4.3 Opportunities
There is huge potential for attracting new life at the heart of the city to achieve cohesion and economic strength. David Mackay has suggested a means of reconnecting the station by extending a tree-lined Armada Way at grade and arriving at a high-level station foyer on the longitudinal axis. He has left the highway network intact including the roundabout but suggests a reduced vehicle capacity. The arterial routes are then reduced in width with a central refuge and calmed by extensive tree planting.

A bolder approach may be to reclaim territory at North Cross by altering the highway system completely and creating an urban route between the main areas of congregation at Home Park and The Hoe. This would provide a powerful spine for movement and activity and place the site at the heart of the city, raising ambitions and shifting perception.

The opportunities include:
• A new city quarter with a clear identity and spatial definition
• Improved connections all round through a new urban structure
• Improved pedestrian permeability and walkability
• Potential for an inter-modal transport exchange including a new railway station
• Screened underground parking and servicing
• Capability to accept landmark mixed use buildings
• A strengthened commercial heart
• A place for people
• Spin off regeneration for the surrounding districts
• A demonstrable change in Plymouth’s image and ambitions
• Growing the strong economic contribution made by the University
4.4 Defining a New Urban Form

The original impetus for this study has been the need to improve the sense of arrival at the railway station and its orientation within the city. This raises the question of what sort of place we would want North Cross to be. What is the vision for this part of the city? This report is a first step to defining that vision and suggests uses and a conceptual urban form as a basis for discussion and consultation with stakeholders and the public.

There has been much discussion about the location of tall buildings in Plymouth. Is the economy strong enough to support such buildings and are they appropriate here? Tall buildings are found at the commercial heart of many cities, driving their economies and land value. They tend to cluster and immediately signal confidence and a centre of activity. They sometimes provide a mix of uses. The approach taken here is to respond to the City’s ambition for a step change in its aspirations and quality of the urban fabric. There is potential for distinctive landmark buildings on this site, but they need to be sympathetic to the quality and character of the unappreciated low-rise city centre. If the city wants a visual counterpoint and beacon for the future, this site offers that potential. To achieve this and ensure that the area has the humane qualities essential to a modern quarter, development must respond to the inherent qualities of the site. Cities are mostly appreciated through the more tangible aspects of streets and spaces, by what people find under their feet and a need for a secure and comfortable environment.
Landform
The natural levels place this site on an elevated plateau above the city centre. The topography can accommodate underground servicing and parking below the pedestrian environment.

Orientation
The natural elevation also provides an open aspect and good orientation offering the possibility for passive solar design. It is however exposed to the prevailing south westerly air mass.

Prospect/Skyline
There are expansive views into and from the site. These are important considerations for the long range and serial views of the site as it is approached from a distance i.e. The Hoe and Home Park. The impact of a nodal intervention that clearly establishes the opportunities to announce a gateway through a skyline feature should not be missed. The Levinsky Building, at a similar elevation, gives a clear indication of the visual impact. The position of North Cross in relation to key viewing corridors within the city is very powerful.

Connectivity
The station should be reinvented as an interchange. The possibility to reconnect the site with the immediate vicinity is achievable with some demolition. The long term ambition to strengthen the spinal link from the seafront to Central Park should be protected. Once established, improved east/west links become more deliverable in reconnecting the existing communities.
Scale

Our analysis indicates there is capacity for a high-density landmark development. This will inevitably be required to breathe financial viability into the proposal given the likely infrastructure costs. The conclusion is that the site can accommodate tall buildings as markers in the townscape signifying the strategic importance of the location, and plugged directly into the public transport infrastructure, announcing an urban gateway. This aligns exactly with the conclusions reached in the Council’s tall buildings strategy and accords with guidance from CABE. However tall buildings demand space around them and need careful consideration to achieve the intimacy.

Spatial definition

The site lacks adequate spatial definition and enclosure and there is almost a “tabula rasa” of possibilities for establishing a new commercial core; an “urban node” on the route to Home Park.
Public space

A public domain of democratic and social spaces where citizens appreciate the city is vital to the way the city is perceived. The importance of this cannot be overstressed. Considered location for rest and refuge spaces must be carefully placed to ease the gradients the pedestrian will encounter in the organisation of streets. A series of different public spaces could be strategically located to take advantage of orientation, provide shelter and be appropriate to the centres of activity. This will ensure civic amenity as well as easing flow along the movement corridors to the major areas of congregation. A holistic approach to redefining the serial nature of movement along Armada Way could transform the way Plymouth City Centre works, with a range of opportunities to increase the vibrancy of space at the heart of the city, terminating at North Cross.

Distinctive Identity

There is an appetite for some drama in the urban form of the city. A mix of uses that builds on the vitality of the University campus and houses a critical mass of people at the centre will help transform the monoculture of the retail centre. This might broaden choice and create more vibrant activity and economy. There is room for a distinctive architectural language that respects and builds on the Beaux Arts grid but offers a more contemporary counterpoint to the Portland stone language of the retail centre.
4.5 Key Design Objectives

The aim of this study therefore, is to prepare conceptual proposals that:

• Build upon the inherent site qualities;
• Develop an evolution of the Abercrombie principles;
• Provide high quality public realm spaces with a strong sense of place;
• Ease movement flows and improve permeability in all directions for pedestrians at street level;
• Change the image and sense of arrival at railway station;
• Encourage a form of development that can flexibly respond to changing market demands and is deliverable through phasing.
4.6 Land Use Mix

Key to the regeneration of Plymouth, as highlighted by Mackay, is the integration of multi-use buildings. Therefore a mixture of uses and tenures will help bring people back to the city centre adding activity at night and help connect disjointed residential and student populations. Urban living is lacking in the centre of Plymouth and this is an opportunity to turn that around.

Commercial uses are central to strengthening the Plymouth economy and although market demand might be perceived to be low at present, Plymouth needs to attract new employment and offices should be considered as a major component of the mix. A large occupier could kick start a new central business district, accessible to all the major facilities and amenities. There is a demand for smaller “incubator” units, and this can be synergistic with the University’s and City Development Company’s stated ambition for retaining graduates and knowledge transfer.

A context has to be created that improves the position of the railway station as a major entrance into the city. Car parking is currently constrained and the possibility of achieving an inter-modal exchange should be a high priority. If this can be effectively delivered then Abercrombie’s desire to have a strategically positioned hotel close to the railway station should be revisited.

The key to unlocking all these possibilities is the notion of revising the highway layout to deliver land capable of accepting realistic urban blocks with an efficient use of space and buildings. If the car is relegated in the strategy, in favour of the pedestrian and a high quality public transport system, the spatial use pattern can be more sustainable.
4.7 Planning Strategy

The conclusions drawn from the context study help define the parameters for site planning. The principles underpinning the masterplan therefore include:

A new movement hierarchy
- Reconnect with the town centre.
- Redefine the threshold to Plymouth University.
- Repair linkages to residential and recreational areas.
- Re-establish the station as a gateway.
- Reduce vehicular circulation where appropriate and provide on-site underground parking.
- Protect potential for new public transit systems.
- Favour the pedestrian and cyclist.

Create a new identity
- Establish a form and density that strengthens the urban core.
- Introduce a distinctive architectural language and public realm strategy.
- Lift the experience of arrival.
- Maximise the impact of a focal location in the townscape.

Improve urban cohesion
- Sensitively handle the interfaces with the existing urban districts, their character and relationships.
- Resolve the different urban challenges at the perimeter of the site.
- Heal the fragmented townscape.
- Develop an appropriate massing strategy.

Develop a sustainable central business district
- Maximise orientation.
- Structure adaptable urban block forms.
- Enliven public realm spaces with specific uses.
- Provide attractive streets with active frontages.
- Identify compatible and self supporting uses.