

CONFIDENTIAL

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Our ref: Q2020/1737/MJR
Date: 22nd November 2021

Dear Mr Hall,

ISLINGTON DESIGN REVIEW PANEL
RE: CASTLE & FITZROY HOUSE (PRE-APPLICATION REF: Q2020/1737/MJR)

Thank you for attending Islington's Design Review Panel meeting on 16th November 2021 for a 1st Review of the scheme. The proposal under consideration is for:

Demolition of the existing B1 office building with B8 data storage centre at basement level and the erection of a part 5, part 6, and part 7 storey office led development, up to 32m in height (to top of plant), to provide circa 30,000sqm (GIA) of B1 office floorspace, a new B8 data storage facility and new ground floor A1 and A3 uses.

Review Process

The Design Review Panel provides expert impartial design advice following the 10 key principles of design review established by Design Council/CABE. Given the Covid 19 Pandemic situation, this DRP was carried out virtually.

The scheme was reviewed by Richard Portchmouth (Chair), Stuart Piercy, Tim Attwood, Kate Graham, and Thomas Lefevre. It included a presentation by the development team followed by a question and answer session, and a discussion of the proposals. The 'site visit' was undertaken virtually, at the beginning of the presentation.

The views expressed below are a reflection of the Panel's discussions as an independent advisory board to the Council.

Panel's Observations

The Chair of the Panel welcomed the opportunity to comment on the scheme and thanked the design team for their presentation. The presentation commenced with the virtual site visit followed by the presentation of the scheme by the project architects Morris & Company. A question and answer session between Panel Members and the applicant team then took place followed by a commentary on the scheme provided by each member. The meeting concluded with the Chair's summing up.

These items, commencing with the question and answer session, are recorded below.

Questions and Answers

Panel Query: RP noted that this was a large presentation but lacking in significant levels of detail. However The Panel appreciates schemes coming early to review while they are still being formed and the team should therefore understand that this is likely to generate a lot of questions from the panel.

RP expressed some confusion with regard to the entrance strategy noting that there was some conflict between some of the imagery presented.

Answer: The design is indeed work in progress. The entrance strategy is also changing and the applicant accepted there was some discrepancy between the plans reflecting a change in strategy.

Panel Query: KG queried a discrepancy in plans with regard to the 6th floor and roof level with those most recently issued at odds with those in the presentation. Queried alternative options to the siting and bulk of plant to roof. Mass of the plant will have a greater impact due to its height and the afforded views.

Answer: Work in progress – the applicant is still looking at options as to the siting of all plant.

Panel Query: KG queried Views and noted that those medium and long range views from Bunhill Fields that were presented are obscured by foliage. Are there winter views and if not these are essential given the set piece of the Chapel and the applicant's stated desire not to interrupt its silhouetted roof form as well as broader heritage sensitivities.

Answer: Winter views will be undertaken and assessed over the coming months.

Panel Query: KG queried the absence of information as to how the building will be viewed from Tabernacle Street looking down Platina Street. This view is also visible from within a conservation area and while recessed is nevertheless of importance.

Answer: Noted.

Panel Query: KG queried whether there are any landscape plans, or any planting or public realm measures such as casual seating to the edges?

Answer: Landscape architects have just been appointed to take forward the landscape design.

Panel Query: SP enquired what the sunlight and daylight findings are and a better understanding of the disposition of uses – including residential - within the immediate context. He noted LBI's strict adherence to BRE standards in this respect.

Answer: The applicant team responded that they don't yet know the effects but are aware of the location of adjacent residential uses going forward.

Panel Query: SP queried the extent of the basement at 2 x full site, 5m deep, levels.

Answer: The applicant stated the need to maximise plant space below ground while adding that there is already a data centre in the building which is to be retained and which requires significant basement space. The applicant also noted the extent of space generated by such a large development and required for wellness related facilities together with cycle stores, possibly a hub for electric vehicles, and such like.

Panel Query: TA sought greater visual clarification going forward with regard to the roof level structures including balustrading given the associated visual impact.

Answer: Noted.

Panel Query: TA queried the double height concourses and sought a better understanding as to what spaces are accessible to the public noting that this area is quite 'dead' for much of the time.

He also noted the confusion of the entrancing strategy and sought clarification going forward given the importance entrances have on the functioning of the development, of the urban form and on street life in general. Given the scale of the block there does need to be considerable public benefit associated with the development.

Answer: Applicant stated that the 'ground' is to extend upwards, through the atrium contributing to a sense of drawing in the public realm to the body of the scheme. The ground floor is conceived as an exchange space. Outside will comprise clearly defined secondary entrances leading to uses that will flow into the heart of the building. The central space is to be more like a market hall and could be occupied as such during the day.

The applicant stated that initially an east-west (internal) route from Platina Street connecting to Paul Street was considered. However this was not encouraged by the Council (*given it did not adequately respond to or reinforce the historic street pattern or demonstrably address future movement requirements*).

Panel Query: TL also expressed some concern about the extent of the basement requesting indicative layout plans for both levels.

Answer: Level 1 was presented as being indicatively populated; Level 2, as presented, was not.

Panel Query: RP queried the flexibility of the internal office space which was presented in plan form as being subdivided into 2 offices per floor.

Answer: The floors have the potential to be effectively subdivided up to 12 individual units. Spatial flexibility is a critical requirement for the applicant.

Panel Query: RP noted the fine and visionary intent including within the emerging architecture and questioned the procurement route and the threat to quality of the D&B route.

Answer: The applicant stated that MOCO will design to RIBA Stage 4 then be novated to the client side to manage quality.

The applicant wants to make this a flagship development with the focus on delivering the best product – that leads in sustainability and where people are excited to come to. Wants an outward looking building that contributes to local communities. Wants a building that is flexible like the old warehouse buildings – that can be used over and over again.

The spatial quality is also really important – want to attract the right sort of tenants. The site sits between Liverpool Street and Old Street – so it is ideally located for this typology.

Panel Commentary

KG: This is a large site so its redevelopment presents multiple considerations. The approach, including that toward townscape matters, is shaping up into what will be a flexible 'Shoreditch'

building. The new buildings will likely be a significant improvement with regard to the setting of the Conservation Area given the poor quality of the existing buildings on the site.

But it is the effects on the setting of Wesley Chapel that is of concern, a big concern. The applicant stated that the design was mindful not to impede on the distinctive Chapel roof form – but those views from Bunhill Fields show upper floors of the proposed new build being clearly visible behind the Chapel roof pitch. Including plant. A winter assessment needs to be undertaken to enable the council to make an informed assessment as to the impact on the setting of heritage assets.

And the applicant is reminded that trees come and go over time. Any views of plant over Wesley's Chapel should not be allowed and even the acceptability of the upper floors in this view are likely to be problematic and should be avoided. Therefore the setting of the heritage assets remains an important and outstanding matter.

SP: The typology is welcomed on this site as is the narrative around it creating resilient workspace. The proposal is undoubtedly positive in comparison with what currently exists. The massing appears to be an acceptable fit in those narrow, near positioned, street views presenting a positive storey. However, it is the long views that are difficult to assess and views presented by photograph are very different to those presented by model. The applicant needs to better illustrate the long and middle distant views and in doing so enable Islington to make a better assessment of the impact.

There needs to be a commitment to tangible sustainable benefits of the scheme. Currently it is hard to see what systems will make this an exemplar building, or how the highest of standards can be both achieved and maintained.

The proposed double basement requires an extensive dig which is of concern in respect of sustainable development.

Plant screen – the amount of plant should be reduced and set further back from the edges. Consider changing its form on plan so it doesn't form such a horizontal mass which is at odds with the vertical rhythms being established to the body of the block. Should be enough scope to push it around and be less of an impact than currently proposed.

Confidence in MOCO studio with regard to achieving the high quality of materiality this development will require. Generally consider it a positive approach and supports the emerging scheme design.

TA: Great having the sustainability ambition as presented but there remains a need to understand how this will actually be delivered. All will be in the detail - not just in the ambition. Sustainability is increasingly important and the applicant is advised to adopt a more rigorous approach, including the citing of prototype reference examples as to the specifics to be achieved and how these will be achieved.

The applicant should also demonstrate how the development will be capturing the waste heat from the data centre. This will help to offset the basement required to house it. The applicant should make sure the lower embodied carbon choice of a steel and CLT frame are 'locked in' as far as possible.

Such a big block – the views are really important and the development will undoubtedly change the skyline in the longer views. More articulation to the top floors is needed. Currently there is not a clear understanding as to effectively break up the mass and the upper levels

are presented as one big building, at odds with the base. It is somewhat too tall in a few places and consideration should be given to lowering it where possible.

Very encouraged by the ambition of the scheme however, including such an enrichment of the local streetscape which is currently dull and bleak with little greening. So while the designs are 'getting there' they are nevertheless not quite there.

The treatment of the public realm around the whole ground floor and in particular around the entrances is really very important. Need to respect yet improve the character.

Don't feel that the bold identity so promoted in the presentation has yet been achieved. Could almost be deemed to be trying to ensure that the development does not stand out – being almost too respectful. Not really bold enough in line with the applicant's vision.

In all this is considered a very promising initiative - but let's keep working.

TL This was a very clear presentation. And the honesty within it was welcomed including the sharing of sketch up and other work in progress.

Three issues for consideration:

- a) Retrofit – we all know we have to move away from a culture of systematic demolition and new build, so well done on the retrofit study. Completely understand the reasons as to why not reusing the existing structure, there are good reasons. Suggest however adding to the analysis some carbon numbers to quantify the difference between the options and also find advantages of retrofit/structure re-use over new build – otherwise we will always find reasons to demolish!
- b) A two level basement – this will have a significant carbon price. Do you really need two 5.3m high levels? Preference would be for no basement and failing that one basement level only. Can you do a comparison between these three options and put a carbon figure on each?
- c) The ambition of 'highest standards of sustainability' and 'best in class' are welcome – but what do they mean for the scheme in design terms beyond the headline of BREEAM Outstanding? What does it mean in terms of energy efficiency? Heating system? Renewable energy generation? Embodied carbon? Biodiversity? Are you targeting compliance with LETI targets? No use of gas on site? Net Zero carbon? The quality of thinking in terms of urban design and architecture needs to be matched by a similar level of site specific thinking in terms of sustainability. The applicant is therefore advised to explicitly articulate how far you are going beyond the London Plan and Islington's policy minimums.

Chair's Summing Up

The chair thanked the applicant team for their thorough presentation and the work that had gone into the scheme to date. All much appreciated. A lot of work was shared with The Panel but conscious that a lot remained unseen and unresolved and that there is a substantial amount of design development still to come. But The Panel is certainly encouraged by what was presented.

Heritage – The Panel is more confident about how the building is appearing in the near and close up views than in the medium to long views. The latter appear very sketchy – verifying and justifying the approach and design in terms of those medium and longer views is of critical importance given the heritage sensitivities. Views from Bunhill Fields and over the top of the

Wesley Chapel remain unclear. The applicant is advised to investigate in winter when foliage is not on trees and to mitigate accordingly.

Plant – The design of screen - its alignment, its materiality etc will all impact on the quality of the development and the impact it has on the setting of multiple heritage assets. It needs more refinement before The Panel could support it as well as clearer understanding as to how it will be seen in the medium and longer views.

Vision - Initial thoughts and vision within the presentation are welcomed – the ambitions and targets being set for the building are all highly positive. Seeing the design early enables The Panel to express its support of your vision. But while we understand and support the vision, The Panel did not see how a lot of those visionary aspects were materialising, nor therefore how that vision is to be achieved.

Site response and configuration – will be interesting to see how the entrances work both individually and as part of an established movement and spatial hierarchy. The entrance strategy seems to be still in flux... but all must be shown to work comprehensively together.

The cycle entrance is really important and details in this respect, and indeed of this entire edge, were missing. Don't want to always feel that one is arriving to work through the back door as it were. Landscape will inevitably help enrich and reinforce a logical hierarchy of the entrances as well as creating a qualitative response.

Architecture - the warehouse language is an appropriate one. It's a unique and special part of London and the applicant team's respect and understanding of this character is coming through which is supported by The Panel including the emergence of a recognisably 'Shoreditch' building and language. Architecturally this will result in a significant improvement to the site and wider context.

The introduction of setback floors becomes an interesting part of the analysis. There are multiple historic examples where the setback floors are built in the same materials as the bulk of their host building. The proposed setbacks and the approach to them appear to be more homogenous and unified – will that confuse the reading of the development from the longer views? The Panel considers that this unified homogeneous set back floor on upper levels undermines how one reads the façade which is richly embedded in historic reference. This needs more thought. This also relates to how to deal with more successfully accommodating plant on the roof etc.

Bold identity – there remains some further work to bring the extensive analysis work and thinking to the fore in terms how to create these indicative smaller building blocks within an overarching bold manner.

Sustainability - A lot of discussion focused on sustainability including how it's going to be delivered. The Panel were very positive to understand that a retrofit study has been done – but was it done to write the existing building off? The positives of keeping the existing building were not articulated - and should be.

The Panel commends the approach to reuse of materials. This could introduce variety and intrigue in the architecture – how you use vestiges of the past in the designs of the future....

An animated and activated ground floor is really important in this location and appears to be emerging successfully. But a reduction of basement space and concern as to the extent of plant to the roof may encourage the applicant team to explore alternative locations for storage and plant. Perhaps areas around Platina Street edge could be further explored. The Panel

advises the applicant to consider reducing the size of the lower basement or, better still, remove it altogether.

Comments re atrium for natural ventilation – want to see how that develops including use for sustainability.

In conclusion, The Panel likes the direction the scheme is moving in but consider it could go much further – and are confident that the assembled team has the ability to take it much further.

The Panel likes to see schemes early on in their design development and as such does not have an issue that some material is edited out or indeed undeveloped at this stage, until whole story is complete.

The Panel would however welcome a further review of the scheme when the project has been developed in response to these comments and such that any further comments can inform the design development as it is finalised in advance of a planning application.

Confidentiality

Please note that since the scheme is at pre-application stage, the advice contained in this letter is provided in confidence. However, should this scheme become the subject of a planning application, the views expressed in this letter may become public and will be taken into account by the Council in the assessment of the proposal and determination of the application.

Yours sincerely,

Linda Aitken
Principal Design Officer