

College site, Archery Road, St. Leonards

Comments on the draft housing development proposals for the college site produced by Design Group 3 Architects

1. Introduction

These comments relate to the draft scheme developed by Design Group 3 Architects and dated 23 July 2008. The comments were first given, in an abbreviated form, at a meeting between the site developers, their professional advisors and officers of Hastings Borough Council on 27 November 2008.

These notes represent a fuller explanation of the comments given on the conservation character and design aspects of the proposed development.

2. Conservation Area Character

The development site at Archery Road straddles between the boundaries of two conservation areas. Both conservation areas contain the extensive remains of a late Georgian resort development, St. Leonards, designed by father and son James and Decimus Burton in the period 1828-1870s. The Burtons developed a high-class seaside resort to the west of the existing main settlement of Hastings. The layout of the new development centred around an attractive wooded valley, leading steeply down to the coast, which was transformed by the Burtons into St. Leonards Gardens. On the valley sides, around these gardens, the Burtons developed a series of low-density villas and terraces of substantial houses, all picturesquely sited within or adjacent to the gardens, or facing onto their own private green spaces. It is a key characteristic of this area that the buildings and landscape are in harmony and that the buildings never dominate over the landscape. All of the buildings are of very high quality and of imaginative, even playful, designs. There is a great variety of architectural detailing, all held together by the common use of stone and render building elements, a generous plot size and the substantial nature of the buildings. In many cases, there is a degree of drama in the way that the historic buildings have been sited, in relation to the topography and within the landscape setting. Most of the Burton houses are now listed buildings.

In conjunction with the development focussed around St. Leonards Gardens, the Burtons also built housing around the Archery Grounds, to the immediate west. This is the late Georgian and Victorian housing that directly abuts the development site. Again, it is characterised by substantial rendered villas and semi-s, all of which enjoy a green outlook and a close proximity to areas of mature landscape.

Later in the C19th, a series of substantial high quality Scottish Baronial style houses were built in sandstone on an elevated site at the top end of the Archery Ground. The houses are called The Highlands. These later houses have a degree in common with the Burton development in terms of their dramatic siting, scale, materials and quality of architecture.

Any new development within the Burton area would be expected to reflect the key character and grain of the surrounding historic townscape. The key characteristics are :

- Low-density suburban development – a high class suburb.
- Streets and houses that curve up and down the slope, a sinuous, flowing street pattern.
- buildings that work with the slope of the land and that are sited so as to create picturesque views and arrangements of houses within the mature landscaping.
- Where the buildings never dominate over the landscape and all buildings are in harmony with the landscape settings.
- Substantial buildings within generous plots.
- Houses generally set back from the street with formal front gardens and stone or render front garden walls, softened by hedges and shrub planting.
- A great variety of architectural forms and motifs used within the area, with several set pieces at focal points eg. The North Lodge or The Clock House.
- The predominant use of render or sandstone for walls and slate for the roof finishes of the houses.

3. General design and character issues with the current scheme that require further development

The Council's letters on the subject of the design quality required on this development site have repeatedly called for built forms and spatial creativity of the highest possible quality. The Council is seeking design excellence in this development.

Unfortunately, the current proposals do not meet this very high standard of design. There are also key areas where the current scheme fails to reflect the prevailing historic and architectural character of the conservation area. The key areas where the scheme fails to meet the Council's design and conservation area criteria for the development site are summarised below :

- The proposals feel inner urban rather than suburban.
- The proposals show the spaces between the buildings to be dominated by roads and parking areas rather than being dominated by landscaping.
- The scale of some of the proposed buildings and the plot sizes is very mean (especially some of the townhouses) in relation to the

predominant grain of the historic development in the surrounding streets.

- The buildings lack architectural distinction. The designs appear to have no points of reference to local building styles or materials. The facades are very plain and lack embellishment and modulation.
- There are no obviously focal buildings within the new scheme and insufficient consideration seems to have been given to using new buildings to frame key views into and out of the area.

The paragraphs below address more fully some of the aspects of the design that require further development or modification.

Topography

A combination of topography and the existing mature landscaping can be used to dramatic affect to create vistas in some areas, but to close in views in others. The layout needs to work with the contours of the site to create a townscape of winding roads and houses stepping up and down the contours. There are some elements of this coming through in the current designs but this needs to be further developed.

Built form and spatial character

It is clear from looking at a map of the adjacent streets around the development site that the area is characterised by substantial building blocks – detached villas, semis and some terraces, within generous plots. The development needs to reflect this style, as least in external appearance. Where smaller housing units are needed, it is possible for the architect to design buildings with a external scale and appearance that is in keeping with the character of the area, but that are arranged internally to accommodate smaller units. The townhouses, in particular, currently fail to fit in with the grain of the surrounding streets.

It is noted that an attempt has been made to arrange new buildings around open spaces. However, some of the spaces created are too small, in relation to the proposed scale and massing of the buildings, and too much of the open space is dominated by roads and car parking. The open space between the town houses, in Blocks C and G is considered to be particularly poor, being of limited amenity value to the resident or to the setting of the new buildings.

Car parking

The issue of car parking seems to have been competently dealt with, at the top end of the site, where the parking provision for the flat blocks is to be sited under ground, with a landscaped square created above this.

However, elsewhere on the site, the provision of the requisite parking spaces has not always been achieved in an acceptable manner.

It is accepted as inevitable that some stand-alone surface parking areas will need to be created within the site in order to meet the local car parking requirements. However, it is not acceptable for these parking areas to be dominated by hard-surfacing and cars. The parking areas to the east of the listed terrace, the parking to the west of the new blocks D and E and the parking to the north of block F are all considered to be unacceptable in their current form.

What we are looking for is a landscape design for parking areas of the highest quality, where there is a harmonious balance between the cars and the soft and hard landscaping is achieved. The landscaping can soften the impact of the cars and the parking areas should read as a good quality landscaped open spaces that double-up as a parking areas and that also provide a high quality setting for the surrounding houses and flats.

It is also generally unacceptable within this area for the front garden of houses to be wholly dominated by hard surfaced parking areas that are directly open onto the street (like those shown for some of the townhouses). As is characteristic of the surrounding conservation areas, consideration should be given to providing front gardens with a strong boundary treatment and parking areas should be integrated into a hard and soft landscaping scheme for the front garden.

Materials

As stated above, the predominant walling materials used in this area are sandstone and render. It is not anticipated that sandstone will be used extensively in this development because of cost considerations. However, there may be opportunities to use some sandstone in boundary walls or retaining walls, as is traditional in the surrounding conservation area.

Render should therefore be the predominant walling material on the external walls of all buildings that will be visible on the boundaries of the site. Within the centre of the site and on the buildings at the top end, that are partially screened by the tree belt, it would be possible to mix render with other materials such as red brick, wood or metal cladding and glass.

Roofs were traditionally Welsh slate, within the surrounding area, and it is considered that, particularly on the site boundaries, natural slate roofing should be specified.

Landscaping, trees and boundary treatments

As stated at our recent meeting, I have concerns that some of the proposed buildings will directly impact on protected TPO trees, particularly Block A at the top of the site and the townhouses in Block C. We really need to see the tree survey and shading analysis for the proposed development, as soon as possible, and I certainly consider that we would need to have had time to consider these documents prior to our next meeting with you. I would advise that you to enter into a early dialogue with Chris Wilkin, the Council's

Arboricultural Officer, regarding the potential impact of your proposed development on the existing on-site trees.

In addition to the trees that are covered by TPOs, there are other mature groups of trees, especially on the site boundaries, that contribute to the character of the conservation area and that I would like to see retained and incorporated within the new landscaping scheme, if possible. Retaining some of these mature boundary trees should help to soften the edges of the new development and give the required balance between the built and natural environments.

The landscaping design statement suggests a scheme for the site that has the appearance of a standard off the shelf response to a housing development, rather than responding to the specific characteristics of the local landscape of this development site. As indicated above, a high quality and extensive landscaping scheme will be required in this development, using the highest quality hard landscaping materials, especially close to the listed buildings. Consideration could be given to developing a landscape scheme for the site that incorporates plant species used in the late Georgian period and that can be seen as mature planting in the areas surrounding the site. Again, Chris Wilken can advise on suitable species for your landscaping scheme.

One other aspect of the landscaping that needs further thought is the existence and form of site boundary walls and fences to the new units. As stated above, most of the historic buildings in the area have a defined front boundary wall and I would expect this to be addressed within the new development. The form of boundary treatments being proposed in your landscaping scheme, such as close boarded fences and high railings would be totally alien to the character of this area. We would be looking for sandstone or render boundary treatments, softened by hedges and shrub planting.

4. Relationships of the proposed new development to the listed terrace and the impact on the setting of the listed buildings

The relationship of the new development to the existing listed buildings on the site will be a key consideration in determining whether the proposed development is acceptable.

The existing setting of the listed building has been compromised, by large modern extensions and a tarmaced playground to the eastern side of the terrace, and an access road and extensive hard-surfaced parking area to the western side.

Any new development adjacent to the listed terrace should seek to enhance its setting, to be of high quality design and materials that compliment the listed buildings and to create good quality townscape.

The listed terrace has dual frontages. The east elevation of the listed terraced could be considered to be the garden front and it feels like the more private, domestic side of the building. This elevation has a series of balconies and canopies that encourage the occupants of the building to enjoy the vistas from the windows, down towards the coast. One objective of any development scheme for the terrace should be to reinstate a formal garden to the eastern side of the terrace. This would significantly enhance the setting of the listed buildings and provide a high quality amenity space for the residents of the new apartments. It is considered that the size of the open space provided needs to be in scale with the buildings and it is suggested that a garden depth of around 20m across a substantial part of the site would be needed to give the buildings the setting that they deserve.

The existing proposals show substantial parking areas too close to the east elevation of the building, which is unacceptable. The land drops away towards West Hill Road and it is considered that there could be an opportunity to provide a parking area, beyond the formal garden, stepped down the hill towards the bottom of the site, out of sight of the listed buildings.

The western side of the terrace is bounded by a road and reads as the more public frontage. It is accepted that it would be possible to site a new residential development block on this side of the terrace. However, the proposed Block D, in particular, is too close to the listed building, providing a cramped appearance and an inadequate setting. This building clearly needs to be set further back, towards the west of the site. What we are looking for is a really high quality urban space between these buildings, of an adequate size, configuration and quality to provide the listed terrace with an enhanced setting. Because of the possible limitations on the parking provision to the east of the terrace, it is envisaged that some high quality and well integrated parking provision may be required on this side of the building. There are also some important views from this side of the listed terrace towards Shaw building "Bannow", which it is important to retain and enhance and this may also impact on the siting of Block D.

It would also be beneficial to the overall design if the southern end of Block E could be sited slightly further to the west of the listed terrace, if possible.

5. Site specific advice on identified focal points

Three key focal buildings on the site have previously been identified by the Council. These are :

- The building at the far west of the site, adjacent to Highland Gardens (Block A).
- The buildings that will sit to the west of the listed terrace Blocks D and E).
- The building at the junction of West Hill Road and Archery Road, between the Burton villas (Block F).

I would add a further site to this list of focal points – the proposed buildings on the corner of Quarry Hill and West Hill Road (Blocks L and M).

In the cases of Blocks E, F L and M, I consider that the buildings proposed currently fail the requirement to provide a focal point in the street. Their siting, scale and designs will need to be re-visited if they are to function as required. More detailed advice on how these key sites might need to be tackled and also about the constraints to development affecting each of these sites is given in more detail, below. Block A has potentially the opposite problem, in that I consider that it may be inappropriately dominant in views, see below.

Block A - it is accepted that there is scope for siting a large-scale building at the top end of the site. However, I have concerns about the proposal to raise the existing site level, at this end of the development site and that, as a result, the proposed building may project too much above the tree belt. An over-dominant form here, especially when viewed in the winter, may have an adverse impact on conservation area views. Also, the proposed siting for the new building looks likely to have a major impact on TPO trees at the top end of the site. Concerns have also been raised regarding the likely shading difficulties that occupants of these flats are likely to experience because of the close proximity of the trees. It is possible that we may need to look at retaining the existing site levels here and also re-siting the building to better accommodate the trees. It is vital that full tree survey data, including shading impacts, and topographical information for the site is made available to the Council, so that we can assess the potential impact of this proposed building on local views and protected trees and can start to have a realistic discussion with you.

Blocks D and E – the siting of blocks D and E in relation to the listed building has been dealt with above. Potentially, the northern end of block D will form a key end-stop to the development, facing out of the site, and visible from the junction of Archery Road and Quarry Hill. We need a building here that works with the slope and the curve of the road, to turn the corner. This doesn't necessarily mean that the building needs to curve steeply, towards the corner, as shown on the current scheme. The building needs to be of a scale and massing to balance the listed block.

Block F – there is an important townscape view, past the two Burton villas at the junction of West Hill Road and Archery Road, and into the development site. This view requires an end-stop in the form of a building of a roughly similar scale and massing to the villas, sitting directly at the junction of the roads and placed between the villas. The proposed off-centred block fails to work with this existing townscape opportunity.

Blocks L and M – the junction of Quarry Hill and West Hill Road provides a very picturesque view, directly north, along the deep lane towards the listed terrace. There is potential to create a view of similar quality, looking west along West Hill Road from the same junction. However, the current proposals are too unassuming and make very little of this opportunity. What we are looking for here is a building that leads the eye along the road and up the hill.

One would normally expect such a punctuation point to be highlighted by a bold form such as a turret or tower, breaking above the main roofline of the building and providing visual interest to lead the eye. The building could be staggered along the curve of the road behind this to eventually meet the Burton villas.

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19 December 2008