

**Plymouth Design Panel Review
Thursday 26th July 2007**

In attendance

Les Sparks (chair)
Bruce Duncan
Prof Adrian Gale
Martin Harradine
David Morgan
Mark Pearson
Tanya Griffiths (Secretary)

Agenda Items

1. New Panel Structure
2. Plymstock Quarry
3. Estover School Update
4. Longfield House Site, Greenbank Road
5. Neptune Park

The panel meeting was preceded by site visits to the Longfield House/ former Greenbank Prison Site, Neptune Park Cattedown and Plymstock Quarry.

1. New Panel Structure

Plymouth City Council and the panel welcome the new chairman Les Sparks and returning member and co- author of the Vision for Plymouth, Martin Harradine, to the Plymouth Design Panel.

New Terms of Reference for the Plymouth Design Panel were issued to members for comment after the meeting.

2. Plymstock Quarry

Panel Members confirmed that they had no conflicts of interest in dealing with this item
The presentation team confirmed that the proposal was in the public domain.

No conflicts of interest were declared

The developer was advised to contact with PCC prior to any press releases regarding the proposal.

The panel received the Design Codes for review but not the Design and Access Statement.

Masterplan

The panel felt strongly that the design coding should more clearly draw upon and strengthen the particular urban design propositions that are already present in the masterplan.

Alterations

A number of significant alterations had been made to the masterplan.. There were 7 major concerns arising from the alterations and/or the results of the North Plymstock AAP assessment:-

1. The tall buildings in the scheme have been omitted because of concerns relating to the impact on Saltram House. The panel regrets the loss of these elements which had been encouraged by the panel in order to give character to the development and to accentuate the topography.
2. There has not been a response to the very important issue on the north west boundary of the site in respect of the objections from the National Trust and English Heritage to the modification of the ridge and setting of the parkland of Saltram House and the major impact this has on the provision of the school within the masterplan.
3. The subdivision of the public square at the centre of the development raises a number of issues described in more detail below.
4. Colesdown Hill link. The panel felt it extremely important that the public transport route be maintained at this point of entry to the site. The restriction of public access would be very detrimental to the development.
5. The nature of the development in the eastern fields were identified by the panel as an area of concern and was seen as a missed opportunity to extract the true value of the site. The notion of a less formal urban plan was thought to be acceptable but that the scheme was not distinctive and lacked 'design.'
6. The phasing of the development remains a concern and that the Eastern fields will exist in isolation to the rest of the development.
7. The means of crossing for pedestrians from the quarry site across Billacombe Road is not evident in the plans.

A number of other concerns prevail as detailed below.

Public Square

The subdivision of the public square into effectively retail service/parking and civic spaces has changed the dynamic of the central area. Some outcomes of this are positive, particularly in respect of reducing the impact of cars on civic amenity, some have not been addressed.

A principle concern is the use ascribed to the new central building dividing the squares. If considered as mixed use with retail on the ground floor how is this retail serviced and how will it work as a double fronted building? Is it a realistic proposition to assume that retail will front the car park square? The ability of the building to sustain pavement café activity and give life to the civic square would be hampered by the orientation. Would a community facility better suit this location? The suggestion that a primary care facility might be located in this position should be properly tested as privacy on the ground floor would be a serious issue.

The servicing of the large retail unit looks undersized and there is a concern that this is likely to cause problem being mixed with residential parking.

There is a lack of definition in the legend of the masterplan as to what is meant by the dark orange blocks.

Sustainability

The ambitions for the site in terms of renewable energy, CHP and the targets to which the individual buildings conform should be much more evident in both the masterplan and the coding.

The SUDS principles remain unclear. Any solution offering renewable energy sources for the pumping of water for the feature on the eastern boulevard would be encouraged.

The application should not be considered independently of a Climate Change/ Sustainability Strategy with reference to the Code for Sustainable Homes and some indication that the scheme will respond to the RSS targets when this has been adopted.

Design Codes – General

In accordance with previous reviews including the CABE panel, it is imperative that the architecture of the development expresses its very particular and unique location.

The panel raised a critical concern that the design coding, as it has developed, displays no aspiration to produce an Architecture specific to its site.

The design codes have prescribed 'character areas' but have not meaningfully addressed the character of the site. The stylistic prescriptions of the code are also a

cause for concern – the use of expressions such as ‘modern traditional’ are misleading and lack integrity. The balance of cohesion and distinctiveness has been blurred in this scheme as described in the codes, into a uniformity of design that might fit any site.

It is worth noting in this context that a recent Mori survey looking at Behaviour and Sustainable Lifestyles:-

90% associate the word ‘modern’ with a sustainable home; 79% ‘high tech’; 78% ‘fashionable’ and 72% ‘attractive’.

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2007/climatechange.shtml>

As specific guidance from the panel:-

It is strongly recommended that coding should convey the important ideas and concepts to be applied to the nature of the public realm, specific topographic conditions, the street types, parking strategies, landscaping and the quality of civic and commercial buildings. The application of codes to elevational treatments and the application of percentages of materials, have taken the coding too far, will inhibit the potential of the site and should be omitted.

The uniqueness, including the limitations of the site should be manifest in the design e.g. the absence of topsoil, whilst the manufacture of topsoil on site might be encouraged, could be evident in the handling of the landscape design. The geology of the site should reveal itself not just in the form of artistically placed boulders, netted and fenced cliffs but in the structuring of the landscape, in the planting, in retaining walls and by being intrinsic to the design concept.

The need for elevation, that is to say- to be elevated within a quarry location is important. This means, in addition to the presence of some taller buildings, not restricting the capacity for higher and lower density development to inhabit roof space and have rooftop amenity. The rash of identically pitched roofs as illustrated in the site modelling is reminiscent of the more design impoverished examples of Plymouth’s suburbs and should not be repeated.

The presentation did address in part the concerns about the topography of the site and coding for the some of the conditions on the site notably on the southern /eastern boundary.

Car Parking

Some of the concerns raised in the previous review had been addressed as to the proportion of on street parking and the nature of the parking associated with the public square and the retail unit. There remain concerns about the viability of the revised proposal- refer to section on the Public Square.

Commercial buildings

The panel did not feel that its concerns from the previous presentation had been addressed in respect of illustrating the architectural quality intended for the civic and commercial buildings. The success of the employment area is critical to providing sustainable development within the quarry and whilst the setting created by the water

feature on the eastern boulevard makes some contribution there is still little to indicate the quality of the buildings in either of the employment zones.

Tall Building and Crescent

The loss of the tall building at the termination of the boulevard at the western end has rendered the crescent somewhat impotent as an urban form. The panel would support the reinstatement of the original idea of a design competition for a tall building and crescent.

A re-evaluation of the crescent is needed if the tall building is omitted, particularly in relation to the triangular open space in order that it is at least geometrically aligned and provides a positive urban framework. The vehicular route around the circus in front of the crescent remains a concern as a counter-intuitive use of the road structure.

Summary

The key points outlined for the changes in the masterplan should be addressed. The design codes are a matter of serious concern. The masterplan has developed out of the character of the place, the design codes have developed in a way that seem to serve as an impediment to the ambitions of the masterplan.

It is suggested that some detailed applications of key buildings are submitted to give a better indication of the intended quality of the architecture.

Plymstock Quarry has the potential to produce an exemplary scheme with a special and dramatic quality of landscape, high standards of design and sustainable construction and is an opportunity that should not be missed.

2. Estover School- Update

Mike Luffingham and Gareth Simmons from Plymouth City Council presented an update on early stage progress at Estover School as a One School Offer under the Building Schools for the Future programme.

The panel was encouraged by the emphasis in the procurement process on design within the selection criteria and the fact that additional funding to achieve a Zero Carbon development had been secured.

The guidance set out in the Outline Design principles were thought to be sound. The panel acknowledges the complex nature of the project in terms of its multiple stakeholders, decanting and phasing, the site topography, zero carbon emissions targets and the ambitions to reconnect the adjacent neighbourhoods. The project was thought to be challenging but also a great opportunity for Plymouth to promote exemplary school design and set the standards for futures waves of BSF and other school building programmes.

The panel looks forward to reviewing the next stage of design development and would encourage the team to present to the October meeting.

3. Longfield House Greenbank Road

No conflicts of interest were declared

The report will be published for public viewing.

The developer was advised to contact with PCC prior to any press releases regarding the site.

The panel had been asked to consider the approach to the existing building- tower and south east wing, which whilst not listed, is currently protected from demolition under an Article 4 notice from Plymouth City Council. The developer confirmed that a number of design options for the site had been explored including retention of the tower element of the existing building. The panel were advised that the commercial viability of the site for this developer was adversely affected by the retention of the historic building/s. The maximum number of dwellings for site were being sought and the affordable housing ratio required by Plymouth City Council had been set at 30% and to be tenure blind.

Longfield House

The panel concluded that in respect of Longfield House, not only should the tower element be retained but also the remaining wing. The panel were impressed by the quality of the architectural modelling and handsome proportions. The nature of the floor plates and window configuration of the wing were thought to be very suitable for conversion. The loss of the west wing is highly regrettable and the panel would, therefore, support re-application for listing and would not be supportive of any scheme which proposed demolition of the south east wing without very robust justification.

In response to concerns about visual amenity arising from retention of the buildings the panel felt that screening of the fire station would be challenging but not insurmountable. It was also thought that the restrictions imposed by the firestation as to opening lights adjacent to their building as reported, may still be accommodated given the plan depth.

The layout showing the proposed conversion of the tower into 4 no. 1 bed units of 360-392 sqft per floor was thought to be a poor fit reflecting a low grade re-use of the building.

With respect to the retention of boundary walls, the wall to the rear of the site is an integral part of the history of the site, affords privacy to the properties of Kensington Road where the shadowing of gardens is a pre-existing condition and it was therefore thought that this wall should be retained subject to consultation.

Site Capacity

The panel did not feel that best use of the site had been achieved and made a number of suggestions as to how this might be improved with a particular emphasis on optimum rather than maximum number of dwellings.

Rather than create a public open space in front and to the south east of the tower building, the proposal could seek to provide a narrower opening and to 'frame' the tower from the street. The suggestion would be to build up to the site perimeter adjacent to the fire station and form an opening to the site whilst allowing sufficient space for access and

ensuring that the buildings flanking the passage are of an appropriate quality in terms of the materials and articulation.

The use of the pocket of space to the rear of the Greenbank Cottages as parking was thought not to fulfil the site's potential and was a weak response to the surveillance/security of the site itself and the adjoining properties. The panel suggested that the provision of single storey homes for older adults or disabled residents may be worth pursuing as an alternative.

The entrance to the site off Longfield Place could be improved by moving it further in-board of the site to allow a building to 'complete or heal' the end of the terrace on Longfield Place (adjoining number 7)

This move, in conjunction with the retention of the wing may suggest other ways of configuring the plot.

Public Realm

The panel noted that the parking arrangement was described as a 'home zone' but was concerned that this was not reflected in the layouts illustrated.

The plan profile of the elevation along Greenbank Road was raised as an issue and the question of whether or not a less heavily articulated and stronger building line might be more appropriate. The panel did not think that there was a particular contextual precedent in the street for either model, however some consideration for the continuation of the building line of the cottages, defensible space and the amenity/privacy of bedrooms on the ground floor should be made. This would also apply to the building/s on Longfield Place.

It was further suggested that the character of the development could be enhanced by reuse of the stone recovered from the demolished north west wing for use in building plinths and stone walls for hard landscaping.

Architectural Expression

The panel were not confident that the development proposal, particularly in light of the panel's view on retention of the remaining parts of Longfield House, demonstrated an architectural response of a quality appropriate to this setting. There is also no indication in the elevational treatment that the buildings respond to their orientation. The panel would support a high quality contemporary design that responded to the challenge of the retention of the building, which was sensitive in terms of framing the tower, the use of suitable materials and a showed high quality of public realm.

5. Neptune Park

The panel was appreciative of the clear presentation of what is a complex array of development constraints on this site and that the panel's views had been sought at an early stage.

As a first response to the proposal the panel wished to express its concern that the site had been split into 3 independent plots. The desire to spread development risk across the site, the limitations of structural loading and the access requirement over Duchy land were recognised by the panel as difficult issues to resolve.

Site Configuration

The design team described 3 approaches to configuring the site:-

1. Pavilion approach, similar to Poseidon House.
2. Perimeter enclosure, places buildings at the outer edge of plots with parking at the street side.
3. Street enclosure, places buildings in order to form street frontages with parking behind.

The approach favoured by the design team and the one illustrated in the scheme had taken the 3rd option as a starting point for discussion. The panel felt that although this was probably the right general approach the scheme was not yet successfully resolved and there remained an uncomfortable inter-relationship between the buildings. There was also a concern that given the overall site, effectively an 'island' location, there was insufficient continuity of street to truly form a street frontage.

The panel offered some suggestions as to how this might be further explored:-

- Looking at the building entrances and addressing the consequence of the 3rd option generating back to front buildings- i.e. creating a street frontage and entering at the back from car parks. Specifically there was a concern that the Apollo building the entrance was on the short end of a long building which is both counter intuitive and also is unsuited to multiple tenancy options. The future flexibility and residual value of the building would be improved by a central entry point.

- Referring to the TR2 parking arrangement as a good model.

- Exploring the alignment of the 3 buildings across the central T junction. The steps in plan may be responding to the plot shapes but they are not contributing to the urban form. The notional grid also did not appear to support the approach taken.

- The creation of a shared surface over the junction may help provide a focus to the space framed by the 3 buildings

- Considering not only the relationship of the 3 buildings around the junction but also the view from TR2 back to the Apollo building.

If there is any possibility of adjusting the demise and widening the plot adjoining the Poseidon boundary to achieve a more regular footprint on the Aphrodite site, this should be explored as this might afford an alternative building form.

Massing and Architectural Expression

There was a general consensus that an opportunity had been missed in the proposal to exploit the unique setting of the site, located on reclaimed land and which has TR 2 as a precedent. The panel felt that the architectural response was too polite. The proposal could be a lot more robust, even coarse and the massing much bolder. The use of materials may help imbue the site with character i.e. combining crude and finer materials in a more innovative way and which could be more rooted in the nature of the site. In addition the buildings, whilst retaining some common language, could also be more expressive of their function i.e. the Trident building to be more distinct from the others as light industrial (trade counter) use.

The panel also suggested that the roof profiles could benefit from re-evaluation e.g. exploring green roofs as an option. The use of roofscape as amenity especially given the predominance of at grade parking and the waterside location could offer a selling point for the office buildings.

The creation of added components to accommodate bin stores etc, the stepping in plan and elevation particularly on the Aphrodite block was thought to detract from potentially stronger building forms.

A positive stance on sustainable means of transport, supported by good cycle park and shower provision would be recommended.

Landscape

The panel strongly supports the continuation of the waterfront footpath from TR2 at least to the Duchy owned hammerhead. It would also be in favour of exploring options for temporary structures in the hammerhead zone to give some sense of destination and place in this somewhat anomalous part of the site.

The integration of parking within the landscaping was felt to be important. Taking a cue from TR2 in its uncompromising but 'designed' approach to the landscape would provide continuity across the site. The planting of trees, particularly in light of the limitations on tree pit depths was thought to be an unsuitable approach and the panel agreed that the design team's suggestion of using structural grass planting was more appropriate.

Summary

Overall, the challenges of the site constraints were thought to be well understood but the response too deferential and that in order to truly exploit the potential of the site and make a commercial advantage of its 'island' position, it should be much bolder and become a more distinctive destination.

The ambition to achieve BREEAM 'very good' and possibly 'excellent' ratings for the buildings was thought to be very positive.

The panel would encourage a further review as the design progresses.