

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

17 July 2008

PROPOSAL:	Consideration of an outline planning application to redevelop the former London Mill building to provide a range of elderly persons' accommodation
LOCATION:	London Street, Leek, Staffordshire Moorlands
DEVELOPER:	Grindco Ltd
ARCHITECTURE:	Christopher Taylor Design
REF NO:	107

Background & Planning Context

The proposals were presented to the design review panel as a live planning application after referral from the local planning authority, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council who had representatives present at the review. Outline planning approval is sought to establish the nature and scope of the development to allow a programme of marketing and phased implementation.

Site Description

The site is linear and is aligned on an almost north to south axis, it is approximately 0.35 hectares at 120 metres by up to 35 metres with the main long elevation to the narrow London Street which forms the eastern boundary. To the north lies the main Brook Street (A53) and to the south, the terraced Duke Street with existing mixed use buildings forming the western site edge. London Street rises steeply upwards from Brook Street and the site has a level change of around 2.5 storeys.

The site is located on the edge of Leek's shopping centre on the A53, a main arterial road leading to the city of Stoke-on Trent. The site currently contains the London Mill buildings and associated hard standing and parking. The buildings are now vacant but until relatively recently housed the lingerie and nightwear manufacturer Masons of Leek which was one of the last such businesses in the town when it closed

in 2004. The buildings on the site are not listed and are not within a designated conservation area.

Design Proposal

The proposal is for the demolition of the majority of the existing mill buildings and the development of three adjacent but distinct blocks providing targeted residential accommodation for elderly people. The only element to be retained would be the southernmost part of the existing building with a 28m frontage to London Street fronting an 'atrium' block which would be formed by constructing a new building at the rear of and parallel to the existing street frontage building.

The three blocks step up the slope of London Street and are from north to south the 'retirement' block, the 'courtyard' block and the 'atrium' block. Vehicular access to the site is proposed off London Street between the 'retirement' and 'courtyard' blocks by reinstating the existing Cornhill Street that had previously bisected the site east to west.

The 'retirement' block is located on the lower part of the site adjacent to the busy Brook Street and comprises 44 apartments over six floors. This block has three entrance points, one to Brook Street, another midway up the London Street elevation and a third to the area of car parking off the reinstated Cornhill Street. The building is stepped back from the busy main road creating a small paved forecourt and there is also a small set back along the London Street frontage that increases towards the newly proposed vehicle access road.

The 'courtyard' block is the middle of the three proposed building blocks and provides 16 apartments over four floors. The building is set back from London Street with an area of landscaping to the front and is three-sided around a landscaped courtyard for the use of residents. Access is gained off the new vehicular access road that forms a continuation of Cornhill Street; car parking would be provided underground as required.

The 'atrium' block is located on the highest part of the site on the corner of Duke Street opposite a listed terrace of 19th century houses and has a retained façade to London Street with new build accommodation behind. The block comprises 20 one and two-bed apartments accessed from a central atrium.

Although submitted as an outline planning application the materials indicated are predominantly brick with slate pitched roofs though there are areas of render most markedly on the 'retirement' block at the corner of London Street and Brook Street, which also has a stone plinth to echo the existing. The blocks vary in height from three to six storeys but as a result of the steep incline of the site the ridge height remains similar. Overall the new build blocks are slightly higher than the current buildings, with ridge heights between 1m and 5m higher than existing. The impact of this increase in height is reduced by setting the new buildings back from the pavement by 0.5m to 4m.

The overall design approach is stated to be one of reflecting the character of the existing mill buildings whilst drawing upon elements of contemporary design.

Panel Comments

The Design Review Panel welcomed the opportunity to comment on the proposals for this important town centre site, but regretted that this was not before the submission of a planning application. The discussions that followed the presentation are recorded under the following headings.

Site Allocation

The Panel understood and agreed with the detailed analysis of the potential uses for the site and were strongly supportive of the decision to provide residential units in this sustainable town centre location. The Panel thought that the wide range of facilities in Leek town centre made the site especially suitable for elderly persons who would most readily benefit from the close proximity of these facilities.

Conservation and Heritage

It was suggested that although the site does not lie within a conservation area it is of some historical significance and may be considered suitable for designation as such in a town less well-endowed with high quality historic buildings than Leek. Taking this into account, the Panel were initially concerned over the extent of the proposed demolition and were especially keen to see the retention of the attractive façade to the block in London Street with the '1875' inscription. It was explained that the variation in levels coupled with the steep slope of the site makes this existing section very difficult to convert to the desired use. However, the Panel thought that the possibility of retaining this element should be explored further.

The Panel supported the proposal to retain the southernmost part of the existing elevation and incorporate it into the 'atrium' block.

Scale and Massing

The Panel were unanimous in their support for the scale and massing of the proposed development, and thought that buildings of this size were entirely appropriate for the site being of a similar scale to the existing buildings. There was a suggestion that the height of the Brook Street element might even be increased to provide a communal lounge for residents who could enjoy long distance views over the town to the surrounding countryside.

Site Layout

The Panel appreciated the difficulties of designing for this steeply sloping site and appreciated that the decision to provide three blocks stepping down the slope was as a result of this. There was some discussion over the benefits of this approach as opposed to the development of a continuous elevation as existing, and the Panel concluded that the marked change in levels from north to south justified the approach to break the proposed development down into separate blocks.

There was a brief discussion about the proposal to step elements of the blocks away from London Street, changing the existing tight urban frontage by providing areas of planting alongside the pavement. The Panel accepted the argument that London Street forms a pedestrian route into the town centre and that the existing public realm was in need of improvement and the proposed landscaping would create a more pleasant amenity for local residents. The Panel were concerned to ensure that these areas of planting were well designed with the use of suitable tree species that would not soon encroach on the building and the narrow street.

Architecture and Materials

The Panel understood that the scheme was presented as an outline planning application and so detail design was still incomplete but felt that the style and materials as indicated were broadly appropriate. The Panel wished to see the massing and scale of the existing mill buildings retained and the new buildings designed in a 21st century style, which if handled skilfully would create individuality on the site and contribute to the special character of the town.

With regard to the design concept of developing the site in three blocks the Panel considered the 'atrium' block to be the most successful and it was felt that the middle 'courtyard' block was the least distinguished element. In fact the Panel thought that it would be advantageous to extend the atrium block northwards to replace the courtyard block, albeit that this would involve a change of levels along the length of the atrium. It was considered that the proposed courtyard would have limited amenity value with four storey buildings surrounding it, but that the provision of a more substantial atrium would give the scheme a unique character, which would help make the development special within the local area.

The 'retirement' block was considered to have unresolved issues surrounding the multiple entrances, particularly the lower entrance to Brook Street. The Panel thought that this could potentially be a dead area as it provides no active frontage to the main road and contains only a room for mobility scooters and a guest room. The Panel had reservations about this part of the building and felt that further work was required to establish a more lively use on this prominent frontage.

The decision to recess the corner to Brook Street to improve the public realm on the busy main road was supported and it was suggested that this entrance would be more attractive by making it double-height.

Landscape

Taking into account the discussion around the location of the building-line above, the Panel broadly welcomed the introduction of landscape to the London Road elevation but highlighted the need for care in providing a planting solution including trees on a relatively narrow strip of land. Similarly there were concerns over the utility and management of the courtyard space as it would be relatively small space overlooked by a four-storey building.

Conclusion

The Panel were strongly supportive of the decision to provide the stated type of accommodation on the site and considered the edge of town centre location ideally suited for this use. Furthermore, there was unanimous support for the scale and massing of the proposed development. There were however a number of issues raised about the more detailed elements of the designs and some recommendations made to address these as outlined below

Recommended Actions

1. The Panel recommend that every effort is made to retain and integrate within the proposals the attractive historical 1875-dated façade as described above.

2. The Panel recommend that the multiple entrances to the 'retirement' block are reconsidered in association with the proposed client and that the Brook Street entrance area is remodelled to incorporate more active uses and to make it more attractive for users and visitors.
3. The Panel recommend that consideration be given to the possibility of extending the atrium block down as far as the new access road and to use this design feature to create a distinct and unique development for the site.
4. The Panel recommend that care is taken in the design of landscaping along the London Street frontage to ensure that it provides optimum benefit for the public realm and that the planting is of a suitable scale for this tight urban setting.
5. The Panel recommend that as the design progresses environmental design issues are considered much more comprehensively than hitherto and that high quality locally sourced materials be used wherever possible in order to create a distinctive and locally relevant place and to help create a more sustainable development.