



ABBEY GARDENS - FAÇADE RENOVATIONS

DESIGN STATEMENT

Prepared by:
SADA Architecture Ltd.
26c George Street
St Alban
AL3 4ES

Planning Design Statement

Proposed Façade Renovation at Abbey Gardens, Abbey Street, Reading, RG1 3BA
Prepared by: Sada Architecture Ltd **Date:** February 2026

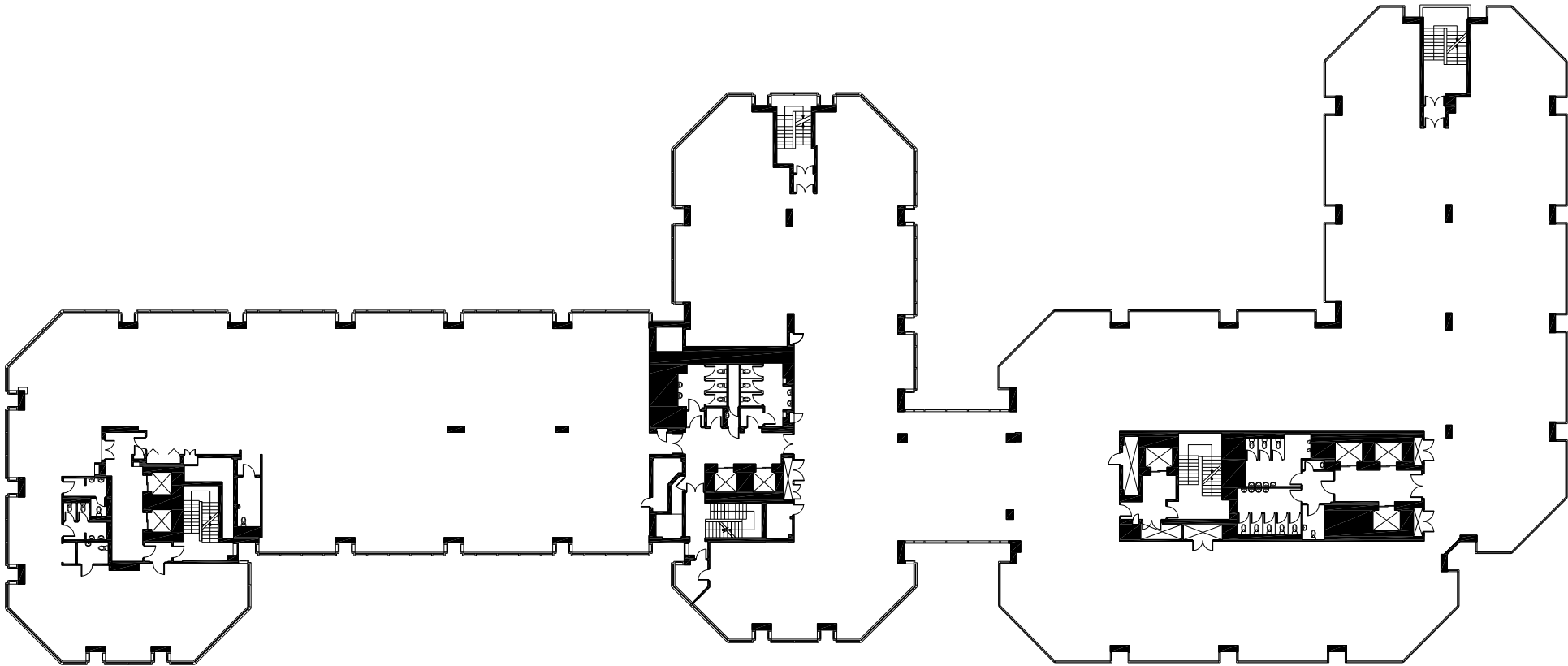
1.0 Introduction

This Design Statement has been prepared by Sada Architecture Ltd in support of a planning application for proposed amendments to the external façades of the existing Abbey Gardens building, located on Abbey Street, Reading, RG1 3BA. The proposals form part of a broader vision to repurpose the existing building from office use to residential accommodation. While the change of use has been established under separate prior approval applications, this submission focuses specifically on the external alterations required to facilitate this transition. The objective is to deliver a façade that is contextually responsive, thermally efficient, and appropriate for high-quality residential living.

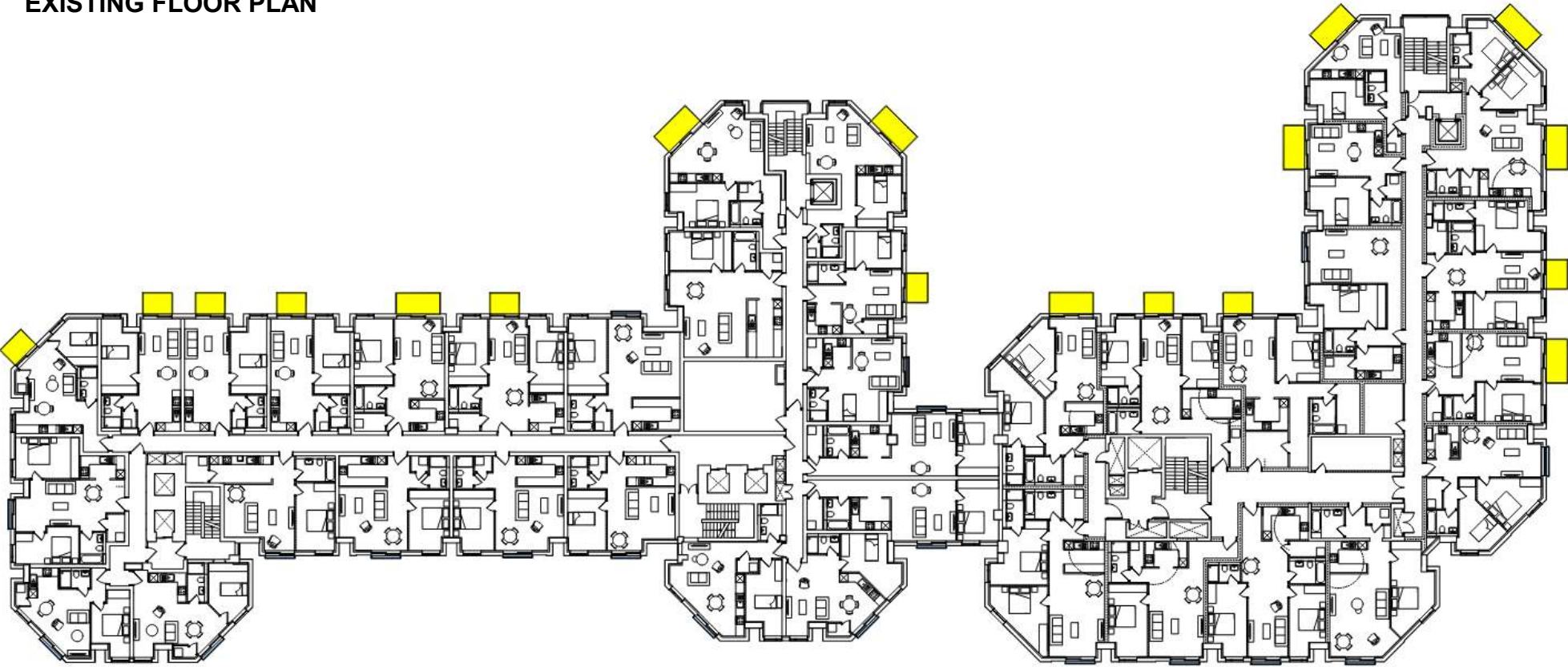
2.0 Site and Context

Abbey Gardens occupies a prominent position on Abbey Street, situated at the heart of the Reading town centre and within the "Abbey Quarter," an area of profound historical and archaeological significance. The site is bounded by a rich tapestry of architectural styles and eras, situated immediately adjacent to the historic Reading Abbey Ruins, a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade I listed site. These ruins, characterized by their exposed flint rubble cores and surviving fragments of ashlar limestone dressings, establish a visual character of aged, textured "stony" greys and muted buffs. Beyond the ruins to the east lies the former Reading Gaol, a landmark Grade II listed Victorian prison defined by its monumental perimeter walls constructed in a deep, traditional red brick. This historic masonry provides a strong "warm" contrast to the "cool" flint of the Abbey Ruins and establishes red and burnt-orange brick as a significant secondary material within the local context.

The existing Abbey Gardens complex, originally constructed in the mid-1980s as a Grade A office development, currently features extensive glazed curtain walling and projecting bays. While structurally sound, its "transparent" commercial character and office-led aesthetic are increasingly at odds with its proposed residential future and the surrounding urban grain. This surrounding context features a varied architectural palette, including the yellow and buff brickwork of Abbots House, located immediately adjacent on Abbey Street. The proposal seeks to mediate between these disparate influences—the flint of the Abbey, the red brick of the Gaol, and the buff brick of the street—to create a balanced, respectful intervention that feels anchored in Reading’s unique heritage.



EXISTING FLOOR PLAN



PROPOSED FLOOR PLAN

Typical upper floor plan showing residential layout



3.0 Planning History and Consultation

The building benefits from prior approval consent for the conversion of existing offices to residential use under references **PL/25/0202** and **PL/25/0918**. To ensure the external appearance matches the quality of the internal conversion, the design team has engaged in a rigorous consultation process with the Local Planning Authority and the Design Review Panel (DRP).

3.1 Pre-Application and Design Review Panel (DRP) Feedback
A pre-application meeting was held on 28th November 2025 (Ref: PL/25/1190), followed by a Design Review Panel session on 4th December 2025. The feedback from these sessions has been instrumental in shaping the final design.

Below is a summary of the key issues raised and how the design team has addressed them in this application:

Feedback regarding Façade & Materiality

- **Comment:** The principle of reworking the façade and the use of brickwork is supported; however, the colour palette requires careful justification to ensure it does not compete with the Abbey Ruins and the prison.
- **Sada Response:** We have revised the material strategy from a monolithic approach to a three-tone brick strategy to better break up the building's mass. Specifically, Brick Type 2 (Deep Earthy Brown Multi) for the North and Central blocks has been selected to strike a sophisticated balance between the "cool" greys of the Abbey flint and the "warm" reds of the Gaol. By utilizing deep, umber tones rather than a direct red or buff, the building avoids competing for prominence with either heritage asset. This palette provides a muted, secondary backdrop that acknowledges the surrounding masonry heritage through "Earthy" and "Cool" tones without mimicking—and therefore undermining—the historical integrity of the protected structures. (See Section 6.0).
- **Comment:** Consideration should be given to more natural elements to blend into the surroundings - including a green wall.
- **Sada Response:** While the design team acknowledges the aesthetic value of such a feature, a green wall is not a viable option for this development. Current fire safety regulations (Approved Document B) prohibit the use of combustible materials within the external wall construction or attached to the external walls of buildings with a floor height over 18m.
- **Comment:** The "Black brick slips" seen in early visuals were considered potentially less contextually relevant.
- **Sada Response:** As part of the materials review, the black brick has been replaced with a Staffordshire Blue brick. This is a historic, high-quality engineering brick that offers a deep, sophisticated tone suitable for detailing, without the jarring contrast of a pure black modern finish.

- **Comment:** Varied colour palettes can risk looking like a "patchwork quilt."
- **Sada Response:** To avoid a patchwork aesthetic, the colour changes are now applied to distinct building volumes (North & Central vs. South Block) rather than applied randomly. This creates a legible architectural hierarchy rather than a pattern.

Feedback regarding Amenity & Layout

- **Comment:** Concern regarding the number of balconies, their proximity to each other, and privacy/daylight implications.
 - **Sada Response:** The design team has undertaken a comprehensive review of the balcony strategy to balance resident amenity with privacy and daylight requirements. The number of projecting balconies has been significantly reduced across the scheme. Where they remain, they provide a substantial improvement to the quality of life for residents, offering private outdoor space and a direct connection to the historic surroundings of the Abbey Quarter.
- To address concerns regarding overlooking and privacy, we have strategically removed projecting balconies in sensitive areas, specifically at the "pinch points" where different wings of the building converge. As illustrated in the **site plan on page 1**, by omitting balconies in these internal corners and replacing them with flush Juliet balconies, we have eliminated the risk of direct overlooking between units. This approach ensures that all apartments maintain high levels of privacy naturally through the building's geometry, removing any requirement for bulky privacy screens which would have otherwise cluttered the façade. Furthermore, by removing these projections in areas where overshadowing was a risk, we have successfully maximized internal daylight levels, ensuring a brighter and more sustainable living environment.

- **Comment:** Recommend introducing variations in the balconies to create a more irregular pattern.
- **Sada Response:** By replacing several full balconies with Juliet balconies, we have broken the rigid vertical alignment of the façade. The Juliet balconies follow the fenestration pattern, creating a more organic and residential rhythm across the elevation.

Feedback regarding Daylight

- **Comment:** Need to confirm internal daylight levels.
- **Sada Response:** A full Daylight & Sunlight Analysis is included with this application. Following a review of the internal layouts, window positions have been adjusted and certain balconies have been omitted to specifically target and improve daylighting in areas where levels were previously identified as less than ideal. These measures ensure a substantial enhancement to the internal living conditions throughout the scheme.



Selection of images from Pre-App submission



4.0 Design Development

The design evolution of the façade was driven by the primary objective to "domesticate" the existing commercial appearance while respecting the building's structural constraints and historic setting. The 1980s "Grade A" office aesthetic—defined by its repetitive, lightweight glazed curtain walling—lacked the solidity and permanence associated with high-quality residential architecture. Early design studies explored various methodologies to replace these bays, including the use of aluminium cladding frames with brick infill or the introduction of render panels to define relief areas. However, these options were ultimately discounted as they risked creating an overly busy or fragmented aesthetic that would not sit comfortably within the sensitive Abbey Quarter context.

As the design progressed, the team focused on stripping the façade back to its reinforced concrete structure. This allowed for a complete reimagining of the fenestration rhythm. By shifting from continuous glazing to "punched" window openings within a solid masonry-effect envelope, the building gains a more traditional residential character. This transition from a transparent "commercial" skin to a solid "residential" wall also provided the opportunity to introduce a new hierarchy of openings. The inclusion of contrasting feature brick panels and the careful placement of balconies was developed to create a dynamic interplay of light and shadow across the elevation, ensuring that the new façade remains visually interesting throughout the day without the need for superficial decorative elements.



OPTION 1a (render)



OPTION 1b (brick)



OPTION 1

OPTION 1a
(render)

OPTION 1b
(brick)

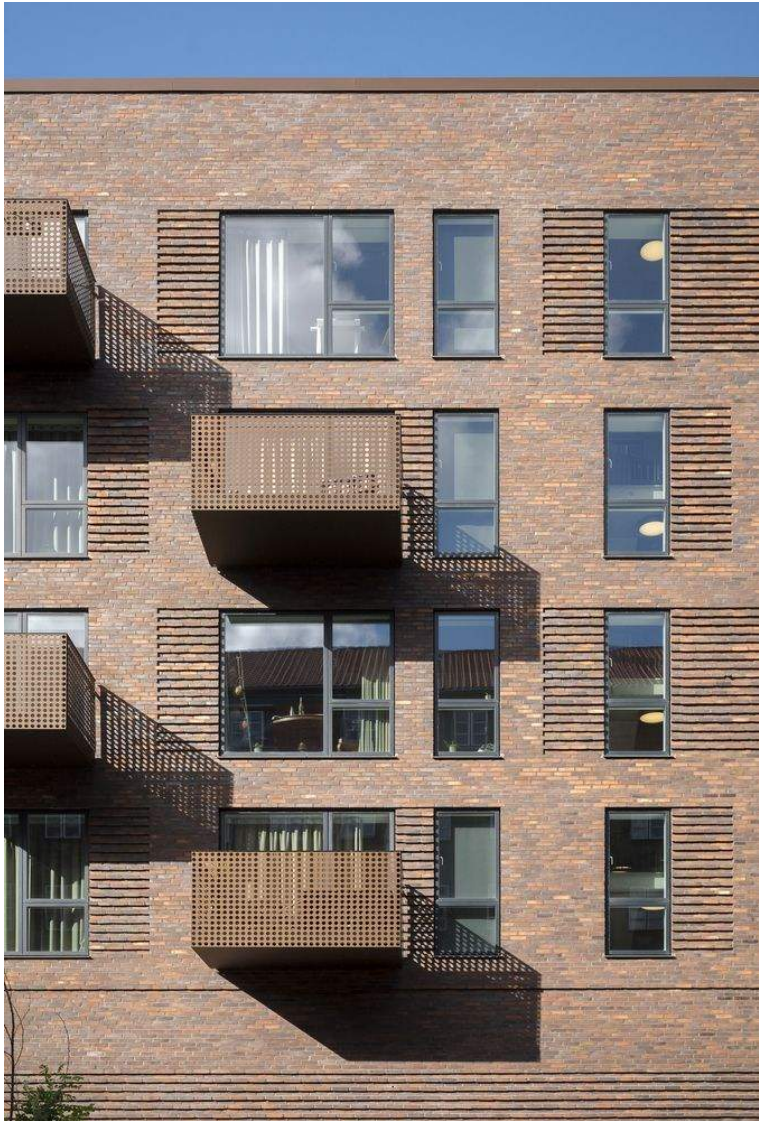


Selection of images from earlier design studies

5.0 Design Rationale

The overarching design rationale is centered on "contextual differentiation." Rather than attempting to mimic the historic Reading Abbey Ruins or the adjacent Abbey Gateway, the proposal seeks to provide a sympathetic backdrop that acknowledges the local material palette through a contemporary lens. The decision to differentiate between the building masses was a direct response to pre-application feedback, which emphasized the importance of breaking down the building's scale to prevent it from appearing as a single, monolithic block that would overwhelm its heritage neighbors.

The architectural intent is to create a "collection" of volumes. By assigning unique identities to the North & Central Block and the South Block, the building appears as a cluster of smaller buildings, a strategy that echoes the historic grain of the town centre. This differentiation is not merely aesthetic; it serves as a functional tool for "place-making," giving each section of the development a distinct sense of identity. The choice of materials—transitioning from earthy browns to cool greys—serves to "ground" the building in the landscape. The browns of the North & Central Block provide a rich, warm texture that feels established, while the grey of the South Block mirrors the flint and limestone of the Abbey walls, creating a visual bridge between the 1980s structure and its ancient surroundings.



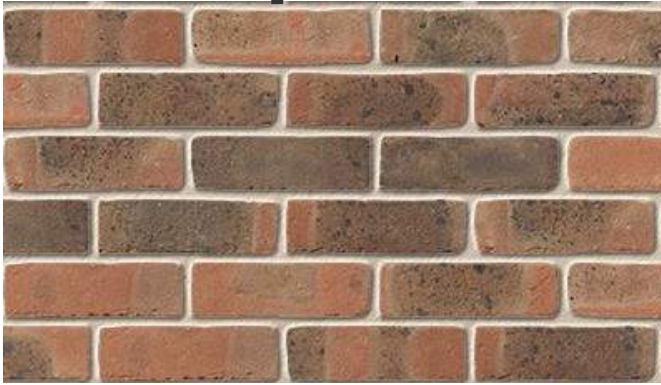
Reference examples of the intended façade style.

6.0 Materiality and Technical Specification

6.1 The Brick Strategy

To reduce the perceived scale of the development, the building is treated as two distinct volumes:

- **South Block: Brick Type 1 (Mid-Grey Weathered Multi)**
 - *Description:* A textured, multi-tonal grey brick with a "stony" appearance.
 - *Rationale:* This cool, weathered grey provides a harmonious contrast to the rest of the development. It is a direct architectural nod to the natural flint and limestone masonry found within the Reading Abbey ruins.
- **North & Central Block: Brick Type 2 (Deep Earthy Brown Multi)**
 - *Description:* A high-quality stock brick featuring deep chocolate and umber tones with subtle tonal variations.
 - *Rationale:* To differentiate from the light buff/yellow of the protected monument, this block utilizes a darker, earthier palette that provides a grounded, "industrial" weight.
- **Link & Details: Brick Type 3 (Staffordshire Blue Smooth)**
 - *Description:* A dense, smooth-faced brick in a deep charcoal/slate-blue tone.
 - *Rationale:* Used for the connecting link and recessed decorative panels. The dark, recessive tone acts as a "shadow gap," visually separating the two main blocks.



Brick Type 2 (Deep Earthy Brown Multi)



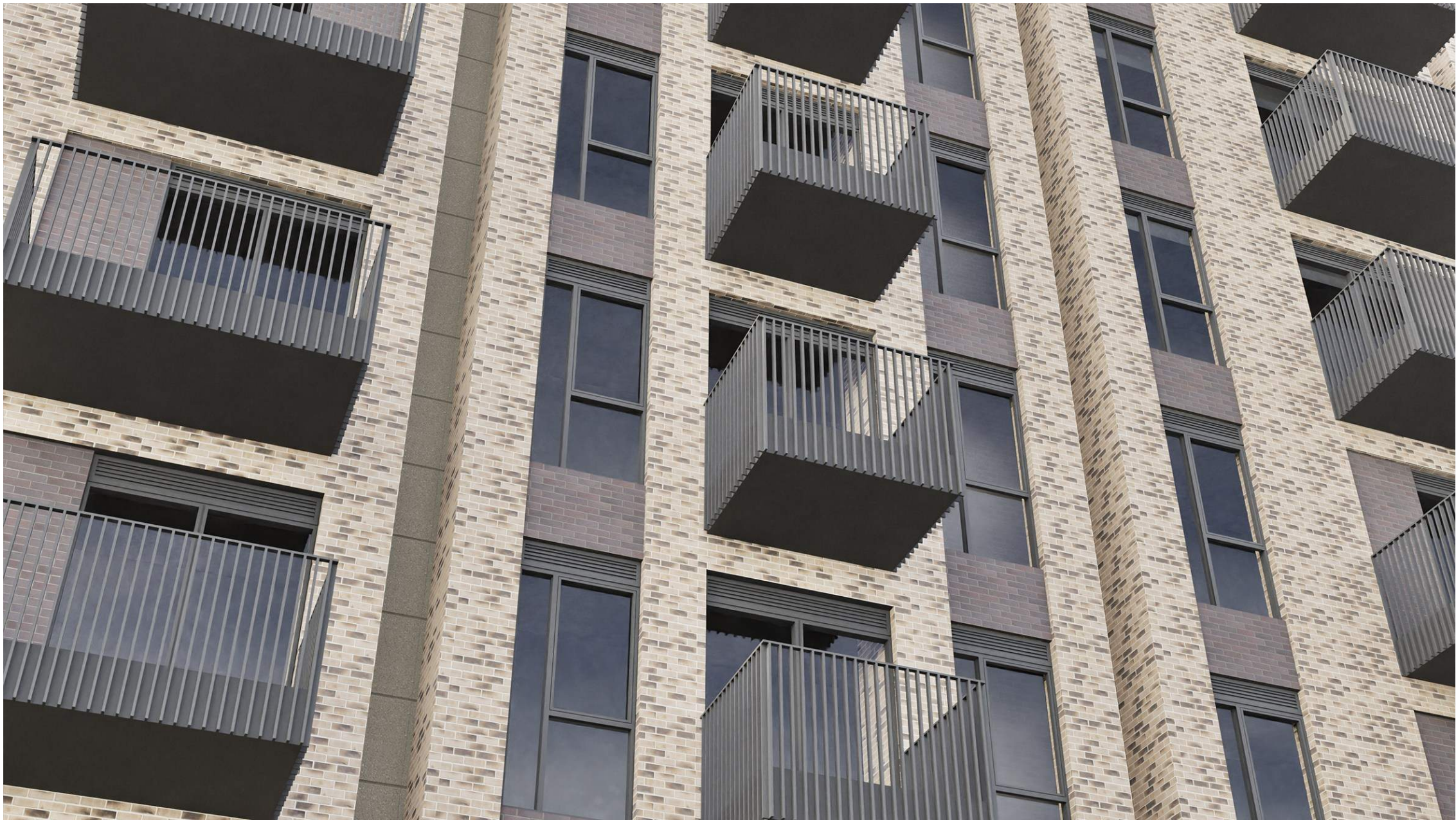
Brick Type 3 (Staffordshire Blue Smooth)



Brick Type 1 (Mid-Grey Weathered Multi)

6.2 Fenestration and Balconies

- **Windows:** High-performance aluminium frame windows in a Black / Dark Grey finish to match the existing curtain wall frames that are being retained in certain locations.
- **Balconies:** Constructed from galvanized steel flat plates (50mm x 10mm), painted to match the window frames.
- **Balcony Soffits:** Finished with a painted soffit liner board for a clean, residential appearance from below.
- **Juliet Balconies:** Utilized to break the rigid vertical alignment of the façade and maximize daylight without excessive overshadowing.



7.0 Technical Strategy and Sustainability

7.1 The Brick Slip Façade System

The proposal utilizes a high-quality, mechanically fixed brick slip system on a Steel Frame Substrate (SFS), providing an authentic masonry aesthetic while significantly reducing the weight loading on the existing 1980s concrete frame. This engineered solution ensures a BBA-certified lifespan of up to 60 years, delivering a premium-grade finish that maintains its structural and visual integrity. By utilizing a high-performance wall buildup within a reduced depth, the system maximizes internal amenity and drastically improves thermal efficiency, transforming the building's original 1980s U-values to meet modern sustainability standards. Furthermore, the system is designed for maximum safety and durability, boasting a non-combustible A1/A2 fire rating and Category 1 impact resistance, resulting in a low-maintenance, long-term architectural solution that preserves the building's character.

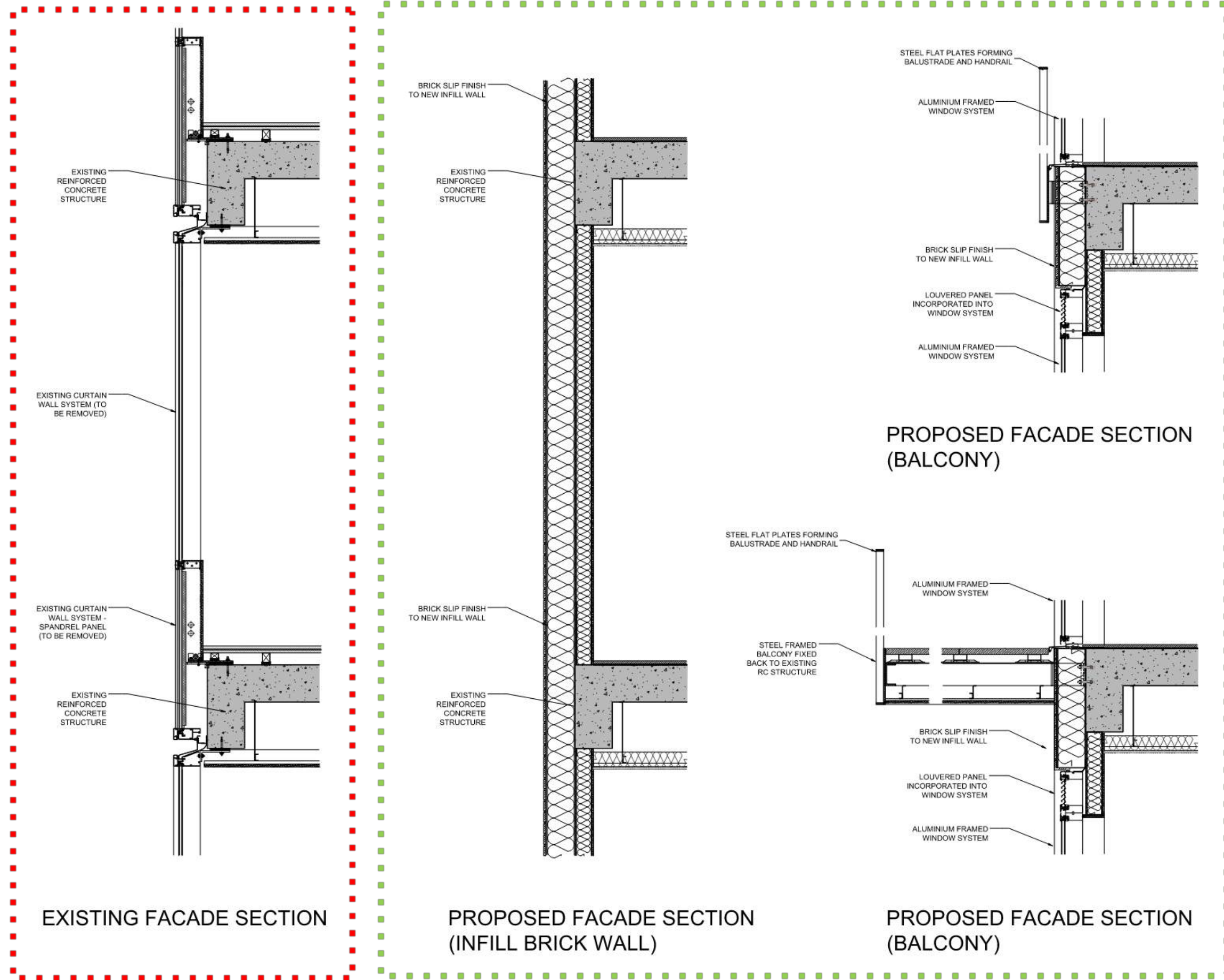
7.2 Energy Efficiency & Future Proofing

The proposed façade renovation represents a critical upgrade to the building's environmental performance, fundamentally transforming it from an energy-inefficient 1980s office block into a high-performance, sustainable residential development. The existing "all-glass" curtain walling system is a significant source of heat loss in winter and solar gain in summer, leading to high energy demands. The new masonry-led envelope addresses these issues through the following targets:

- **Walls:** Target **U-Value of 0.18 W/m²K**, achieved through a high-specification insulated rainscreen system.
- **Windows:** Target **U-Value of 1.2 W/m²K**, utilizing high-performance double glazing with thermal breaks.

Key Benefits of the Upgrade:

- **Reduction in Operational Carbon:** By significantly increasing the thermal resistance of the envelope and improving airtightness, the building will require substantially less energy for heating and cooling. This aligns with Reading Borough Council's climate emergency goals.
- **Natural Ventilation:** Unlike the sealed 1980s office environment, the introduction of high-quality openable windows allows for passive cooling and natural airflow. This reduces reliance on mechanical systems, improves indoor air quality, and gives residents direct control over their environment.
- **Occupant Comfort:** The shift from lightweight glazing to a solid masonry-effect wall with "punched" windows provides better thermal mass and acoustic insulation. This creates a more stable internal temperature and protects residents from town-centre noise.
- **Embodied Carbon Retention:** By retaining the primary reinforced concrete structure rather than opting for demolition and rebuild, the project preserves the vast amount of carbon already "locked" into the building's frame.
- **Future-Proofing:** These upgrades ensure the building meets modern building regulations and is protected against rising energy costs, ensuring it remains a viable and high-quality residential asset for decades to come.



8.0 Phasing of Development

A portion of the ground and first floor within the north block is currently occupied under an active commercial lease. While this application seeks permission for the façade works to be completed across the entire building up to the parapet, the delivery of these works is expected to be carried out in two phases.

The majority of the façade renovation will be delivered in the first phase, alongside the residential conversion of the main building. The remaining works to the ground and first floor of the north block will follow in a second phase. This will coincide with a future application for the change of use for that specific space once the current lease allows.

The submitted plans for Phase 2 and the accompanying elevation drawings show how this will be managed. The design has been carefully considered to ensure that the new façade works will still look right alongside the existing elements during the period they remain in place, ensuring the building maintains a coherent and well-maintained appearance across both stages of the project.

9.0 Ecology and Biodiversity

The proposal seeks to provide meaningful enhancements to the local ecology, in accordance with local planning policy regarding biodiversity net gain in urban environments. Given the building’s location within the Abbey Quarter, the design intends to utilize the new facade to provide nesting and roosting opportunities for local wildlife.

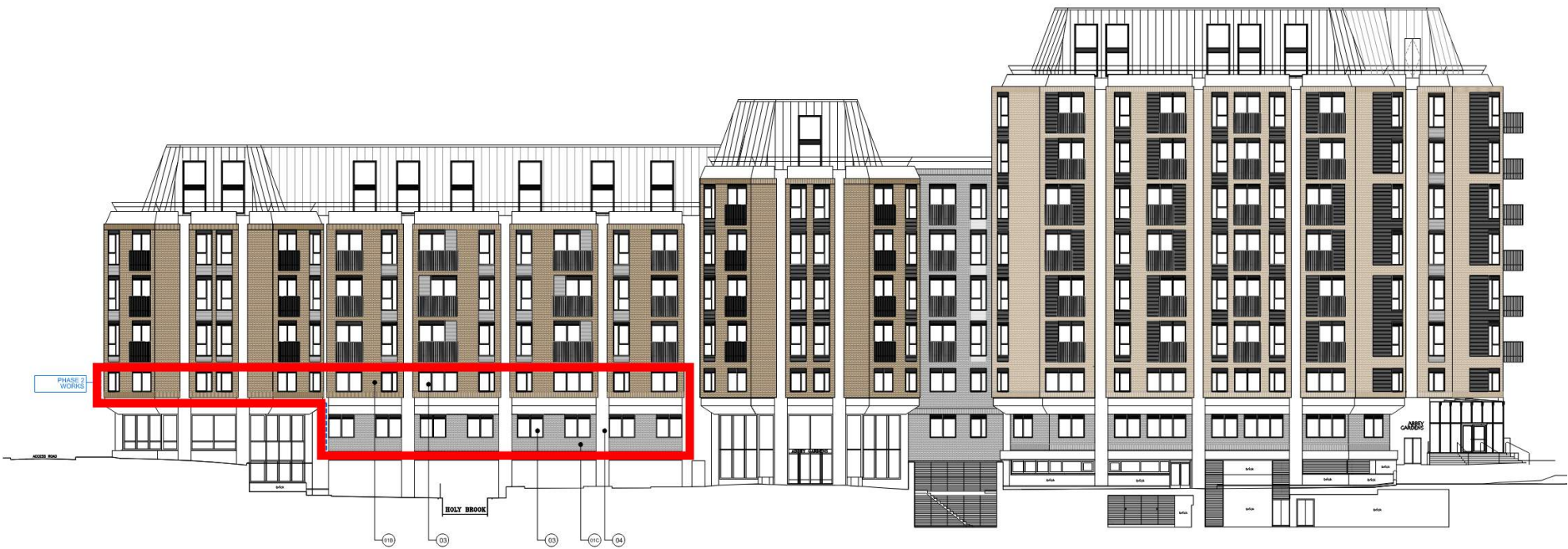
The following ecological enhancements are intended for integration into the facade:

- **Integrated Bat Boxes:** Specifically designed integrated brick-faced bat boxes are proposed. These are to be positioned at a minimum of 4m above ground level, away from artificial lighting and clear of any flight paths, typically on the quieter southern and eastern elevations.
- **Bird Nesting Boxes:** Integrated swift bricks and sparrow terraces are intended to be installed within the brickwork at high levels (typically under the eaves or parapet). These locations provide protection from predators and clear flight paths for nesting birds.

These features will be aesthetically integrated into the new brickwork without disrupting the architectural rhythm. The final quantities and precise positioning of these ecological elements will be confirmed as the project details are finalized.



Phase 1—West elevation



Phase 2—West elevation

10.0 Conclusion

The proposals for Abbey Gardens represent a sensitive and high-quality design response to the challenges of repurposing a 1980s commercial building within a significant heritage context. By stripping back the dated curtain walling and introducing a robust, masonry-led aesthetic, the scheme successfully transitions the building from its office origins to a permanent residential home that enhances the character of the Abbey Quarter.

Central to the design’s success is the strategic differentiation of the building volumes. This approach—born directly from a constructive Pre-Application and Design Review process—ensures that the development is no longer perceived as a monolithic mass. Instead, the use of three distinct brick types creates a legible architectural hierarchy that respects the scale and materiality of the adjacent Abbey ruins. The transition from the "earthy" browns of the North & Central Block to the "stony" greys of the South Block provides a sophisticated backdrop to the Abbey Gardens, ensuring the new façade complements rather than competes with the neighboring protected monuments.

Furthermore, the technical implementation through a lightweight brick slip system allows for a dramatic improvement in the building’s environmental credentials. The significant enhancements to U-values and thermal airtightness represent a long-term commitment to sustainability, ensuring the building is future-proofed against rising energy demands while retaining the embodied carbon of the original reinforced concrete structure.

In summary, the proposed façade renovation delivers a major aesthetic and functional improvement to Abbey Gardens. It balances the requirement for increased residential amenity with the need for architectural restraint in a sensitive setting. We believe the resulting scheme makes a positive and lasting contribution to the wider regeneration of Reading’s town centre, providing a benchmark for the sympathetic conversion of modern office stock into high-quality urban housing.

11.0 3D Visualisations

To clearly illustrate the impact of the proposed façade renovation on the Abbey Street streetscape and the wider heritage context, a series of 3D visualisations have been prepared. The following pages present existing and proposed views of the scheme from key vantage points. These visuals demonstrate how the transition from the 1980s glazed curtain walling to the new masonry-led aesthetic creates a more sympathetic, residential character that respects the historic setting of the Abbey Quarter.



Above: Proposed aerial view from the corner of Kings Road and Abbey Street.

Right: Existing view.





Right: Proposed aerial view from the corner of Kings Road and Abbey Street.

Below: Existing view.





Right: Proposed view from the corner of Kings Road and Abbey Street.

Below: Existing view.





Right: Proposed view from Kings Road.

Below: Existing view.



Right: Proposed view of rear of building from Chestnut walk
Below: Existing view.



Right: Proposed view of rear of building from Chestnut walk

Below: Existing view.





Right: Proposed view of rear of building from Crown Bridge.

Below: Existing view.

