

21/05580/F | Redevelopment to provide a mixed-use development comprising office (Class E) with ground floor food and beverage uses, retail, non-residential institutions (Class E) and public house, wine bar, drinking establishment, hot food takeaway (Sui Generis), hard and soft landscaping, cycle parking and associated works (Major). | Waterfront Square Millennium Square Bristol

Bristol Civic Society OBJECTS to this planning application

This key site at the heart of Bristol's historic Harbourside requires both exceptional use and form. There is an overwhelming need for exceptional quality in any development on this site. This view is now supported by National Design Guidance. The Society considers that the current proposal at Waterfront Place does not meet any of the criteria listed in that Guidance. It cannot be considered as a high quality, beautiful and sustainable building and for this reason the application should be refused.

The Civic Society has consistently voiced concerns

At the "preapp" stage we commented as follows and these comments are still valid, perhaps even more so:

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 view from M Shed and Prince's Wharf is enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of people every year. It is one of the views that makes the Harbour so attractive on television.

The potential harm to the City

The preapp response describes in very clear terms the enormity of the potential loss of the iconic views from Princes Wharf which include at varying points... Brandon Hill, Wills Memorial Tower, the Bristol Cathedral, Wills Physics Laboratory, the university precinct escarpment and chimney at the aquarium. These views, together with near views of the harbourside, form the backdrop of the working exhibits at M Shed and are a much loved and appreciated part of the enjoyment of visiting the Harbourside.

The proposed office is a bulky modern 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 critically it will block important views across the city. The Millennium Square elevation falls far short of the policy design standard.

The Society generally supports development – but only of a high standard - and has encouraged the Council to develop this outstanding harbourside site. In the Society's view this site should accommodate a building of the highest design quality to make a significant contribution to the character of the location and contribute to the cultural and civic infrastructure of the city.

The Society is disappointed that this is not a development which will be open to the general public and it is not acceptable that there are absolutely no cultural activities included within the proposed uses. This is particularly unfortunate given the disappointment felt by the City that the Centre for Performing Arts didn't happen.

An Inappropriate Design Solution

The Society recently held an open event for Members to discuss this planning application. With respect to design some of the comments were:

“bland and slick, not gritty, dock edge vibe”

“very un nuanced building, great big block”

“an anywhere building with absolutely no reference to Harbourside location”

“no reference to neighbours – U shed, Lloyds or Arnolfini”

“alien form”

“airport terminal architecture”

The design for the over prominent roof was singled out for particular criticism as being far too large and too visible from all views.

The general view was that this building is out of place. It may be a well designed building for speculative office purposes in another context but is not at all suitable for the historic context of Bristol’s Harbourside. The Society questions whether moulded precast concrete with no expressed hierarchy of structure sits well with the adjacent transit sheds. Both Watershed and the modern U Shed are successful ‘industrial’ buildings because the structural design is legible.

The impact of the height of the proposed development

The Society supports the objections raised by Historic England especially about harm to important views and harm to the appearance of the Conservation Area. It considers that the proposed development would be too tall, particularly as the bulk of adjoining buildings are only two storeys.

The potential harm to important views has been highlighted above. The Society is also concerned about the loss of daylight to both the Square and to Narrow Quay. As a result of its height and bulk the building has the potential to have an extremely unwelcome over shadowing impact on popular hospitality areas along the harbourside, notably but not exclusively on the harbourside stretch by the Arnolfini. These potential impacts require further detailed assessment.

Addressing Millennium Square

The proposal brings absolutely no life or discernible planning benefit to Millennium Square. This aspect of the scheme requires a fundamental rethink as the proposal effectively turns its back on the Square. It is simply not acceptable to replace the previous proposal for a hotel with a ground floor cycle store and with the creation of an awkward piece of “leftover” land. It would be challenging for the City Council to find a sensible use for this site. There needs to be much more activity at ground floor level facing the Square.

The secretive background to this planning application

The Civic Society is extremely concerned by the secretive process which has led to the emergence of this highly unsatisfactory planning application. The City Council has not followed its own guidelines for development. The Council’s “Statement of Community Involvement” sets out very good stages for consideration of major projects with, amongst others, serious consideration of options and the building of a consensus.

Instead, we are faced with a total lack of transparency and accountability. Unfortunately, the Council appears to be acting as an insensitive developer and neglecting its role as a cultural leader and a representative of its citizens.

National Planning Policy has changed

Since the start of the long process which has preceded the submission of this planning application the National Planning Policy landscape has evolved and changed very significantly. The Society is very pleased to see that Policy is now very firmly in support of creating well designed and attractive buildings and places.

In particular National Planning Policy (NPPF) – achieving well-designed places - makes it very clear that:

“ The creation of high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities. Being clear about design expectations, and how these will be

tested, is essential for achieving this. So too is effective engagement between applicants, communities, local planning authorities and other interests throughout the process.

Planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments:

a) will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development;

b) are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping;

c) are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities);

d) establish or maintain a strong sense of place, using the arrangement of streets, spaces, building types and materials to create attractive, welcoming and distinctive places to live, work and visit;

e) optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development (including green and other public space) and support local facilities and transport networks; and

f) create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible and which promote health and well-being, with a high standard of amenity for existing and future users; and where crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine the quality of life or community cohesion and resilience.

National policy also makes it explicit that

“ Development that is not well designed should be refused”

Conclusions

The Society considers that the current proposal at Waterfront Place does not meet any of the criteria listed above. The brief to developers was prepared before the National Planning Policy changed and there is therefore an irrefutable argument that there should be a fresh start to the planning of this key Harbourside site with full community involvement and the preparation of a planning brief. The current proposal cannot be considered as a high quality, beautiful and sustainable building and for this reason the application should be refused.

