

Perceval House development, design review, 2 July 2019

Introduction

What follows is a note on the consensus views of a design review panel commissioned by LB Ealing to comment on the design proposals in respect of the Perceval House development, including the site to the rear of the existing building. Following a tour of the site and key locations from which the new development will be visible, a detailed presentation was given by Pankaj Patel of Patel Taylor, architects for the developer/client Galliford try; additional information and comments were provided by LB Ealing, Tavernor Consultancy and DP9

Design review panel: John Lyall, Jeremy Melvin, Paul Finch (chair)

What the panel noted

- This is a complex mixed-use development, on a significant town centre site next to the town hall
- The development will involve demolition of the existing Perceval House, which is no longer fit for purpose, in two phases.
- Staff will be relocated to the rear half of the building while the front half is demolished and replaced; staff will then move into the new accommodation, allowing redevelopment of the rear half with residential and other uses
- The back of the site, currently a substation and parking, will be redeveloped with housing in a series of linked blocks of varying heights
- The overall development is planned to comprise 100,000 sq ft of offices, 30,000 sq ft of library/customer service space, and 365,000 sq ft of housing (about 500 homes) in blocks of varying heights in an 'organ-stop' arrangement, rising to a maximum of 26 storeys; 50 per cent of the housing will be 'affordable'
- A planning application is anticipated at the end of this year; the final phase of the project is anticipated to be completed by 2027
- Pre-app consultations have taken place with the GLA (DP9 noted that no fundamental concerns have been raised) and Historic England (DP9 reported that harm to views reported as less than substantial, but high level of concern over one particular view from Walpole Park – see panel comments below)
- Key drivers for the proposal are (a) the need for council to rehouse staff in smaller/more efficient and better workspace; (b) a desire to do this without decanting staff away from the site; (c) a residential programme including 50 per cent affordable units; (d) a requirement for new library and customer service facilities in a 'one-stop-shop'; and (e) a requirement to provide the new office space at no net cost to the public purse
- Galliford Try won the bid to develop the council-owned site based on its financial offer and the quality of its proposal

- This includes the creation of two new public ‘squares’, the opening of routes across the site, and in particular connecting Craven Avenue, currently a cul-de-sac, with the town centre as a whole
- In total, more than 50 per cent of the site will be open space
- This development would be the latest of a series of significant projects in a vibrant town centre, including the adjacent Dickens Yard urban quarter, the Filmworks project across the road, and the Arc residential tower development on Uxbridge Road
- Development pressure and Ealing’s popularity is likely to grow, given the Crossrail station which should complete in about two years

What the panel liked

- The ambitious and aspirational programme to develop a high-quality project with a rich mix of uses
- The transformational improvement to what is a ‘dead’ site behind Perceval House, and the logical location of the tallest element
- The overall programme for the site and the thorough process by which the development partner has been appointed
- The emerging design, which is based on clear and appropriate principles
- The establishment of those principles via intelligent and thorough analysis of the site, town centre history, building morphology and connectivity across the wider area
- The detailed analysis of views, especially those considered important by Historic England
- The creation of significant new public spaces across the ground plane
- The establishment of a movement pattern which enhances connections and makes the new council facility welcoming rather than isolated
- The appreciation of, and extensions to, existing grain, plus a thriving high street, high-quality buildings (Pitzhanger Manor, the fire stations) and the very attractive Walpole Park

What the panel had concerns about

- There were no fundamental concerns expressed about the ideas or the work to date. The comments below should be read in that light

Some comments for consideration

Views, height and ground plane

- In respect of townscape views, the panel had the opportunity to go to each site where some concern had been expressed. The panel was satisfied that the ‘harm’ arising from the fact that the tallest element of the site could be seen in conjunction with other landmarks, for example church spires was not significant
- In the specific case of the view from Walpole Park, referenced by Historic England, the panel noted (a) that it did not involve a view of Pitzhanger Manor itself; (b) it did not contribute to a cluster of tall buildings; and (c) that it provided a visual counterpoint to the existing Arc Tower. The latter is both

nearer to the park, and a more dominant form because it does not diminish at the top. In short, the panel's view is that the new building would improve the existing situation. Overall there are no reservations about the heights currently envisaged

- In respect of the top of the tallest residential element in the proposal, given its prominence and the fact that it is part of a civic redevelopment, there would be a case for some form of public or quasi-public facility. Examples from elsewhere include viewing galleries, education rooms, bar-restaurant-cafes and so on. Such an element could serve as a beacon for the development as a whole, with opportunities for creative lighting
- Any proposal would need careful analysis in respect of costs and logistics, but the potential public benefit might justify a modest increase in height to offset construction cost
- By contrast, at ground level, it would be advisable in the near future to think about whether all the open space would be 24/7/365. It would be worth getting a police view about this, especially in respect of the 'yard' area of the development, which might well have night-time uses at ground level
- The panel is not saying that routes should definitely be controlled or gated (indeed it would be wrong to think about a gated development as a whole), but the issue should be addressed, particularly from the point of view of resident amenity

Responding to users

- This leads to a wider point, which is the huge variety of users who will visit/inhabit the site and its buildings. It would be worth the architects thinking about narratives of who those users might be and whether at different times of day and night the facilities and opportunities are as harmonious as is practical
- In respect of the 'book-end' council facility building, for instance, the way the library is announced will be an important design consideration. How will people know the building is more than a library? Incorporation of a library is very appropriate for a public, civic building, but it could provide a wide range of services and other activities
- On this latter point, the panel felt that based on some recent development in London, there might be a case for introducing some office facilities that could be hired out by the hour, for small or start-up businesses the council might wish to encourage. Would it be possible to incorporate such facilities, even if it resulted in the building being a bit taller (ditto to save trees)?

Appearance and materials

- Given that this will be a new civic quarter, it will be important that the materials and detailed design approaches respond to the complex mix of uses across the site to give character and individuality to different elements
- This need not mean ignoring the virtues of simplicity, simply that the detailed approach needs the same rigorous thought that has already been given to the analysis of site and programme

- Similarly, the architect will need to address the dilemma of whether to express the 'street of towers' at the back of the site as a horizontal proposition with vertical variations, or a series of vertical propositions with horizontal links
- Elements to play with will include colour, winter gardens, 'sculpting' of façade treatments and textures
- The panel has confidence that the architect will be able to synthesise the challenges and opportunities, and note that the practice has addressed similar issues on developments elsewhere

Two final points

- The panel looks forward to a reviewing the next iteration of the design
- For the record, it should be noted that the three panellists plus Pankaj Patel carried out a design review on a residential project in the London Borough of Hounslow in October 2018. It has no connection to the Perceval House project

Paul Finch, 5 July 2019