



Bristol Civic Society comments 17/09/2024

24/03137/F Waverley House Crow Lane BS1 1WH

Demolition of multi-storey car park and student accommodation and redevelopment of the site. Student accommodation and flexible commercial floorspace

Summary

The existing development on the site is identified as a negative building in the City and Queen Square Conservation Area character appraisal which also refers to it as an 'insensitive building intruding its ugliness near Welsh Back'.

This is a wonderful opportunity to replace an over-tall, ugly and incongruous building with something that is worthy of its location in the heart of the historic core of the city. Unfortunately, the building proposed in this application fails to meet up to our expectation; in some respects, it is worse than the existing.

The elimination of the car park and increase and continued use of student accommodation on the site is appropriate,

Bristol Civic Society reviewed proposals for the replacement building at pre-app stage and identified significant issues in the comments we made. It is regrettable that the revisions which the applicants have made fail to address our pre-app comments and there is no explanation why our comments have largely been ignored.

Building height

The statement on page 16 of the Design and Access Statement that the existing building height is 53.2m and equivalent to 16 PBSA storeys is misleading; the existing height of the main part of the building is 39.4m and the stair tower is 44.6. The height of the main part of the building is equivalent to 13 PBSA storeys.

In our comments at pre-app stage, we noted that the 'before and after' views were too small to be able to make any meaningful comment apart from noting that the proposed building appeared to be significantly higher than the existing.

The Built Heritage, Townscape and Visual Impact Appraisal includes critical 'before and after' views from Castle Park, from Bristol Bridge, from the north-east corner of Queen Square, from Redcliffe Bridge, from Redcliffe Parade, from the south-west corner of

Queen Square and from Bridge Quay all confirm our initial concern that the proposed building is too tall.

The tallest part of the proposed building (excluding plant room) is 13.6m (4.5 storeys) higher than the main part of the existing building and 8.5m higher than the existing stair tower.

The height of the south-east wing on Crow Lane is 3.1m lower than existing but the height of the south-west wing is 4.0m higher. At pre-app stage the height of the two wings were the same and 1.35m (0.5 storeys) higher than existing building. We understand that the south-east wing has been lowered to improve the relationship between the silhouette of the proposed building and the towers of St Nicholas, Christ Church and All Saints churches in key views from Redcliffe Parade and Redcliffe Bridge.

Following detailed examination of the 'before and after views', we consider that heights must be significantly reduced so that the proposed building fits comfortably into its historic context. The central part of the building needs to be three storeys lower and the south-west wing on Crow Lane two storeys lower.

The Ground and First Floors

There is no reason given in the Design and Access Statement for siting the main entrance on Crow Lane; the main entrance should be on the principal street, Queen Charlotte Street, and lead directly to the 'feature stair' and thence to the first-floor communal accommodation/roof garden, with wide corridors each side connected to cores A and B and core C. The Crow Lane entrance becomes secondary, as a fire exit/firefighting access and access to the refuse store.

It is not clear why the ground floor level of the student areas is set 0.59m above the pavement level on Crow Lane. This results in a short staircase and platform lift immediately inside the entrance; the accommodation and circulation spaces should be on one level.

The routes from the entrance on Crow Lane to cores A and B involve negotiation of the short staircase/platform lift, two doors, two changes in direction and a narrow corridor. The route to the 'feature stair' involves negotiation of the short staircase/platform lift and two doors. There is no connection at all from the main entrance to core C.

There is no explanation why adjacent cores A and B are identical with separate lifts and lift lobbies in each core; the lifts should be adjacent and accessed from a single lift lobby and the core area design rationalised.

No explanation is given in the design and access statement for moving the sub-station from Crow Lane to a prominent position on Queen Charlotte Street; surely it should stay as close as possible to its existing location on Crow Lane. The whole frontage on Queen Charlotte Street should be 'active'. The area occupied by the sub-station, switch room

and front part of the cycle store could be commercial space, so continuing the retail frontage of Bridge House. Alternatively, this space could be the reception/staff and waiting space for the student accommodation with commercial space in the prime position on the corner of Queen Charlotte Street and Crow Lane.

We query that there will be adequate headroom in the elevated area of first floor above the sub-station. We understand that the floor level of the sub-station has to be above the worse predicted flood level.

The communal accommodation on the first floor could be better concentrated around the roof garden and the various activities arranged to be contiguous, thus allowing a good degree of flexibility in the use of the space. This would leave the space overlooking Queen Charlotte Street to be cluster flats as levels 02-07.

Upper Floors

Rationalisation and redesign of cores A and B, as noted above, would allow the addition of a further studio to each floor on levels 02-13.

Architectural Treatment

The two principal elevations are each split into three elements with contrasting architectural treatments. This provides welcome variety into the street frontages. We agree with Historic England's comments that the architectural treatment could be more muscular, and choice of materials bolder and aggressively applied to reflect the exuberance of the Granary.

The treatment to the north and west sides of the courtyard (type D) is described as light-coloured fibre cement cladding which is unlikely be appropriate in the conservation area and visible from Welsh Back; a combination of types A and B would be better.

The proposed architectural treatment and fenestration of the wall to the courtyard behind Bridge House and the Brigstow Hotel is poor; tiny slit windows set in an unrelieved expanse of cladding board with white render finish. Surely a more robust and interesting treatment is possible.

External Areas

Design and Access Statement pages 96 and 97 includes ideas for landscaping the miserable city-owned area adjacent to the Welsh Back side of the site. This area could become an outdoor area linked to the proposed café; it must be included in the scheme and the options shown developed further.

Conclusion

If approved in its present form the proposed building will have a severely detrimental impact on its immediate surroundings and the heart of the historic core of the city. The

proposal will be over-prominent in important views across the city and in local street scenes. It fails to maximise commercial frontage to Queen Charlotte Street and Crow Lane. The proposal represents a lost opportunity to rectify the adverse effects that the existing building on the site has on its surroundings.

The proposed building is too high. We consider that three floors should be removed from the central part of the building and two floors removed from the south-west wing. Thus, the central part of the building would be one storey lower than the stair tower of the existing building and the main part would be one storey lower than the existing building on Crow Lane.

The layout of the ground and first floors should be reconfigured with the main entrance placed on Queen Charlotte Street, service entrance and sub-station on Crow Lane, active frontage on all three sides, direct access from the main entrance to the two core areas and up to the first floor via the 'feature stair' and first floor communal accommodation all centred around the roof garden. The layout of core areas A and B needs rationalisation.

The adjustments to the building set out above would reduce the number of studios by nine and bedspaces in cluster flats by nine. The total number of rooms would therefore become 145 studios and 344 bedspaces in cluster flats, 489 rooms in total.

Architectural treatment of the courtyard elevations and service yard behind Bridge House and the Brigstow Hotel should be reconsidered.

The city-owned area adjacent to the Welsh Back side of the site must be included in the proposals and a high-quality landscaping scheme implemented.