

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

7 JUNE 2007

BUILDING: Single contemporary eco-home
LOCATION: Field House Site, Bignall End, Newcastle-under-Lyme
CLIENTS: Mr and Mrs Croxton
ARCHITECTS: Hulme Upright Manning
REF NO: 067

Site Description

The site is located in the village of Bignall End which lies approximately four miles to the north west of Newcastle-under-Lyme in North Staffordshire. It is located at the junction of two roads being bounded to the south by New Road and to the west by Old Road. The site is approximately 0.15 Hectares with a steep fall of around 9 metres from the southwest corner. New Road itself is elevated by approximately 3.5 metres with the adjacent land, including the site, falling steeply on each side. Across Old Road opposite the site lies the site of a motte and bailey castle which lies within a conservation area and to the north and northwest lie a number of detached and semi-detached dwellings of no particular historical merit.

The site includes on its southwest corner an unoccupied two-storey house with attached garage and extension. The house and out-buildings are in an uninhabitable condition and appear to be structurally unsound. The whole site is covered in dense foliage and undergrowth and there is evidence that the site has been extensively used for fly-tipping.

Planning Context

The site lies within the designated green belt and there is an existing planning permission for a traditional two-storey, four-bedroom house to be located behind the current footprint of the existing derelict dwelling, closer to the centre of the site.

The Proposed Dwelling

The proposal is for a large bespoke dwelling comprising; on the ground floor a large open plan living space incorporating a dining area and kitchen opening up onto a large paved area and a large master bedroom suite comprising en-suite bathroom, large dressing area and an attached study. The basement below is partially earth sheltered and comprises a large family area/home cinema, three bedrooms all en-suite with dressing rooms and a play room. The sub-basement, which is entirely subterranean, houses a 25m swimming pool with dressing area and a large work space with two private offices.

The Design Objectives

The design is an attempt to satisfy all of the objectives as stated below:

- The plan and elevations will respond to the topography of the site and the character of the surrounding area.
- The form, scale and massing will respond to and respect the geometry of the surrounding buildings and streets.
- The elevational design should respect the scale and materials of the surrounding buildings without resorting to pastiche.
- The development needs to consider the proximity of the conservation area and be of no detriment to the greenbelt.
- The proposal shall be of significant architectural quality.

The Panels Comments

The Design Review Panel considered the proposed design and their comments are summarised in the following sections:

i) Architectural Design

The building is a double-crescent shaped house on an approximate north-south axis with each crescent joined by a glazed entrance. The house is three storeys in height although as a result of the sites sloping topography approximately half of this is underground and it presents as only one storey to the street elevations. The interlocking crescents have different aspects with almost fully glazed inner faces, the northernmost block is orientated towards the east and the southernmost to the west. Each crescent also each houses different functions on the upper two floors with the southern crescent contains the living accommodation and the northernmost the bedrooms, the basement contains offices to the north and a 20 metre indoor swimming pool.

The panel welcomed the innovative approach adopted and that both the client and the architect had avoided producing a pastiche neo-vernacular solution. There were some concerns raised over the difficulties in internally utilising the round spaces created by the two crescents but the Panel accepted that this was a client led decision and that the circular spaces were a key aspiration. The Panel were particularly satisfied by the attempt to place the building *in* the site and utilise the steeply-sloping topography, it was further applauded that the proposed dwelling presents lower than both the existing derelict house and the existing scheme that has planning permission.

ii) Access

The site is to be accessed by vehicles at the northernmost end where there are four car parking spaces. An earlier design had just two spaces at the northern end and a vehicle pull-in lay-by for two cars located on the long Old Road elevation but this was removed after discussions with highways engineers.

The panel had initially seen the earlier layout with the lay-by on Old Road and regretted that this had not been retained as it related better to the main entrance of the house on the western elevation. There were however no significant concerns over the changes that had been made to the site access.

iii) Materials

The proposed dwelling has a deliberately limited palette of materials intended to create a clean and contemporary expression whilst fitting harmoniously into the surroundings. The house is faced in a through colour render which is proposed to be white or off-white which is to contrast with the two large walls of structural glass that form the inner concave curve of the crescents. The entrance is deliberately understated and is constructed predominantly of glass in order to provide a transparent link between the two drums.

The panel applauded this limited palette of materials and noted that the white/off-white render is a common feature of the adjacent houses. It was felt that careful colour selection and the clever use of planting was crucial in a scheme with such a simplicity of expression.

iv) Landscaping

The proposal includes an indication of landscaping and a basic planting scheme. The importance of sympathetic landscaping was noted by the architect and it was accepted that the suggested landscape proposal was more suited to a suburban garden and was therefore inappropriate in this case.

The Panel reiterated the importance of good landscaping with such a bold design and suggested the appointment of a sympathetic and experienced landscape architect. Furthermore, the Panel were concerned over the proposed corner feature at the junction of Old and New Roads. This was felt to be unnecessary and it was felt that retaining more of the existing hedge and carefully landscaping the corner would provide a more satisfactory solution.

v) Sustainability

The building has been designed to incorporate a number of sustainable solutions including sedum roofing, photo-voltaic cells, polystyrene block walls with concrete infill, grey water recycling and a host of other features. There is also a provision for home offices that will lead to employment opportunities for three local people.

The Panel pointed out that one-off developments such as this provided an opportunity for providing a very eco-friendly and sustainable home and welcomed the way that the proposed design had approached this.

Conclusion

The panel were strongly supportive of the design objectives and of the proposed design solution and welcomed the bold attempt at creating a contemporary building in such a setting. It was noted that the design would be likely to arouse some local suspicion and potential opposition but that the Local Authority should show confidence in the proposals and support the application.

Recommended Actions

1. The panel recognised and applauded the efforts to make the building address the very particular concerns raised by the topography of the site but felt that this might benefit from the production of a detailed contour plan.
2. In an attempt to better understand the site and the way that the building sits in it and also to convey this to a wider audience the Panel felt that the building of a 3D model would be useful.
3. The Panel agreed with the stated importance of getting the landscaping solution right and recommend the appointment of a properly qualified and experienced landscape architect in order to achieve this. It was suggested that a simple planting arrangement consisting ground cover, with grasses and wild flowers might be the most appropriate solution.
4. The Panel recommend that the corner feature proposed at the junction of Old Road and New Road be reconsidered.
5. The Panel recommend that the Local Authority should show confidence in the proposal and support what is a challenging and innovative scheme.