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1st May 2015

The Society's statement in response to pre-application discussions in respect of the proposed redevelopment of Regents House, Consort House & Imperial Arcade, and land off Lombard Street, Bedminster (the site)

The Proposed Development

The proposal is to convert the existing office buildings to residential use and to construct new residential buildings on the existing car park and the land on Lombard Street. The existing retail units at Imperial Arcade would be unaffected by the change of use of the upper floors. The retail units will continue to use the car park and rear service access. The new residential buildings would provide 176 new homes of which approximately 32% are to be 1 bedroom, 2% 3/4 bedroom townhouses and 64% 2 bedroom units. The scheme would provide 190 car parking spaces. The conversion of Regents House and Consort House could deliver 100 units new homes. The housing figures will be subject to change as the design evolves.

The Society's response to the scheme

The Society welcomes this scheme, which will return two large vacant buildings to economic use and secure their future maintenance. The scheme would make a significant contribution to the social and economic regeneration of East Street. The Conservation Brief impressed the Society as an excellent history of the site and summary of the significance of the GII listed facades.

Change of use

The Society assumes that the Council will accept the applicant's evidence that there is no market interest in the obsolete offices behind the GII listed facades, which have stood empty since 2012. If that is the case, the Society supports the change to residential use.

Demolition

The applicant proposes to demolish the end of Regent House furthest from its abutment to Consort House. The Society has nothing to add to the discussion that the Council will have with the applicant about whether the public advantage of the proposed redevelopment outweighs the loss of historic fabric. The Society does not propose the retention of the modern wall that encloses the car park. The Society notes that the applicant proposes to retain and reuse as much of the 19th century joinery that survived the 1980s reconstruction as is possible.

Plan, height, and mass of the proposed scheme

The Society supports the proposal to build within the existing car park and new perimeter blocks along St. John's Road, which the former tobacco factory enclosed for most of the 20th century. The Society postpones further comment until the Council's response to the applicant's pre-application enquiry is available.

The design of the new buildings in St. John's Road

The importance of the GII listed facades is their substantial contribution to the street scape and their historical significance. The Society notes that the Design Package contains a number of design ideas and approaches for the elevational treatment of the new blocks. The design principles of the abutting Lombard Street, GII listed elevations that should inform the appearance of the new elevations to avoid a bulky monolithic appearance are:

- The street elevation is broken down into substantial vertical blocks of with a formal, regular window pattern to temper the scale and mass of the block.
- There should be a clear relationship between the fenestration on the several floors to create a coherent appearance.
- The skyline/roofline should create local distinctiveness.
- To contribute positively to the area the street elevations of the new buildings should employ high quality, durable and sustainable materials of an appropriate texture. The applicant should present a compelling argument to justify the use of material that differs from the colour, pattern and appearance of the industrial brick of the retained GII elevations.

The Design Package preferred scheme drawings- 'Aerial view looking south' & 'Street View- block 4 & 5 on Lombard Street' show the prominent corner elevation of proposed new building pulled back and raised on columns. This configuration enables the access road to loop under the building to gain the upper level of parking beside the ASDA wall. This elevation, which faces the public realm, is poor urban design for a street frontage. The Society suggests the applicant considers further design work and screening.

Public realm

There is an opportunity to coordinate the street works and improvements ancillary to the scheme to complement the changes to Bedminster Parade to accommodate the Metrobus. The Society would prefer any budget set aside to provide public art to be spent on improved quality street furniture. The public art provision should include a substantial scheme to interpret the building's history as the major participant in the tobacco industry and local employer.

Housing mix and affordable housing

89% of the residential accommodation currently found in the Bedminster East super output area is apartment based. The housing mix of 1 or 2 bedroom units is too limited; there should be a greater choice of unit size.

In a development of this size and this location, the Society assumes there be to no reason why the affordable housing that local planning policy requires cannot be provided.