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The Society's response to planning enquiry - 20/01542/PREAPP - Waterfront Place - land to South of V Shed Millennium Square

Summary

The Society supports development and has for long encouraged the Council to develop this outstanding harbourside site. We regret that the Council did not decide that this site was too important to leave to the market and did not commission an urban design brief as it did for Redcliffe Wharf. The Society supports the proposed uses for the site but regrets that it cannot support this proposal. The office is a big glass box out of scale with its surroundings. The height and mass of the office building would dominate and cause substantial harm to the character of the area and block important views across the city. The hotel's Millennium Square elevation falls short of the policy design standard.

The proposal

Bell Hammer (the Developer) proposes to develop the last and most important site on Canons Marsh with a mixed-use development of offices, a hotel and ground-floor food and beverage uses.

The site

The office building might be acceptable in another location but, this was the site on Millennium Square chosen when Bristol was to have had its landmark Performing Arts Centre. It is the last and most important site on Canons Marsh. The site dominates views in all directions and particularly the focal Harbour/St. Augustine's Reach junction. A commercial building that is adequate in other locations is not acceptable on this site. The site demands a landmark building of architectural significance. The cityscape around the site is as impressive and sensitive as the natural setting. To the east there are a group of locally listed, converted and reused warehouses. The quay wall is Nationally listed Grade II as is RS Pope's architecturally ambitious Bush Warehouse which was sensitively restored and converted in 1975. To the south, on Prince's Wharf lies the locally listed M Shed City Museum and an assembly of historic ships. To the west there is the broad columned crescent of Arup's Lloyds TSB offices designed in a Beaux Arts inspired style, faced in pale limestone. A planning gain

of this development is that it will close the fourth side of Millennium Square. From Prince's Quay there are critical views towards the centre of the city. Layers of buildings climb the escarpment. To the west is the Cabot Tower the Cathedral, the University Wills Memorial Tower and Physics Building. This view is as crucial and important as any view in the city. Nowhere in the city attracts so many residents and visitors as the area that surrounds and overlooks the site. For the past generation, the Council has pursued policies to promote the social and economic attractions on both sides of St. Augustine's Reach Quays, Prince's Quay and Museum Square, and Millennium Square to create a place of public resort and pleasure for residents and visitors. The Council's investment around the harbour includes Pero's Bridge, M Shed Museum, the listed cranes, the collection of various historic industrial exhibits that form an outdoor extension to the M Shed Museum, and Millennium Square itself. Photographs from Prince's Wharf of St. Augustine's Reach routinely appear in the city's publicity. The view from M Shed down the length of St. Augustine's Reach has opened local BBC news programmes.

The office development

The proposed building has 7-storeys, but the first floor is raised above a mezzanine above a double-height ground floor. The building does not 'unify and bind' the buildings on the site, it ignores them. There would be an awkward jump from the height of the dockside buildings to the north and the proposed building. The Council conserved the former dockside buildings to maintain the quayside character of this part of the conservation area. The building makes no attempt to work with the townscape of Bordeaux Quay, it would overbear the former dockside buildings as far as the quay head. It would cause substantial harm to the carefully conserved quayside setting. The quayside is a major visitor attraction and income generator for the local economy. The images in the Developer's Character Analysis show a building whose height and mass would draw attention from the reach of water and from the Grade II listed, Bush Warehouse and the Lloyds TSB crescent building and its amphitheatre. As the Developer notes, the proposed building, and the Grade II listed warehouse frame the entrance to St, Augustine Reach. This building at the entrance to St. Augustine's Reach should complement the listed Bush Warehouse. But there would be no equality of arms. The height of the new development would belittle the listed Bush Warehouse and cause substantial harm to its setting and the junction of St. Augustine's Reach with the Harbour. The building does not recognise the presence of the Lloyds TSB building; and makes no attempt to harmonise with it. Any comment on the design of the proposed building, such as the impact of the emphatic horizontal banding, reminiscent of the 'cheese grater' building west of the Lloyds building, would be immaterial when set beside to our concern about the harmful impact of the proposed building's height and mass. A development on this exceptionally prominent site should not exceed four storeys to reflect the predominant local character and to ensure that the Cathedral maintains its significance.

The hotel development

The Society supports development, innovative design, new materials, and construction methods. This important site frames Millennium Square in the City Docks Conservation Area. The Society understands that the presented design is work in progress. The Society regrets that it cannot support the direction of travel of the proposed scheme, which falls short of the Council's design requirements set out in BCS21 and Policy DM29 - Design of New Buildings. It is disappointing to make a negative response. Without imaginative design, hotels with their standard room components create repetitive elevations. This design of 7-floors above ground

of 17 bays lacks any modulation. The proportion of each identical bay is square which is not dynamic. The Character Analysis does not show the depth of the window reveals, which the Society suspects are shallow and have minimal recession from the exterior skin. The fenestration of the upper five floors has no horizontal hierarchy or vertical articulation. The elevation presents a grid of equally spaced room bays without an overall architectural envelope or composition. There are no architectural elements to signify the top of the building or to define its width. The stepped back floors at the north end and the cantilever at the south do not mitigate the repetitive quality of the accommodation components. This structure would fail to create a sense of place or local character, it lacks distinction. We are disappointed in this repetitive design that would frame this popular and important civic space; it does not enhance or conserve the conservation area. We note that the hotel would face the Lloyds Amphitheatre where there are occasional festivals and concerts. How would the hotel accommodate these events?