

Urban Design Observations

Revised Drawings

To: Steve Ashdown, Development Management

From: Will Dorman, Urban Designer, Mid Sussex DC

Application ref: DM/15/3858 **Date:** 28/1/16

Address: The Martlets Shopping Centre, Burgess Hill,

Description: Demolition of multi-storey car park, public library, community building and offices. Provision of additional retail floor space (Class A1-A5), residential units (Class C3), a multi-screen cinema (Class D1), public library (Class D2), a hotel (Class C1), the reconfiguration and expansion of existing car park, amendments to the site access, public realm improvements including landscaping.

Drawings: MSDC date stamped 28/9/15

Summary and Overall Assessment

The improved retail offer together with the addition of a substantial residential/hotel component, and a 10-screen cinema potentially provides a vibrant mix of uses that should regenerate the town centre. While I am supportive in principle to these aims, it is unfortunate the developers have not been able to realise the Burgess Hill Masterplan vision that envisaged a more comprehensive urban design intervention to stitch together the town's urban fabric. However I understand that land ownership divisions have made this impossible, so my observations are tailored accordingly. As a result of this limitation, the car parking will remain a dominant feature on the main southern approach. Nevertheless the scheme, addresses current deficiencies especially in terms of creating outward-looking buildings that now announces the town centre and should help to attract people in.

On the western side, the scheme succeeds in defining this part of Civic Way while the proposed planting of Plane trees along the street boundary should provide an attractive formal approach to the town centre that will offset the parking and soften the development, but this will need to be coordinated with the underground services.

The building design has been revised since the pre-application stage with one residential floor being taken off the larger building, which now also incorporates a set-back top floor; this has given it a more modelled / less monolithic appearance. However the phase 2 and 3 buildings are still substantial buildings and their prominence is reinforced by the extended car park occupying their front threshold. While the similar sized Sussex House does at least provide some context for the proposal, the buildings will feel significantly bigger than the modest scale of the surrounding built form especially in relation to the adjoining Market Place.

Following the concerns raised by the Design Panel and myself in respect of the submitted application drawings, further information/revised drawings have been

received. On these I agree with all the Design Panel comments (refer to their 25th January meeting notes). In conclusion, I would raise no objections subject to:

- The outcome of a full Wind Impact Assessment study that looks in detail at the conditions in the new square.
- The measured Visual Impact Assessment's being consistent with the information supplied in the draft photomontage images.

In addition to the facing materials and a detailed landscape plan, I would also like conditions requiring further agreement of the following:

- The design of the cinema elevations. They will need to demonstrate their acceptability both at night and day, and show the junction with Market Place as well as the treatment of the east / north elevations, and the set-back top floor.
- The design of the balustrading and the dividing privacy screens.
- The design of the top floor and south west on the southern elevation of the 4 storey residential block.
- Detailed 1:20 scale drawings vignettes of the full height elevation and section of the following (including the plinth):
 - The cinema building
 - The 5 storey residential building
 - The hotel building
 - The Civic Way elevation
 - The Argos store
 - The Pergola type structure used in the pedestrian link across the car park.
- A plan/strategy that demonstrates how the planting of the proposed line of plane trees along the Civic Way frontage will be coordinated with the underground services and is acceptable to the utility companies.
- The incorporation of windows in the north / end elevation of the hotel building.

The Demolition of the Existing Buildings

The existing circa 1970's shopping centre is designed in the ubiquitous "International style" of its time, and looks architecturally tired. The Martletts Hall and library are more recent buildings, but their "Post-Modern" design already has a dated appearance. While the central square has a comfortable scale, the shops and café's around it do not seem to attract a level of activity associated with its central location. The worst aspect though is the back-to-front layout of the existing centre with the dead rear face of the buildings facing south and west towards the surface car park and Civic Way. I therefore have no objection to the demolition of the existing buildings.

Proposed Layout

Overall

While the Burgess Hill Masterplan dates back to November 2006, the urban design analysis is still relevant, and paragraph 3.11 in particular; it describes Civic Way "*as a vehicular dominated environment onto which the development of the town centre effectively turns its back, with surface car parking and service areas..... Levels of enclosure and surveillance are poor and the spaces that abut the road are unattractive and have been known to be associated with anti-social behaviour.*"

The current proposal addresses some of these existing shortcomings:

- The re-orientation of shops, cafes and incorporation of residential facing southwards towards Civic Way, will provide an outward-looking scheme and level of surveillance that is currently missing.
- The replacement of the existing set-back multi-storey car park with the library building and retail / residential above will introduce a strongly defined edge and outward-looking frontage along this presently dead-faced section of Civic Way introducing street enclosure that does not presently exist. It will also screen the presently open service yard and the rear side of the Church Walk buildings.
- The incorporation of undercroft parking in place of the multi storey hides the parking on this part of Civic Way.

Unfortunately, the proposal does not address the lack of street enclosure on the highly visible southern side which will become a more vehicular dominated environment as a result of the overall increase in surface parking in place of the existing Martlets Hall and library. From this southern side the proposal risks giving the impression that this could be an out-of-town shopping mall; although the scale and mix of development does off-set this to some extent.

The Square

The widened area of street along the pedestrian link does not convincingly read as a square. This is not only because of its linear shape and lack of interconnecting routes, but also because of the limited enclosure on the north and south sides of the space, and the lack of a central feature to give it some focus. The box shaped trees on the south side do not convincingly address the enclosure issue on the south side; with the short run of trees potentially looking rather fragmented and isolated; similarly the irregular configuration of the return face at the bottleneck point on the north side also provides weak definition. Nevertheless the revised drawings now incorporate a couple of windows in one of these flanks that at least provides some animation.

While the south-west orientation of the square may be awkward in terms of the prevailing wind direction, it should bring sunlight in to this space during the afternoon especially.

Market Place Link

The loss of the internal link is unfortunate, however the revised drawings show a widened external footway to 5m (approx.) in front of the phase 2/cinema building that should now feel sufficiently generous.

Landscaping

The tree-planting strategy is important in softening the scale of the development and screening the car park while helping to define the edge of Civic Way, particularly where there is no building frontage. I strongly support the choice of London Plane trees along the street frontage, because of their appearance, size and robustness; they will work well with the scale of the buildings and spaces while being hardy enough to absorb and withstand the pollutants in this heavily trafficked environment. They will also follow on from the recently planted plane trees along Queen Elizabeth Avenue, and with time will provide an attractive formal approach to the town centre that will offset and help screen the fragmented built form. I nevertheless have concerns because underground services may be an impediment; the applicant will therefore need to demonstrate how they will coordinate the planting with the underground sewer and gas line.

The recently revised layout of the surface car park is an improvement; by grouping the central part of the parking in to two triangular shaped islands, it allows space for soft landscaping and tree planting including a bund that should help to break up this otherwise large hard-surfaced area. It is nevertheless disappointing that more trees are not shown immediately in front of the shopping parade as this would help to provide pedestrians and the retail environment with some sense of separation from the car park.

A partially covered pathway is proposed between the bus stop on Civic Way and the new "square" which should also help to visually break up the large car park. The drawings are sketchy, and more detail of the pergola-type structure is needed.

Internal Layout

The north facing single aspect flats on the lower floors still do not appear as if they will benefit from much sunlight. The street entrances serving the flats are now better announced.

Elevations

Phase 1 – Retail

The all-glazed Argos frontage is elegantly conceived and sits comfortably in its context. The continuous feature surround employed here has been utilised in the adjacent new shopfront albeit with a deeper face and solid rendered first floor. This variation on a theme allow these frontages to work harmoniously together, and their intermediary scale and design helps to marry the existing 3 storey shops on Church Walk and the significantly greater scale of the phase 2 and 3 buildings.

The existing retail frontages on the Church Walk corners (and this also applies to unit 8 of phase 2) appears to involve the loss of the inelegant heavy blue canopies and a rationalised shop frontage/signage with stone pilasters and fascia that appropriately dovetails with the new-build elements.

Phase 2 – Retail / Residential

The residential element generally benefits from a formal vertically proportioned frontages with replicated window bays punctuated by larger bays with balconies and terminated at roof level by a set-back all-glazed top floor. This overall arrangement provides a reasonably well articulated frontage that successfully helps to break-down the scale of the building.

The revised drawings have also addressed some of my previous concerns:

- The previously clumsy-looking south-west Civic Way corner has been improved. The irregular series of staggers and the bolted-on appearance of the corner balconies have been omitted in favour of a more rationalised and integrated design that features a heavier roof on the set-back top floor. This feature also helps to aesthetically differentiate the lower residential block from the higher one, and provide more overall modulation which is also helped by the hotel building which also breaks up the southern elevation by its different height and treatment. The down-side of this strategy is that the heavier roof treatment marginally increases the scale of the building particularly along Civic Way. In addition to this the floorplates incorporating the terraces on the south west corner of the southern elevation are excessively extruded with a 2.8m cantilever

that extends beyond the balustrading.

- On the southeast corner, the reduced balustrade and open-glazed front elevation is welcomed as it delivers a better balanced façade which allows the vertical rhythm to extend across the frontage.

However the following concerns still remain:

- The double height shopfronts are elegant in their own terms, and the consistent repetition of the bays provides a strong underlying rhythm with this discipline matched in the signage strategy (this assessment also applies to the phase 3 shopfronts). However the phase 2 shopfronts are less integrated with the residential façade than the earlier pre-application proposal. The substantial size and expressed projection of the shopfronts together with the different alignment of the bays on the southern elevation acts to dislocate them from the residential façade above. While there is an argument that this approach helps to break down the massing, unfortunately it has been at the cost of harmony (NB: on the west elevation the staggered rectilinear configuration of the residential façade with the curved library / retail frontage, is less of an issue as the two volumes are more distinctly distinguished from each other).
- The all-glazed balustrading will need to be well-detailed to avoid it looking clumsy; this is particularly so on the prominent top floor.
- The photomontages show that the north flank of the hotel building is visible from the north side and needs some fenestration to animate it as well as bring daylight into the long corridors and stairwell.

Phase 3 – Cinema Multiplex

The cinema building is improved upon the pre-application proposal; with the deeply punctuated corner and entrance windows, together with the perforated aluminium cladding providing an interesting architectural form that also opens up a naturally introverted building. The recessed shopfronts are vertically aligned with the upper floors resulting in greater architectural integrity than phase 2. However the long squat proportions of this building combined with its significant size still looks monolithic. I also have concerns about the appearance of the junction with Market Place and the treatment of the return north and east elevations plus the design of the set-back roof section. For these reasons, I believe the external design of the cinema building needs to be subject to further agreement