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David Campbell
Alumno Developments Ltd
2nd Floor, 10 Frith Street
London W1D 3JF

23 May 2018

Our reference: DCC/0832

Colchester Borough Council: St. Botolph's, Colchester

Dear David Campbell,

Thank you for the opportunity to present the proposal for St. Botolph's, Colchester at a Design Review on 2 May 2018.

Summary

This scheme presents an opportunity to create a vibrant and exciting cultural quarter for Colchester that helps in integrating the historic and modern parts of the town. We support the principle of a new hotel and student accommodation on this site. The initial location and scale of buildings and open spaces seem appropriate in its immediate context and we also welcome the stepping down of the heights in Block A to the north to help reinforce Firstsite as a prominent building for cultural and civic uses in Colchester. The proposed key pedestrian and cycling access routes help to physically connect the site to the wider area and make the site permeable, although we raise detailed concerns later in the comments on landscape. We welcome east-west views provided across the student accommodation site and the potential for this route to enable public access to Berryfield in the future. In terms of open spaces, we support the design approach to the broadwalk to the south of the site which provides a new public amenity for residents and visitors and helps to provide views to the Priory.

At this early stage of the design process we encourage the team to continue to test and develop the site layout and the design of the buildings and open spaces. In doing so, we ask that the team:

- Continue to look for ways that the scheme can contribute to Colchester's social, economic and environmental sustainability in terms of its character, uses, connections and open spaces;
- Carry out further historic and townscape analysis of the town and integrate the findings of those studies in the design approach. We currently feel that this aspect of the design process is underdeveloped;



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- Prioritise and future-proof the quality of the public realm and open spaces across the site which is a key asset of this scheme and important to the integration of the scheme into the town. We advise that the planning application makes clear which parts of the landscape and public realm are being delivered in this scheme.
- Address the need for privacy of the student rooms on the ground floor, particularly to the east of the development (a possible approach is suggested later in the comments on landscaping).
- Test alternative locations of the uses on the site to take further advantage of the proximity to the Roman wall and key views to the Priory, for instance, relocating the hotel to the south of the site adjacent to the Roman wall.

We would also draw attention to the relationship between density of development and size of student rooms, which seemed minimal and very tight if they are to provide a suitable environment for living and study. The living environment for students across the site is important for their health and well-being, and their experience of living in Colchester. We suggest that the sizes of student rooms are increased, which can also help to provide the opportunity for changes of uses in the future. This may require a reduction in the amount of the student rooms on the site, or potentially increasing the height of the parts of the building to help redistribute the internal spaces. We therefore still have unresolved concerns on this matter.

Wider context and site layout

The relationship of the site to the town is important in the design approach to St. Botolph's and there are a few key opportunities to better showcase the heritage assets through the layout of buildings and spaces. We urge the design team to engage in further historical and townscape analysis, particularly in terms of the existing streets, open spaces, urban grain and key views across the site and into the town. We advise that you undertake a visual impact analysis at the earliest possible stage. This will help to ensure the character of the spaces are developed so that the scheme is in harmony with the historic town and the Firstsite venue. The contextual analysis should also include an assessment of the hierarchy of buildings and open spaces in the surrounding area to help underpin height and massing strategy across the site. This information may help to determine whether the scheme could be slightly taller, and if so, in which parts of the site.

Landscape

We welcome the clear and considered landscape approach to date and the proposed connections across the site. The north-south routes - to the west of the site and the east of the site alongside Berryfield - work well in connecting and activating the cultural spaces to the north of the site, for instance the entrance to Firstsite and the proposed performance space. The southern open space, along the Roman wall, will provide a key amenity space

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for local residents, employees and visitors to Colchester. We welcome the proposed courtyards between the student accommodation blocks which provide internal open spaces for the students and the potential to connect Queen Street to Berryfield in the future. We also welcome the inclusion of green roofs across the site, particularly their role in water attenuation.

At this stage of the design process, we encourage the design team to look for opportunities to link the new and existing public realm and open spaces across the site and wider area, particularly to Firstsite and the Priory. This could be achieved by setting the development within an overall landscape strategy which highlights the uses of the open spaces and how they contribute to the new cultural quarter. We also encourage the team to make St. Botolph's as accessible as possible across the site, particularly in terms of connections to surrounding areas, such as Priory Street. We note that the team is in the process of considering the access requirements and building design to help address the topographical changes across the site.

The boundary treatments and the ground floor uses across the site will benefit from further investigation. We advise that you give consideration to security on the boundary in this location between the development and Berryfield. The privacy of the student rooms on the ground floor, particularly to the east of the development is a key concern. Raising the level of the rooms and providing a buffer zone between the rooms begin to address this issue but we suggest that these spaces may work better if allocated for alternative uses. While the courtyards between the buildings on the student blocks work well, further clarity is also required on how the courtyards within the student accommodation will be used to help avoid these spaces becoming unwelcoming and leftover spaces.

The proposed boardwalk to the south of the site has great potential in linking the key heritage assets on the site and in the immediate area. We suggest continuing to define and develop the character of the open spaces and connections to the south alongside the Roman Wall. In particular, the open space to the south west of the site adjacent to the Creative Business Centre appears to be undefined and underutilised. We think this space has great potential to link the boardwalk and Southgate, and better celebrate the historic wall. We suggest enhancing the character and use of this space in the landscape design, taking into account its day-to-day uses and the potential to open up the Business Centre in the future.

In addition, we also think there is potential to expand the concept of the boardwalk along the Roman Wall to the south of Berryfield. This will help to create a walking circuit for visitors, employees and residents which can connect to Southgate and East Hill. In developing this walking route, we recommend more analysis is required of the setting of the wall and the listed buildings, as well as the backs of the existing buildings adjacent to the site. The analysis of these historic buildings and features should also take into account the bastion on the Roman wall which can provide opportunities to engage the public with the heritage assets of the town. We support the initial approach to the walking route which provides key 'episodes' and visual vantage points created by the placement of buildings

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and open spaces. The proposed distance between the Roman wall and the buildings seems appropriate along this route, and the points at which the route narrows to the west of the broadwalk help in accentuating these episodes along this route.

We also strongly recommend investigating the potential to provide the students with access to the green roofs given the large number of student residents on this site in the future. While we appreciate the challenges associated with anti-social behaviour and noise issues, these are south-facing spaces and present an opportunity to provide a different type of outdoor space with attractive views over the town. Access for maintenance to the green roofs should also be considered in the development of the proposals. Finally, there is potential for more trees to be added to this scheme and we encourage the design team to make this addition, particularly as it will offer more opportunities for greenery and shade.

Architecture and internal layout

To help better integrate this large-scale scheme into the town, we recommend that the architecture of the hotel is made more distinct to that of the student accommodation blocks, and advise that more architectural variation across the site is also needed. Architectural variety can be enhanced by slightly increasing and diversifying the material palette. We support the use of bricks and think its use should be celebrated, for example by using bricks of different colours or introducing patterns to the brickwork.

The initial approach to the elevation on Queen Street has potential to work in this context but the elevations in other parts of the scheme currently appear less developed. As the ground floors will be used for commercial purposes along Queen Street and Southgate, we urge the design team to consider, in particular, the experience of the pedestrian across the site and therefore the ground floor elevations. We suggest that architectural elements, such as bays or similar, can be explored on Southgate to create tighter streets that match streets in the historic town centre.

We encourage the design team to continue to test the possibilities for the sliver of land to the south of the hotel adjacent to Queen Street. The proposed colonnade in this location does not appear to serve a particular need in the public realm and seems incongruous to the rest of the development. If the existing building on this land is removed in future, the historic character of the adjacent listed building could be celebrated more, for instance. We would suggest also exploring the potential to connect this space to the Creative Business Centre Currently in future.

Next steps

We hope you have found the review process and the content of this letter useful. In the light of the above recommendations we recommend that this scheme returns for a further Design Review at an appropriate stage of the design and planning process when further design detail has been worked out.

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Should you have any queries please do hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted signature]

Sabina Mohideen

Design Council Cabe Advisor

[Redacted contact information]

Review process

Following a site visit and discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 02 May 2018 by [Redacted]. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

Confidentiality

Since the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application, the advice contained in this letter is offered in confidence, on condition that we are kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of a planning application. We reserve the right to make our views known should the views contained in this letter be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). If you do not require our views to be kept confidential, please write to dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

cc (by email only)

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