

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

17 May 2007

PROPOSALS: Full Application for Residential units including converted warehouse, car parking and various associated works.
LOCATION: Ivy House Mills, Commercial Rd, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent
DEVELOPERS: Inspired Developments
ARCHITECTS: OMI Architects
REF NO: 064

Background and Planning Context

After some in-depth pre-application discussions and extensive consultation with a range of bodies including English Heritage and British Waterways an application for full planning permission was submitted in March 2007. This has been considered by Stoke-on-Trent City Council planning department and will be presented to committee on 23rd May with officer recommendation for approval.

The proximity of the Planning Committee meeting to the Design Review Panel meeting when the proposal was considered by all members of the panel and the applicants as being unsatisfactory and something that needed to be addressed. The panel suggested that for the design review process to be of maximum value the proposals should be presented at an early a stage as possible, ideally at the pre-application stage.

Site Description

The site is 1.3 hectares and is located to the south east of Stoke-on-Trent City

Centre within the designated City Waterside area. The site is bounded to the northwest by Commercial Road and to the south by the Caldon Canal. To the east and west are similar former industrial sites, the former is in the process of being redeveloped for residential use and the latter is also subject to a planning application for housing. The site slopes down toward the canal and has views across the valley to the hills beyond. Though the canal borders the site the towpath is on the opposite side and the bank is naturally vegetated and currently un-passable.

Ivy House Mills was originally a paper mill from the early 19th Century and although this was closed in 1906 other buildings were constructed on the site almost immediately and extended again in 1928 along with the warehouse building located on Commercial Road. All of these buildings along with the 1940's industrial chimney are considered to be of heritage significance by the local authority and are located within the Caldon Canal Conservation Area. The buildings are vacant and are currently in a poor state of repair. The remainder of the site contains a wide variety of other industrial and office buildings, many pre-fabricated and all similarly in a poor state of repair.

Design Proposal

The proposal is for a high-density residential development comprising a mix of dwellings from studio flats to four-bedroom houses. The proposed dwelling mix is 102 apartments, these are predominantly two-bed but with some one-bed and studio flats, and 41 new houses of which 20 are two-bed, 10 are three-bed and 11 are four-bed. The site density is 107.5 units per hectare.

Although it was the initial intention to retain the mill buildings adjacent to the canal and convert them into loft-style apartments the presence of numerous mineshafts beneath them meant that was not considered possible. However, the warehouse building located on Commercial Road is to be retained, with one storey added, along with the industrial chimney adjacent to it. The south elevation of the existing warehouse is to provide the north boundary of the new public square that includes the chimney and acts as a focal point for the development. This square is to be bordered on the other sides by new buildings and is to have subterranean car parking underneath.

The apartment buildings are to be sited perpendicular to the canal on an approximately north south axis providing predominantly east and west elevations to each apartment. The flats have balconies on the canal side elevations. The new houses all have saw tooth mono-pitch roofs.

With regard to massing the houses facing Commercial Road are of two storeys and are set back from the pavement only two metres in an attempt to recreate the street frontage in the area of terraced housing to the north. Other houses on the site are also two-storey, excepting the larger three storey homes that back on to the canal. The apartment blocks are of five storeys though it is suggested that the sloping of the site towards the canal lessens the impact of this.

The materials palette includes brickwork (re-used from the industrial buildings on the site wherever possible), timber cladding, render, steel and glass balconies, dark grey tiles and glazed ceramic panels.

Panel Comments

The Panel were generally supportive of the proposed development but identified the following key areas:

1. Retention of historic industrial buildings

It was explained that the presence of mineshafts revealed as a result of a desktop ground condition survey had prevented the re-use of the existing building alongside the canal. The possibility of capping the mineshafts was discounted as a result of the difficulties in accurately locating and making these safe. Furthermore, the likely legal problems associated with developing on an area known to contain mines, led the change in approach - this is especially

relevant to the apartment blocks that would be subject to multiple legal searches upon sale. The panel considered this canal side mill building to be of significance and thought that possibilities for the retention and conversion of this block be explored further.

2. Access to the site and permeability

The panel were informed that the access road into the site was located as a result of discussions with the highways department and was not in their preferred position that would reinforce the grid of the terraced streets to the north of Commercial Road. However, an attempt had been made to provide a view to the canal down Balfour Street by placing a pedestrian and cycle pathway at that point. This is further supplemented by another pedestrian and cycle pathway running through the site on an approximately east to west axis.

The panel appreciated the constraints placed upon the architects by the highways department and was supportive of the attempt to construct a vista to the canal through the site. However, the panel expressed concern that the opportunity to create a direct vista to the canal and the countryside beyond had not been taken.

3. Treatment of the canal edge

The panel generally applauded the treatment of the canal edge to the rear of the townhouses, with private gardens having views in and out to the canal achieved by the use of steel railings. However, there was concern over the potential of future householders to put in their own fences and inappropriate sheds and it was suggested that this may be over come with the use of covenants. The panel also suggested that the rear gardens of the houses go as far to the banks of the canal as possible, taking into account that it is a naturally vegetated canal bank, and that attempts be made to prevent pedestrian access to the rear of the gardens.

With regard to the canal edge adjacent to the apartment blocks the panel recommended that this be a more public solution and that the canal side be made accessible for residents. It was suggested that this area may be paved and that the possibility of including moorings be looked into further.

4. Selection of materials

The panel were broadly supportive of the range of materials selected and in particular appreciated the proposal to re-use as many of the existing bricks as possible. It was however noted that many of the older existing bricks on the site were larger than contemporary bricks and their positioning would have to be carefully considered. The proposal to use locally produced ceramic glazed panels was also very much welcomed. Finally, with regard to the timber cladding surrounding the balconies of the apartment blocks it was suggested by the panel that the planks may be used vertically as opposed to the horizontal solution presented.

5. Architectural Design

The panel were generally supportive of the design style adopted but did suggest that the mono-pitch, saw-tooth roofline of the houses did not sit comfortably alongside both the existing buildings adjacent to the site and the proposed apartment blocks. It was put forward that a more horizontal roofline could be achieved by incorporating a parapet roof and that this might offer a more harmonious solution.

Conclusions

Overall, the panel were supportive of the design proposals presented and applauded the fresh design approach adopted and way that the many opportunities provided by the site had been explored. Although it is regretted that the canal side existing building could not be retained there were no strong objections to the proposals put forward.

Recommended Actions

1. That the footpath and roadway into the site off Commercial Road be straightened to create a vista down Balfour Street towards the Caldon Canal and beyond.
2. That the feasibility of retaining and converting the historic mill building adjacent to the Caldon Canal be investigated further.
3. That the canal edge is looked at in more detail with a view to ensuring a consistent visual treatment of the private and secure rear garden areas of the three-storey townhouses and a publicly accessible canal side adjacent to the apartment blocks.
4. The saw tooth, single pitch roofs be looked at again with a view to reducing their visual impact especially to the Commercial Street elevation.