Design Review

Tunbridge Wells Civic Development

1 September 2017
Tunbridge Wells Civic Development, Mount Pleasant Avenue
Reference: 638-981

Report of Design Review Meeting
Date: 16 August 2017
Location: Tunbridge Wells Town Hall, Mount Pleasant Road  TN1 1RS

Panel
Lorraine Farrelly (Chair), Architect
Steven Bee, Planner/Historic Environment
Simon Collier, Landscape Architect/Masterplanner/Urban Designer
Nigel Green, Planner/Urbann Designern

Other attendees
Huw Trevorrow, Design South East
Lynda Middlemiss, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Planning
Karen Fosset, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Planning
David Scully, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Planning
Steven Baughen, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Planning
David Candlin, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Development and Property
Diane Brady, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Client
Alan Legg, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Client
Paddy Dillon, Allies & Morrison
Robert Townshend, Townshend Landscape Architects
Rebecca Doull, GVA
Mark Anderson, GVA

Site visit
A full site visit was conducted by the Panel ahead of the review

This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application
Summary

The panel commend Tunbridge Wells Borough Council on their proactive approach in responding to the future needs of the town. The requirements for a larger theatre venue and more flexible council office space were clearly demonstrated, and the proposed sites have the potential to accommodate these facilities.

Any proposals must address the Calverley Grounds, a registered parkland of historical significance and an important asset to the town. There are potential advantages to be gained from this, such as the opportunity to improve the main entrance to the park, however, we are concerned the amount of tenanted office space and additional parking proposed within the brief are in danger of creating too great an intervention on this highly sensitive site. We feel the scheme could be improved if the mass of the office building and amount of mature planting lost through excavation of the underground car parking were reduced.

It is beneficial to see this project at an early stage in the design process, and we feel the close collaboration between architecture and landscape teams has been advantageous. The proposed public square and the way the theatre and office building address this space and each other will be key to the success of the scheme. We appreciate the significant focus given to this, but suggest issues such as the approach from Mount Pleasant Road, and the level of activity in ground floor internal areas facing on to this space could benefit from further consideration.

Background

This is a proposal for a new civic development in Tunbridge Wells, adjacent to the Calverley Grounds on Mount Pleasant Avenue. Split into two main areas, to the south, on the site of the existing Great Hall car park, a 1200 seat theatre, café and ancillary services are proposed. To the north, on the site of the existing surface car park for the Axa building, a 39,500sqf office building is proposed, including 262 parking spaces provided below ground level. Council offices currently located on Mount Pleasant Road will be relocated to this development, predominantly over a single floor, with the remaining space given over to lobby and service space, a flexible council chamber space, and two floors of offices to be let by the Council to secure a continuing income. Between these two buildings, a new public square is proposed, between Mount Pleasant Road to the west, and the Calverley Grounds to the east. This will involve the demolition of the former pavilion at the entrance to the park.

The Calverley Grounds is part of a Grade II Registered Park and Garden designed by Decimus Burton to provide a setting for the villas of Calverley Park Crescent to the west. They were first laid out in the early nineteenth century, and made public in the early twentieth century. The dramatic topography, mature trees, and historic surrounding buildings make this a valuable part of the town fabric. The Great Hall car park was developed in the 1980s and intrudes to a minor extent in its setting. The surface car park to the north is entirely screened in views from the park. Although the proposed buildings will be predominantly located within the existing car park areas, the larger footprint of the proposed office building will require the felling of surrounding mature trees and planting. The proposed underground car park will extend into the hill to the east, beyond the footprint of the office building above, requiring the felling of the mature tree screen within the park.
The higher capacity performance space will replace the existing on Crescent Road and provide a venue with sufficient capacity to attract major productions to Tunbridge Wells. The replacement of the existing council offices responds to the need for more flexible office space, and further office space to be rented out to provide an income stream.

This proposal has been in development since 2015, and is currently in pre-planning stages, with a view to submitting an application towards the end of 2017. Initial public consultation has raised concerns regarding the massing of the new buildings. The amount of accommodation was reduced and its configuration adjusted in response to this process.

**Calverley Grounds impact**

This listed park is one of the town's most significant heritage assets, and therefore limiting any potential negative impacts, and exploiting opportunities for future improvement should be core to this development. Previous development of the Great Hall car park has intruded into the western setting of the park, therefore redevelopment in this location has the potential to redefine this edge and make improvements to the main entrance. Burton’s original concept for an Arcadian landscape should inform the general approach, particularly in planting choices and groundworks. For example, the opportunity to reinforce the sweeping curve of the hillside with earth displaced from the construction process could be considered.

While we feel a theatre and council offices are appropriate uses for this site, we are concerned that the mass of the proposed office building could have too great an impact on views from within the park. At up to six storeys this building will be highly visible. Reducing the height of the building by omitting some or all of the proposed tenanted office space would improve its relationship with the park. The loss of mature planting associated with the excavation for a multi storey car park will further exacerbate the issue of visibility. We feel that significantly reducing the amount of parking to be provided on site would benefit the scheme, reducing associated traffic movements, and allowing mature planting such as the four mature pine trees to be retained. We were not provided with a clear justification for the replacement public car parking, or with a financial justification for the commercial office space. Considering car parking requirements on a town-wide scale and looking for alternative locations, including the reuse of council sites released, could be a better solution. If any vents or access points are required within the park, the impact upon the wider landscape should be clearly demonstrated.

The issue of partially screening the building through planting was highlighted during the presentation, but we encourage winter views as well as summer views to be included in this analysis, particularly if coniferous planting is reduced. As any new planting will take many years to mature, we suggest this should commence at the earliest possible stage. This process could begin before construction works take place if appropriate.

**Approach from Mount Pleasant Road**

The proposed town square area could be considered in two parts, the square itself, and the approach to it flanked by Sainsbury’s and Carluccio’s. The character of this approach will have a significant effect on how the new development is viewed from the Mount Pleasant Road and the town beyond, and should be considered as a key part of the arrival experience to the proposed development. It is unfortunate that the sides of the businesses facing the high street present blank facades on to this space, and a strategy should be put in place to address
this issue. The Carluccio’s flank is south facing, with favourable conditions for cafe seating. The existing narrow pavements discourage this, but a more generous pedestrian area could accommodate this. The way the space links to Mount Pleasant Road and the railway station could also be further explored, improving the public realm of the wider setting and pedestrian amenity and safety in this area. Although it may be unlikely that this scheme could directly fund improvements outside of the red line, a strategy should be developed to account for issues such as improved links to the station, and more rational bus/taxi pick up in future.

Public square

Much of the success of the scheme will revolve around how it relates to the wider town fabric, forming a threshold between the bustling Mount Pleasant Road to the west and more tranquil Calverley Grounds to the east. We commend the focus on creating a new public square at the entrance to the park. We feel that a public square, defined by colonnaded frontages of the new buildings will be successful, but the potential of this area could be further explored. The level of activity in the square should be realistically considered. A calm space with a generally low level of activity is not necessarily problematic, though we feel it is important that the proposed buildings present active frontages facing on to this space. The theatre café could contribute to this, but further consideration could be given to issues such as how circulation and café areas could be used in flexible ways, and potential synergies with the new civic spaces. The way the office lobby will be activated should also be further considered. Breakout space and informal meeting space could contribute to this activity, but there may be further options that could be explored.

We feel the way this square connects to the park could be further considered, addressing the activities that should be encouraged, and discouraged, in this stepped area. Late opening hours of the theatre and the effect on the surrounding square and park spaces after the sunset should form part of this consideration. The way that the buildings are lit after dark will be an important element of their successful integration into the setting of the park. We are concerned that the raised terrace areas of the new buildings may not be well used throughout the year. The impact of service vehicles sharing the square and park entrance with pedestrians should also be addressed in the layout and design details.

Programme

This will be a highly prominent development within the town, therefore guaranteed funding streams are required to ensure a high quality scheme is realised, with great attention to detail required. It is beneficial that the main building elements of the scheme are planned to be constructed alongside each other, helping to guarantee consistency of detailing throughout the project. Beyond the impact of the extra mass additional tenanted office space will add to the building, we note that Grade A office space typically requires exclusive rights, such as separate entrance and parking space. This means that sharing space with council offices may be viewed as problematic. Parking provided for offices is typically less profitable than equivalent residential provision, therefore we question the viability of this, particularly in relation to the greater impact on this sensitive site this would create.
This review was commissioned by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (Development and Property) with the knowledge of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (Planning).

DECLARATION OF INTEREST
Bob Allies, Allies and Morrison, is Chair of the DSE Panel. He is also a visiting Professor at the University of Reading where Lorraine Farrelly is employed. Mr Allies has played no part in the deliberations of the Panel or in the content of this report.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Since the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the Panel, this report is offered in confidence to the addressee and those listed as being sent copies. There is no objection to the report being shared within respective practices/organisations. DSE reserves the right to make the guidance known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed to remain confidential, this report will be publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application and to any public inquiry concerning the scheme. DSE also reserves the right to make guidance available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please let us know.