

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

20 June 2006

PROPOSAL: Full Planning Application for Caring Centre of Excellence
LOCATION: Cauldon Campus, Stoke Road, Stoke-on-Trent
DEVELOPER: Stoke-on-Trent College
ARCHITECTS: Hickton Madeley
REF NO: 042

Background

This proposal is for a new campus building on the Cauldon Campus of Stoke-on-Trent College, accommodating teaching facilities for the caring professions at ground floor level and for hair and beauty professions at first floor level, with staff and administrative facilities on the second floor. The site is located astride the boundary between the existing College Campus and Cauldon Park, the latter being in the ownership of Stoke-on-Trent City Council. The proposal would comprise the first phase of comprehensive restructuring of the heart of the College Campus whereby all buildings except the two facing Stoke Road and College Road would be redeveloped. The Panel were informed that the College is seeking a long lease of the entire park from the Council and aims to restore the historic landscape as part of the Campus master plan. The Panel visited the site prior to commenting on the proposal.

Strategic Planning Context

The site extends into the northern edge of Cauldon Park which is included in the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. Immediately to the north of the College Campus lies the Caldron Canal. Both the Canal and Cauldon Park are designated conservation areas.

Stoke-on-Trent College lies within the University Quarter where major proposals are in preparation for the expansion and further development of Staffordshire University, including the improvement of interconnectivity with Stoke-on-Trent College and Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College.

The College Campus lies immediately to the south of the City Centre South Area of Major Intervention identified by Renew North Staffordshire, the housing pathfinder, as a priority for housing market renewal.

The site is therefore situated in a pivotal and sensitive location within an area undergoing extensive regeneration. The Panel were pleased to learn that it is the applicant's aim to create a building which strengthens the relationship between the College Campus and the park, and to restore and maintain the historic landscape to a high standard.

Contextual Analysis

Although correspondence from the architect states that a design statement has been produced, this document was not made available to the Panel and so the underlying rationale for the design was not fully explained. The architect's presentation took the form of a narrative describing the proposal, but did not include an urban design analysis of its context and so the relationship of the scheme to its wider setting was not made explicit.

The Campus Development Plan illustrated how the proposal would fit into the long term redevelopment of the College. It is intended that the proposed building would form one of a symmetrical pair of south-facing buildings aligned on an axis with the historic park. To the rear and also on the same axis it is proposed to site a glazed building linking two more symmetrical buildings, which would replace other existing buildings. A pedestrian zone with hard landscaping would be located between these buildings, and parking for 410 cars provided in two areas adjacent to the Caldon Canal.

The boundary between the College Campus and Cauldon Park is currently defined by a zone of trees and shrubs, most of which do not form part of the historic park landscape. The proposed development would remove the majority of these trees, but the Panel considered that this loss would be outweighed by the potential benefits of the proposal for Cauldon Park as a whole, and for the development and enhancement of the College itself. The Panel also considered that the successful integration of the College and the Park would have significant townscape benefits and would help improve the image of this important inner urban area.

Urban Design

Character

The part of the historic park affected by the proposal was formerly occupied by a conservatory, which had a terrace along its southern frontage. The conservatory was demolished many years ago and the terrace, which is located in an elevated and partially screened position in relation to the rest of the park, has been the subject of vandalism and has fallen into a state of disrepair. The Panel were informed that the proposal had been designed with reference to the demolished conservatory, but how this had been achieved was not made clear.

The Panel commended the College's aim of using a main axis of the historic park to organise a symmetrical layout for the redevelopment of the College Campus and fully supported the intention to restore the terrace with its stone and terracotta features.

Continuity and Enclosure

The new building would be aligned with the terrace and, with its future complementary building, would present a strong south-facing built-up frontage to the historic park. However, the Panel were concerned that this elevation, although well glazed, would have very limited opportunities

for interactivity between the building and the terrace, and therefore with the park. The proposed outdoor café area at the western end of the building would be quite small and would have a poor relationship with the existing terrace. The Panel considered that too much importance was being given to the original form of the terrace, which was of limited historic value and was in fact extensively damaged. The need for major restoration of the terracotta balustrades of the terrace would involve substantial rebuilding and this would provide the opportunity to reposition its semi-circular end further to the west, thereby making it possible to provide a larger and more functional outdoor area to the café. This would create a much more positive relationship between the building and the historic terrace, increasing levels of passive surveillance and activity generally.

Quality of the Public Realm

The Panel welcomed the College's intention to restore the terrace and to take ownership of the historic park. The Panel considered that the development of this special site offered the opportunity for the significant enhancement of an important though neglected part of the City's heritage and that every effort should be made to realise this opportunity to the full. This commitment should be locked into any planning permission by means of conditions or a legal agreement.

Ease of movement

The Panel were concerned that the proposal did not connect well to its surroundings. Major regeneration initiatives are planned in the immediate vicinity of the College Campus, but no indication was given as to how better pedestrian linkages might be formed between the re-planned Campus and its wider context. The Panel considered that despite the difference in levels a greater effort should be made to provide good pedestrian linkages between the Campus and the Canal towpath and to create a much more beneficial relationship between the College Campus and the Caldon Canal corridor.

Legibility

The main entrance to the proposed Caring Centre of Excellence is located in a corner of the building that is not prominent, with the result that the building does not present an accessible image to the outside world.

Architecture

The Panel considered that the proposal is a site-specific design with an appropriate scale and massing for this setting. The design had strong three-dimensional qualities which give its architectural form a certain dynamism.

The materials were described as having been selected following consideration of the conservatory building formerly occupying the site and the pottery factory that pre-dated the College Campus. However, the alleged historical connection is questionable as the materials proposed (white render, white composite panels, cedar boarding, powder-coated metal and glazed blockwork) appear to have no historical precedent. The Panel thought that the inclusion of genuine, locally distinctive materials within the palette of materials for the development would help integrate the new building with its historic setting.

The near total absence of active frontages along the two main elevations of the building showed little regard for the adjacent public realm. The Panel considered this to be particularly unfortunate along the south-facing elevation, where the opportunity of creating seating or for activities to spill out onto the terrace had not been taken. The potential synergy between the public uses in the building and the park had not been properly realised.

Overall the Panel thought that the architectural design, whilst not without merit when considered in isolation, had deficiencies in so far as it did not fulfil the stated aim of connecting well with the terrace and the park, did not relate well to the public realm, and had no genuine reference to the locally distinctive palette of materials.

Sustainability

The site lies on the College's Cauldon Campus which is conveniently located for road, rail and bus access. The site is partially brownfield land, although a number of established trees would be affected by the development.

No reference was made to the use of local energy generation in the design, or to the potential for passive solar gain in this south-facing building. The louvres on the south elevation appeared to be for shading, rather than for the controlled utilisation of solar energy.

The proposed materials did not appear to have been selected for their sustainable qualities. No indication was given of an intention to source materials or labour locally in carrying out the development.

Conclusion

The Panel welcomed the fact that this proposal sought to reconfigure the existing College layout in order to create a much more positive relationship between the College and the park, and to restore and improve the maintenance of the historic landscape. The Panel considered that this special site offered significant opportunities for improving the character and quality of the area, and for making a major contribution to the regeneration of the urban core of North Staffordshire.

However, despite laudable intentions for the development, the Panel considered that the proposal failed to take the opportunities available to the site. The building was not particularly legible, it had poor linkages with the terrace and the park, the proposed materials lacked local distinctiveness, and only minimal consideration appeared to have been given to issues of sustainable development.

The Panel commended the use of symmetry as an organising principle for the Campus Development Plan, but was not convinced that the potential to improve the integration of the Campus with its environs had been fully explored.

Recommended Actions:

- 1 The proposed Campus Development Plan should be reviewed in the light of an urban design analysis in order to demonstrate how the new Campus layout integrates with its environmental context.
- 2 The ground floor layout of the building should be revised in order to improve significantly its connectivity with the terrace and the park. The scope for extending the terrace westwards and for enlarging the outdoor café area and integrating it with the terrace should be thoroughly investigated.
- 3 The main entrance to the building should be re-sited and given greater visual prominence, in order to improve its legibility.
- 4 The proposed materials for the development should be revised to include one or more materials of genuine local distinctiveness, in order to integrate better with the historic setting.
- 5 The applicant should be asked to demonstrate how the principles of environmental sustainability have been taken into account in the design of the proposal.

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22 November 2006

Your ref: For the attention of Kay Mitchell
Our ref: DR042/Mick Downs (t:01782 790595; e: mickdowns@uvns.org)

Dear Kay

**DESIGN REVIEW PANEL
RECONSIDERATION OF PROPOSED NEW CAMPUS BUILDING
STOKE-ON-TRENT COLLEGE, STOKE ROAD, STOKE-ON-TRENT**

I refer to your recent request for comments on the amended plans and accompanying documentation in relation to the above proposal from Urban Vision's Design Review Panel.

On 20 July 2006 the Panel commented on a full planning application for the erection of a new campus building for Stoke-on-Trent College on land along the north side of Cauldon Park. On 16 November 2006 the Panel considered the College's amended proposals informally and made further comments, which are itemised below under the five headings of the Panel's original recommendations.

- 1 The proposed Campus Development Plan should be reviewed in the light of an urban design analysis in order to demonstrate how the new Campus layout integrates with its environmental context.*

The revised Architect's Design Statement (October 2006) provides an explanation of the proposed design, setting the proposal in the context of a master plan previously prepared for the redevelopment of the college and emphasising the relationship between the proposed new building (one of a symmetrical pair) and the axial planning of Cauldon Park. In other respects however, the Design Statement does not extend beyond the boundaries of the existing college

site and fails to provide the wider urban design analysis that ought to accompany a scheme of this significance on a such sensitive site. The way the redeveloped college integrates with its setting, especially the relationship between the college site and the canal, and the way in which the site layout integrates with the pedestrian movement network in the locality through its connections with the historic Hanley park to the east, and with Hanley Cemetery to the west, are significant factors which have not yet been satisfactorily dealt with.

- 2 The ground floor layout of the building should be revised in order to improve significantly its connectivity with the terrace and the park. The scope for extending the terrace westwards and for enlarging the outdoor café area and integrating it with the terrace should be thoroughly investigated.*

The internal ground floor layout has been amended to provide steps to the level of the south terrace, although the amended plans show no paving between the base of the steps and the terrace making the functionality of this connection questionable. A "feature" wall along the front of the building has been removed. Otherwise, the Panel's previous recommendation for significant improvements in connectivity between the building and the terrace have not been acted upon. In fact additional opaque glazing to this elevation is proposed, which would reduce its transparency and the scope for interaction between the building and the terrace. Whilst these changes amount to a slight net improvement, the proposal still fails to realise the opportunities provided by the presence of the terrace for making strong active linkages between the important south-facing elevation of the building and the historic park.

- 3 The main entrance to the building should be re-sited and given greater visual prominence, in order to improve its legibility.*

A minor amendment to the orientation of the main access door at the western end of the building so that it faces the drop off point has improved legibility for visitors.

- 4 The proposed materials for the development should be revised to include one or more materials of genuine local distinctiveness, in order to integrate better with the historic setting.*

In the revised Architect's Design Statement it is claimed that the proposed materials "are drawn from characteristics of the earlier building". Photographs reproduced in the Historic Research paper on the Cauldon Grounds' Terrace produced by Anthony Short and Partners (October 2006) show the former conservatory to be a timber, iron and glass structure set on a brick plinth. The extensive use of white composite panels and white render proposed for the new college building clearly has no historic precedent, and it is misleading at least to state otherwise. The use of glazed masonry on the rear (north) elevation has a notional connection with the pottery industry, but no precedent in the external surfacing of traditional buildings in the area, other than as a minor decorative element. The Panel welcomed the proposed reinstatement of the terracotta balustrade to the southern edge of the terrace, but thought that further consideration should be given to the palette of facing materials, with a view to including one or more materials which are genuinely traditional to the area (i.e. materials based on clay, iron or structural timber).

- 5 The applicant should be asked to demonstrate how the principles of environmental sustainability have been taken into account in the design of the proposal.*

From the information available to the Panel it was not apparent that any further thought had gone into the environmental sustainability of the proposal.

I hope that these comments will be helpful. If you need any further clarification, please get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Manager
Urban Vision North Staffordshire