

Report of the Berkshire Design Review
Panel

Broad Street Mall, Reading

12 July 2023

The design review meeting

Reference number	1984/280623
Date	28 July 2023
Meeting location	Stantec Offices, Caversham Bridge House, Waterman Place, Reading RG1 8DN
Panel members attending	Gillian Horn (chair), architecture and housing Claire Mitchell, urban design and public realm (including street design) Marcus Wilshire, urban design and regeneration Steven Bee, historic environment and urban design Vanessa Ross, landscape and public realm (including street design)
Panel manager	Chris Lamb, Design South East
Presenting team	Dominic Manfredi, AHR Architecture Glen MacFarlane, Macfarlane and Associates
Other attendees	Thomas Bradfield, Reading Borough Council Jonathan Walton, Opus Works Oliver Westray, McLaren Property Kate Falconer-Hall, Montague Evans LLP Scott Witchalls, Stantec
Site visit	A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel the scope of this review was not restricted. However, the local authority asked us to particularly concentrate on the increase in scale associated with this proposal and the impact on nearby heritage assets, the quality of the public realm and the detailed design. The applicant team asked us to comment on the design approach and design development.
Panel interests	Marcus Wilshire notified us that he was working on a project in which Montagu Evans are engaged. This was not deemed to constitute a conflict of interest.
Confidentiality	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a detailed planning application. Full details of our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

The proposal

Name	Broad Street Mall, Reading
Site location	Broad Street Mall, Reading, RG1 7QE
Site details	This is a 1.86 hectare site with significant level changes.
Proposal	Part-demolition of existing retail units, car park and service areas, rebuild of the car park ramp, and construction of a residential-led, mixed-use development fronting Queens Walk and Dusseldorf Way. There are 605 residential units and circa. 1,500 square metres of Class E floorspace.
Planning stage	Pre-application stage. Several pre-application meetings have been held.
Local planning authority	Reading Borough Council
Planning context	Minster Quarter Outline Development Framework, December 2018; Local Plan November 2019, Policy CR12d. There are sensitive heritage assets to the east (Grade I Listed Reading Minster), the south (Church Street Conservation Area, numerous Listed Buildings), and the west (Russell Street Conservation Area). The site is allocated for redevelopment in the Local Plan (CR12d). The previous application established the principles for development in this location, and the authority's position on this is unchanged.
Planning history	A previous application (ref. 182137) was granted permission for this site. This scheme includes a number of changes that form the basis of a new Full Planning Application scheduled for submission later in the year.
Planning authority perspective	Officers broadly support the proposal but have concerns over the increased height (which is greater than the extant permission) and the impact on local heritage assets.
Community engagement	Three meetings have been held with planning officers and three meetings held with elected members. Stakeholder engagement is to take place shortly.
Previous reviews	A previous application for this site was reviewed by the panel on 15 November 2019.

Summary

This well-presented scheme is an improvement on the extant planning permission. We support the increase in height; however, the configuration of the layouts results in towers that are relatively wide and lack elegance. The architecture is also somewhat generic, rather than rooted in its Reading context.

The junction to the north between new and existing built fabric is clearer than in the consented scheme. However, retaining the deck car park and omitting Building E moves the focus of investment south, at the expense of the whole site. There is a stark difference in quality between the north- and south-facing apartments and a lack of private external amenity space throughout. Some apartment layouts, particularly in Building C, are also problematic. External communal amenity space is neither generous nor easily accessed.

It is disappointing that the low carbon strategy focuses on operational carbon, rather than whole-life carbon. Whilst it is encouraging to hear that Minster Quarter is coming forward, we are concerned that placemaking opportunities will be missed unless both are designed coherently to form a new part of Reading.

We would welcome a further review or workshop of this scheme once the design team and council have had the opportunity to address our comments and recommendations.

Key recommendations

1. Work collaboratively with the team appointed for Minster Quarter.
2. Commit to delivering whole-life, rather than just operational, zero-carbon homes.
3. Reconsider the massing of the scheme paying particular attention to Building C, and better articulate the buildings, integrating shading and balconies into the south elevations.
4. Do more to benefit the whole urban block, including producing a strategy to convert the car parking deck into a new amenity space.
5. Explore the retention of the existing car park and the integration of the dramatic undercroft spaces into the masterplan.
6. Ensure the architecture reflects the character of Reading, including its twentieth century heritage, particularly at the lower levels and interface with the streetscape.
7. Increase communal amenity space and improve access to play spaces.
8. Improve the layouts of the apartments, particularly those in Building C.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy

- 1.1. We are encouraged to hear that the Minster Quarter masterplan is coming forward. However, this scheme needs to be seen in the context of a wider masterplan to help shape the public realm and integrate it within the wider context. Ideally the two masterplans should progress concurrently, but if this is not possible, we advocate a joint approach to Dusseldorf Way.
- 1.2. The opportunity to retain the concrete structures and integrate the dramatic below-ground spaces into the masterplan should be explored. Doing so would conserve under-appreciated heritage value and embodied energy and help to create a more distinctive public realm. This approach has been used to dramatic effect at London's Southbank Centre. We recommend producing site sections to explore this, which could also help to clarify the historic topography and identify and unlock other open spaces or developable areas.
- 1.3. The extant permission includes Building E to the north of the site. Given that this is not part of the revised scheme, the investment focus appears to have moved to the southern part of the site, at the expense of the rest of the urban block to the north. We consider this to be detrimental to the character of the wider area, and advocate for a more holistic approach that includes improvements to the mall. This would help to add value to this development and demonstrate a long-term commitment to Reading.
- 1.4. One of the most impactful changes would result from the conversion of the parking deck into a new amenity space to benefit residents of this development and the wider community. If this is not feasible, recommend working with the council to reduce the quantum of car parking. This would have immediate benefit to residents living in the north-facing apartments.
- 1.5. The south-facing apartments and retail units are likely to overheat and need mechanical cooling. We recommend shading is provided to the elevations and sufficient street trees to Dusseldorf Way.
- 1.6. Whilst the south-facing apartments are likely to benefit from good levels of daylight and views to the public realm, those facing north may lack natural light and will have views to the car park. It was, however, difficult to understand what the views will be for north facing residents, and we would welcome more information on this.

- 1.7. In addition, without information on the detail of the junction between the existing structure and the north elevation it is difficult to understand the implications for residents at the lower levels who are adjacent to, or overlook, the deck. Our recommendation is that residents in the north facing apartments at the lower levels overlook amenity space.
- 1.8. We would very much welcome an opportunity to review the Design Code. We also think that one code should cover this site and Minster Quarter.

2. Sustainable design

- 2.1. We strongly recommend that the scheme is designed to deliver whole life, rather than just operational zero carbon homes. This requires an understanding of the amount of embodied carbon in the demolished structures and setting targets to inform design decisions, including material selection.
- 2.2. Whilst we accept there are technical challenges, the decision to demolish the car park has serious implications for the sustainability of the development given the embodied carbon in the existing concrete structure.
- 2.3. Given the excellent rail connectivity, this is a sustainable location. It is encouraging to see that thought has been given to promoting active travel through the provision of well-located cycle parking. We recommend building on this and producing an active travel plan to determine the number of car parking spaces required for residents and to provide a framework for long term active travel provision including for example, electric charging for bikes. The travel plan could also help to further reduce the need for parking spaces through, for example, car sharing schemes.
- 2.4. We think that south facing retail units (particularly given the substantial areas of glass) and apartments will overheat and require mechanical cooling. We strongly recommend modelling this to determine how much of a problem it is likely to be and take steps to address it. Measures that would help include carefully selected street trees in the public realm and the addition of shading on the facades. Both would offer additional benefits in terms of the quality of life for residents, articulation of the currently sheer facade and the quality of Dusseldorf Way.

- 2.5. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in detail at this review. Our guidance is that at a subsequent design review and at planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear strategy that details how the development will minimise embodied, operational, and transport-related carbon emissions, and optimise the use of renewable energy to align with the Government's emerging zero carbon policy. This strategy should be tied to measurable targets and detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods. The strategy should also address water use, biodiversity net gain, and waste reduction in construction and operation through circular economic principles.

3. Layouts, form, and architecture

- 3.1. We are supportive of the increase in height of the buildings and do not think this will result in greater harm to the heritage value of heritage assets locally than the heights proposed in the extant consent.
- 3.2. We do however think the towers could be more elegant, and we are concerned that from some viewpoints the southern elevation will read as a single, continuous façade, making the towers read as one mass. We would therefore be supportive in principle of selectively increasing in the height of the towers, subject to further townscape analysis, or reducing their footprints, perhaps incrementally with height to achieve the same development quantum. Simplifying the facades and strengthening the vertical emphases would also help to enhance the proportions of the buildings, as would a more clearly differentiated the base, middle and top.
- 3.3. The tower typology of the buildings appears to have dictated the internal layouts, compromising the quality of apartments throughout the development. We recommend a different approach, that of developing a plan form that works well in terms of apartment layouts, and then assessing how this works in term of massing and townscape. The two should be iteratively tested to find the optimal balance between townscape considerations and quality of accommodation.
- 3.4. This is particularly true of Building C. Many of the apartments are unsatisfactory and there are too many apartments per corridor at lower levels. There is also no private amenity space or more generous communal space to compensate. We think reducing the height and changing this buildings typology from that of a tower/slab hybrid and to a mid-rise slab would work better in terms of townscape and enable higher quality accommodation.
- 3.5. Providing balconies would not only help to articulate the form, but also give residents choice over which amenity space they use. It would also connect residents directly to the outside and help to reduce the pressure on the shared amenity spaces.

- 3.6. We think that the architecture, with the use of coloured infill panels for example, risks appearing generic. We recommend focussing on the development of a richer connection between the towers and Readings streets. This could include drawing on a key part of that context; the immediate twentieth century heritage; the Hexagon Theatre, the car park, and the structure of the under crofts, all formed from concrete. More specifically, we there may be merit in incorporating all or part of the existing concrete frieze of the car park.
- 3.7. We support the extension of the base of the towers to ground level on Dusseldorf Way and think that this approach is an improvement on the consented scheme. We also think the strong architectural forms and substantial columns at the base work well, but the architecture needs more clarity. One example of how this could be achieved is to expose the concrete structure at the base, rather than clad it, to demonstrate its purpose and to reference the architecture of the car park and Hexagon Theatre.

4. Amenity space and public realm

- 4.1. The comments made above about the generic nature of the architecture extend to the public interface along the public realm of Dusseldorf Way. There is a danger that this area could feel anonymous. Referencing the local historical context in the design, details and materials will help to anchor its character in Reading.
- 4.2. Calibrating the scale of Dusseldorf Way, and the correct provision of shading and street trees, will be critical factors in the success of the public realm as the masterplan progresses.
- 4.3. How the public realm contributes to biodiversity net gain is unclear and we would like to understand the habitats that will be provided and how they will support life.
- 4.4. We are not convinced by the green wall. They are generally unsustainable and difficult to manage.
- 4.5. The increased amount of internal public amenity space is positive. However, we are concerned that the amount of outdoor communal amenity space is insufficient and lacks the variety needed to meet the different needs of users.
- 4.6. The play spaces are very small and difficult to access. Thought needs to be given to how these spaces are used and accessed. It should be possible for children to go from an apartment to a play space unaccompanied, but the convoluted route prohibits this. Locating the play space at street level, as Elephant Park in Southwark, London, would make it more accessible.

- 4.7. There are also conflicting uses in the communal external spaces, with insufficient space to enable a satisfactory separation of active play from quite social areas.

5. Materials and detailing

- 5.1. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in detail at this review. Paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) states: *'Local planning authorities should seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).'*
- 5.2. To be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note Design South East's general guidance on material quality and detail. At planning application stage, the quality of the detailing should be demonstrated through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building/landscape and should be accompanied by actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval.

This report is a synthesis of the panel's discussion during the review and does not relate to any discussions that may have taken place outside of this design review meeting. A draft report is reviewed by all panel members and the Chair ahead of issuing the final version, to ensure key points and the Panel's overarching recommendations are accurately reported.

The report does not minute the proceedings but aims to provide a summary of the panel's recommendations and guidance.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations provided that the content of the report is treated in the strictest confidence. Neither the content of the report, nor the report itself can be shared with anyone outside the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the content of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available, and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

Design South East Limited
Admirals Office
The Historic Dockyard
Chatham, Kent
ME4 4TZ

T 01634 401166
E info@designsoutheast.org
designsoutheast.org

