

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

15 February 2007

PROPOSAL: Preliminary proposal for 24 Residential Apartments
LOCATION: Land off Furlong Passage, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent
DEVELOPERS: Talbot Developments
ARCHITECTS: Wood Goldstraw Yorath
REF NO: 059

Background

This proposal is for 24 residential units with undercroft car parking on a 0.12ha site on the western edge of Burslem town centre immediately adjacent to the Burslem bypass (Woodbank Street). The site is situated on a south facing slope with views towards the wooded landscape of Grange Park and Festival Park and across the Fowlea Brook valley to Newcastle-under-Lyme. The Panel were informed that the proposal is at an early stage and that a number of design issues had yet to be resolved. The site was formerly occupied by the Royal Staffordshire Tableware company and is now vacant. The Panel visited the site before commenting on the proposal.

Description

The proposal comprises three/four storeys of residential accommodation with car parking concealed in an undercroft extending over most of the site area and accessed via the small public car park immediately to the south. The development is proposed in the form of perimeter blocks on or near to the south and east boundaries of the site, enclosing private amenity space over the undercroft car park. The external elevations are treated in a contemporary architectural style and consist of a plinth of spaced stone gabions with brick and render panels in rectangular frames fronting the residential units above.

Strategic Planning Context

The site lies with the Burslem Town Centre Conservation Area and within the area covered by the Burslem Master Plan, which was adopted by Stoke-on-Trent City Council in June 2004 as Supplementary Planning Guidance now saved under the new Local Development Framework.

The Burslem Master Plan identifies the land at Furlong Passage as one of eight strategic development sites suitable for mixed use (residential/commercial/retail) development, with indicative uses of 32 residential units and 1,000m² of studio/retail floorspace. The present proposal utilises over half the site identified in the Master Plan, omitting land to the north and the

public car park to the south. The Master Plan proposes some small retail / commercial units at ground floor level nearest St John's Square, in a development of a minimum of 3 storeys rising higher at the corners on Woodbank Street.

Panel's Comments

The Panel thought that this is a site with great potential, lying inside the historic town centre and possessing wonderful views to the south and the east. The Panel welcomed the general approach being taken to the form of the development with perimeter blocks which would repair the street frontage and reinstate the urban grain of this part of the town.

However, the wider context of the proposal requires more careful consideration, so that it can be clearly demonstrated that the proposal would work in relation to key contextual factors including local pedestrian movements, its relationship to Furlong Passage, the local historic environment, the topography of the site, and views of the site from a distance. The Panel had the following detailed advice:

Car Parking

The Panel thought that the provision of undercroft car parking in the form of a single horizontal slab across most of the site was driving the design of the proposal towards a more or less uniform flat roof form of development which does not respond to the sloping topography and does not fit well with its historic setting. The Panel thought that the amenity value of the courtyard to the rear of the perimeter blocks would be poor, given the fact that it would be enclosed by 3 and 4 storey buildings and would get little if any direct sunlight. Whilst the aim of concealing car parking from external view is entirely appropriate, the Panel thought that it would be possible to do this at surface level in the enclosed courtyard, and that the slope of the site should be accepted as given and the car park surface aligned with the slope.

Building Form

Whilst supporting the use of perimeter block development in general terms, the Panel thought that a more sensitive response is required to the topography of the site, to pedestrian desire lines and to the street frontage. Rather than inserting floor slabs on a single horizontal level across the site the Panel thought the building blocks should be broken down to allow their floor levels and roofline to descend and rise with the slope of the land, like those of nearby historic buildings. The use of higher built elements at the corners fronting Woodbank Street would further help integrate the development into its context.

The building line should be continued right up to Furlong Passage and as far as possible a built-up frontage should be provided to reinstate tight enclosure along Furlong Passage itself. There is a pedestrian desire line running from the pedestrian crossing at the top of Woodbank Street to Furlong Passage along the northern boundary of the site. The Panel thought that this should be recognised in the alignment of the northern building line so as to encourage footfall along Furlong Passage and provide a direct route into the town centre.

Elevations

The Panel thought that the plinth of stone gabions would have the advantage of elevating residential units above the busy main road to the west. However, on the south elevation the gabion baskets would result in an inactive frontage leading into St John's Square. This would not be good urban design practice and would not serve to integrate the development into the historic

town centre. The Panel suggested that provision should be made for more active uses at ground floor level along the south side of the development, perhaps including some non-residential uses if possible.

The fact that the site lies within Burslem town centre should be taken into account in the selection of external surfacing materials. The Panel is supportive of a contemporary architectural approach to the design of the development, but this needs to be tempered by the use of materials which reflect local distinctiveness as part of the overall palette of materials for the development.

Conclusion

The Panel considered that this is a highly sustainable site, being brownfield land with easy access to a wide range of facilities, good public transport links and excellent views out. However, the Panel noted that the issues of sustainable development had not yet been fully addressed.

The site lies on the edge of an important historic town centre and the Panel thought that the urban design quality of the development is more important than achieving precise levels of car parking or providing ideal servicing arrangements. The Panel thought that some flexibility is called for in applying such standards, in the interests of achieving a form of development for this site which is comparable with the way established uses operate in the nearby historic buildings.

Recommended Actions

- 1 That a contextual analysis of the site is undertaken which gives consideration to factors such as the topography, views into and out of the site, the local footway network including informal desire lines, and the distinctiveness of the built form of the adjacent historic town centre.
- 2 That consideration is given to providing car parking in the form of a sloping surface level car park within the enclosed courtyard.
- 3 That the development is broken down into elements the height of which responds to the changes in level across the site and to the building line and roofscape of the historic town centre of Burslem.
- 4 That consideration be given to providing active ground floor uses along the southern boundary of the site leading into St John's Square.
- 5 That a systematic approach be taken to addressing the issues of environmental sustainability in developing the design of the development further.