

Plymouth Design Panel Review Workshop Sutton Harbour Thursday 28th June 2007

In attendance:

Mark Pearson (dept chair) Panel Member
Prof Adrian Gale Panel Member
David Morgan Panel Member
Tanya Griffiths (secretary) Panel Member

Richard Bara Plymouth City Council (PCC)
Mark Evans PCC
Matthew Coombe PCC

Graham Lobb Form Design
Luke MacAdam Form Design

Nigel Godefroy (part-time) Sutton Harbour Group (SHG)
Jason Schofield SHG
Tim Bacon SHG
Jon Turner SHG
Michael Kyle SHG

The Plymouth Design Panel had requested the convening of a separate workshop because it had not been given the opportunity to review waterfront schemes coming forward within the Sutton Harbour AAP at pre-application stage.

The objective of the workshop was to address the wider context of Sutton Harbour and concerns that the proposals on the harbour might not provide the framework for sustaining quality and value in the more challenging areas behind the waterfront development.

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

Workshop format:

Nigel Godefroy introduced the Sutton Harbour Group, outlining the diverse and long term interests of the company around the harbour and in Plymouth.

Matthew Coombe PCC introduced the policy and background study context for the discussion including:-

Core Strategy (incorporating the Vision for Plymouth)
Sutton Harbour AAP (incorporating the Interim Planning Statement)
Barbican Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan (Alan Baxter)
Civic Trust Characterisation study.
Draft Tall Buildings Strategy document

Tim Bacon SHG and Matthew Coombe then provided an update on the preferred option areas and development sites of the Sutton Harbour Partnership.

There followed a site visit of North Quay, Sutton Road, Shepherds Lane, Alma Cottages and Exeter Street.

The workshop following the site visit identified some clear points for discussion:-

1. Historic Environment

Assessment of the historic environment assets should form the starting point of a masterplanning exercise. *Reference should be made to both the high level Alan Baxter and Associates report and the subsequent, more detailed Plymouth Waterfront Study by the same consultancy team.*

The panel welcomed the notion of testing the viability of retaining fragments of the historic urban fabric and a contextual approach to integrating new development.

The setting and the urban grain of the Alma cottages/workshop and the terraces on Exeter Street (identified in the Interim Planning statement) was also thought to be helpful in informing the local distinctive character of the new neighbourhood.

2. Infrastructure

It was very obvious from the earlier discussion and the site visit that the implementation of the transport strategy is absolutely critical to the delivery of the masterplan. Notwithstanding the internal street structure, the ambitions for improved penetration and connections between Sutton Harbour/Coxside and Tothill/Beaumont Park are reliant on crossing points over Exeter Street. A number of links, visual and physical have been identified in the AAP to the areas north and south of Exeter Street but there remains a lack of definition for how and where the connections are to be made across this arterial route. It was felt that, without the confidence that these connections will be identified in the East Corridor Transport Strategy, the quality of the regeneration of Sutton Harbour/Coxside could be adversely affected.

The suggestion from SHG, that consideration should be given to the wider nodal points beyond the boundaries of the Sutton Harbour AAP was noted.

It was also apparent that in spite of the greening strategy, it is unlikely that Exeter Street will be a pleasant environment for pedestrians or cyclists. The suggestion that St. John Street might be reinforced as a primary pedestrian/cycle route and might form the artery of an 'East Urban Village' was thought to be valid. The future significance of Sutton Road also has a direct bearing on the character and use of the streets in the area. Again, the movement strategy will have a major impact on whether the ambition of achieving a 'community high street' can be realised.

There was a debate about the nature of the boulevard and its 'street' character. It was agreed that 'boulevard' was possibly a misnomer, implying a civic quality not quite appropriate to the area. The nature of this route; its width, on street parking, pedestrian/cycle routes and the wider movement structure needs to be much more defined.

3. Demises and Delivery

It was also agreed that given the complex demise issues on the site, a 'vision' strategy may be hampered in its delivery and implementation. A dual approach,- simultaneously working with the existing urban fabric and demises to develop an incremental and more organic approach whilst retaining an overview and strategic masterplan to deliver high

quality new development could well produce the best outcome. The need for a masterplan or at the very least a refinement of the principles for development and street character is evidenced by issues arising from land assembly affecting the footprints of- and access to- the approved schemes (Salt Quay and Boatyard) on the Harbour front. The setting out of key routes, public realm and building footprints will be a key objective of a masterplan study and must acknowledge land assembly and delivery.

4. Topography

The site visit revealed a complex topography that was not evident in the diagrammatic urban principles described in the AAP. The panel concurred that the topography presented some challenges but also opportunities. The under-use and poor setting of the St. Johns Bridge was thought to offer an opportunity for future development and re-frame the historical context to the harbour.

5. Green Infrastructure

The suggestion of the using the cutting from St. Johns Bridge as a park amenity space/cycle route particularly as Coxside/ Cattedown lacks green space was thought to have merit. For 'under the arches' uses, the examples cited were the Westway in London and the Viaduct in Manchester.

An alternative which utilises the dramatic change in levels for the provision of parking could also reveal the potential of the site although it may prove difficult to make a feature of the bridge.

The green infrastructure could be used to provide a framework for connecting existing communities currently located in pockets and at the extremities of the site. The planning of routes should consider 'walkability'. Some doubt was expressed as to tree planting on Exeter Street in front of the terraces east of the church where there is a level step at the front. The greening of Exeter Street should be integral to the transport strategy and the practicalities should be tested.

6. Mixed Use

The panel felt that it was very important that the location of any new retail considers existing facilities and is careful not to compound regeneration problems in adjacent areas. The 'nose' of the southernmost plot (junction of Sutton Road with Clare Place) was thought to be a good location for a neighbourhood convenience store. The improved integration of the Vue Cinema complex into the emerging neighbourhood and the creation of the better, more secure access were thought to be essential.

7. Car Parking

It was suggested that the AAP and 3d modelling was indicative of a very dense perimeter block development and that understanding the strategy for parking was important to the implementation of such a plan. The impact of parking policy will influence block typologies and as such should be set out in principle as part of a future masterplan. There would be benefit in describing the ratios of future parking, the use of

street parking, extended use of the Coxside car park, the shared use of at-grade parking eg. at the Vue complex and strategies for encouraging a higher take-up of the park and ride services.

8. Shepherds Lane

The panel thought that the ambition to retain Shepherds Lane should be tested as part of a future masterplanning exercise. The manner in which the stone walls might be retained will have an impact on a perimeter block structure and security of this as a pedestrian route. (This aim is identified in the Interim Planning Statement but becomes less clear in the AAP preferred options.)

9. St. John's Church

There was some debate about the appropriate setting of the church and how the church might be used to demarcate the entrance to the City and the Coxside neighbourhood along Exeter Street.

The boulevard or connecting street establishing the visual and physical connection between the harbour and the Church as outlined in the AAP and the Vision for Plymouth is very important. The setting of the church in relation to the existing terrace buildings – representing another fragment of the older, finer grain of the area is also thought to be a key consideration.

The panel suggested that, whilst the church needed generosity of space around it, it would not be advisable to create permeable public space at the back of the church. Further that an enclosing development on the south side sufficiently set back from the church could have community or potentially commercial use. It is important that the church, whose south elevation is not necessarily its best frontage, does not become an island monument.

The concentration of public space should be on the west side of the church linking the crossing and the boulevard. This should be considered in relation to any development on the north side of Exeter Street/ Friary Park providing continuity of public realm.

10. Masterplan and Design Codes

The panel agreed that a masterplan would be an essential next step and the understanding of the proposed movement strategy is critical to this exercise. The use of design codes would be supported providing that these allowed sufficient flexibility to sustain incremental development and innovative design.

A strategy for public realm/public art should form part of the masterplan and should pay particular attention to reinforcing the heritage trail and the appropriate lighting of the new neighbourhood.

The panel would like to take the opportunity to reiterate some points made previously in its reports:-

The panel would welcome the opportunity to discuss the architectural composition and ambitions for the emerging character of Sutton Harbour.

The panel has previously recommended that a development brief for the Bretonside site be commissioned and that again the transport strategy for the City Centre and Eastern Corridor should not be progressed in isolation from the development of this very important site which links the city to Sutton Harbour.

Concluding Comments

It was reported that the Commercial Wharf sites were likely to be subject to an international design competition. This news was welcomed by the panel.

The panel were encouraged by the level of discussion in the workshop and would like to continue the dialogue established. The panel would urge SHP to seek the advice of the panel on any future development schemes or masterplans at an early stage.

A plan or plans illustrating the following would be useful for further discussion:-

- Character areas and identification of buildings or elements of historical or townscape value. Any buildings appearing on the 'buildings at risk' register should be identified.
- A plan overlaying the historic layout including the railway cutting.
- Demise lines – it is important that the complexity of the plan is understood.
- Diagrammatic representation of the contours of the site and/or basic modelling of the topography.