 17 7-9 storey mixed use block (commercial on ground floor, residential on upper floors)
- 18 6 storey residential block
- 19 Potential/opportunity for future bridge link
- 20 Direct pedestrian route
- 21 1 - 1.5 storey retail pods or permanent 'market stalls' wrapped around Sub Station
- 22 Vehicular (restricted) access possible
- 23 Improved entrance situation to the Hexagon... making it part of Hexagon...
- 24 Improvements to pavements, carriageway and bus stops around BSM
- 25 Activation of southern facade along Dusseldorf Way/Hosier St. Provide spill out space for restaurants/cafes
- 26 Potential for outdoor bar space and start-up yard at the Hexagon lower ground floor level (below podium level)...
- 27 Reduce the impact of the IDR to the development area in terms of noise, pollution, and visual intrusion. Consider acoustic barriers as part of the underground car park structure along the IDR edge.