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24/04568/F Demolition of existing building and redevelopment for purpose-built student accommodation (sui generis) and flexible commercial space (Class E/Class F.1) with servicing arrangements and associated works. 68 - 72 Avon Street Bristol BS2 0QH

Bristol Civic Society response, January 2025

Introduction

Bristol Civic Society made comments in respect of the information produced for the public consultation exercise carried out in October and November 2024. These were sent to the applicant's PR consultant on 21 November. Since then, little has changed in the proposals, though we note that the ground floor layout has been amended so that the cycle stores now face Avon Street. The comments we made in November still apply and are repeated below. Additional information is now included in the formal planning application and our comments in response follow on from those made in November.

November 2024 comments

The use of the site for PBSA will help centralize student accommodation adjacent to the new Bristol University campus although it is a stretch to say it will free up private HMOs for use as family housing.

Unfortunately, the overall design and look of the development is poor. The brutalist aesthetic is reminiscent of 1950/60s poorly designed and depressing council housing. This is one of the worst examples of student housing aesthetic in Bristol and does not relate to the history of the site. This is particularly disappointing as the site is in the Silverthorne Lane Conservation Area and adjacent to the Listed Marble Works; the proposal does not conserve or enhance the conservation area.

The proportion of the scheme is all wrong, there is no humanity to the design. The architectural scale is wrong and thus there is no harmony, no balance or depth to the design. There is no clearly designed base or top to the elevations. It has obviously been designed within an extremely strict budget where the architects have not been able to design a scheme that fits into Bristol history or clearly established architectural principles. We realize that construction viability is difficult, but that does not excuse submitting such a poor-quality design just to make more money for the PBSA investors.

When you look at the planning context diagram and if it is a true reflection of the adjacent planning status then height does not seem to be an issue. Taking that into account the heights of the building elements/wings fit into the surrounding building context well, although we are concerned that there could be overshadowing and daylight issues between the 11-storey northern wing and potential buildings on the Kawasaki site on the opposite side of the path to the proposed footbridge over the river, which has outline permission for a building of up to 36.5m height (application no.21/02141/P).

We note that the proposed future pedestrian footbridge and allocation of space for future steps up to the bridge are indicated in the landscape proposals but there is no commitment by the applicant (or other adjoining landowners) to contribute to the construction of the bridge. We consider this bridge to

be an important element of approved outline planning permission 21/02141/P and must be implemented as it will become the direct route between the University academic sites and student accommodation on both sides of the river as well as linking the wider Silverthorne Lane development area with the new south entrance to Temple Meads station.

We applaud the ground floor uses and its orientation opening-up the views and space to the floating harbour. The design could be improved at this level by swapping the cycle store and sub-stations to allow a better and more active street frontage onto Avon Street. The access required for the sub-stations could be given through the accessway adjacent to the TQEC phase 2 building without too much difficulty. We would also suggest the windows on the ground floor to the floating harbour could be substantially larger and even increase the ground floor height to help daylighting and help enhance the design by opening-up views of the floating harbour, bringing the outside in. The building is split into distinct parts defined by setbacks and changes in height which we consider can be used to enliven the building's elevations by applying different architectural treatments to each distinct element. More emphasis could be given to the external architectural treatment of the common area rooms on the corners of blocks.

We note the architect's intent to reference the historic use of the site (a Vitriol Works - creating brightly coloured chemicals) by use of coloured glazed bricks in key areas of the building, however, the extent is so minimal that bland grey brickwork predominates and presents a colourless and uninspiring building with no relationship to the Bristol red brick and stone vernacular.

There is a lost opportunity with the landscaping proposals. There seems to be too much hard landscaping and not enough trees, rain garden areas and soft landscaping. The idea of fencing off the courtyard is wrong; the public should be allowed to venture into this space from the harbourside walkway to encourage the mixing of students and the local population.

It is good that sustainability is a major factor in the design proposals, and we will be keen to see and read about the actual sustainability proposal in due course, especially the whole life carbon analysis and the sound /noise surveys.

Further comments, January 2025

The context elevations and views shown in the TVIA show that the building proposed is bland, too high and overbearing in some views, which confirms our earlier comment that the scheme is poor aesthetically and does not relate to the history of the site, particularly disappointing as the site is in the Silverthorne Lane Conservation Area and adjacent to the listed Marble Works.

We agree with Historic England that *'there is little architectural texture in the articulation of the proposed elevations, as these appear as a flat veneer with no depth to framed banks of fenestration or accentuation of the string courses and pilasters'* and that the design approach to the elevations *'should be significantly revised, to provide a meaningful and clearer response to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area.....through greater horizontal emphasis and articulation of the blocks and a more contextual material palette.'*

We note that in the Statement of Community Involvement three (of four) responses to the public consultation take issue with the appearance of the proposed buildings.

- 1. the grey exterior looks so dull. Your previous developments (e.g. Wilder Street & New Bridewell) look a lot nicer.*
- 2. the facade treatment and external design is extremely bland and dated. The current massing seems*

sensible, stepping down towards Motion, but desperately needs some more inspiring materiality/facade treatment.

3. Thomas Heatherwick's book called 'Humanise' outlines how so many buildings these days are dull and boring. Your design fits into this category. Consider adding detailing to the facade to give it more character. Make it less uniform. It looks like a prison, or an excel spreadsheet. Those small little windows look quite depressing.

We agree with these observations that confirm our earlier comments that reconsideration of the design of the elevations is imperative. It should be noted that the scheme in Wilder Street was the recipient of a Bristol Civic Society Design Award in 2022. The award panel citation applauds the varied facade treatments of the scheme and advocates it as a model for future student accommodation developments.

We have reviewed the Noise Impact Assessment and noted the introduction of wintergardens to student bedrooms on the north-eastern elevation as an acoustic device to counter the noise from Motion Nightclub. We are surprised that the wintergarden space is counted as part of the room area, which is bizarre as it appears to be only 0.7m wide and unusable. We consider that the inner wall should be the solid wall and the outer wall the glazed wall, which would then be expressed externally as a different architectural treatment, so enliven the building's elevations.

We have reviewed the daylight and sunlight report and note that a good level of daylight is achieved in most rooms, however, the inclusion of the future building on the site on the opposite side of the path to the proposed footbridge over the river has a significant negative effect on daylight in the rooms facing the path. This negative effect could be overcome by enlarging the windows, which would also enliven the building's elevations.

We consider that there must be a fundamental rethink of the elevational treatment of this building to respond to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. There needs to be greater horizontal emphasis with a more clearly defined base, middle and top to the elevations and different architectural treatments applied to distinct parts of the elevations as defined by setbacks and changes in height. The dull grey brickwork needs to be replaced by a more contextual material palette reflecting the Bristol red brick and stone vernacular.