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Emerging proposals for 68-72 Avon Street: mixed-use Purpose-Built Student Accommodation scheme with commercial or community use

Bristol Civic Society response, November 2024

We thank the development team for offering us the opportunity to comment on their emerging designs. The use of the site for PBSA will help centralise student accommodation adjacent to the new Bristol University campus although it is a stretch to say it will free up private HMOs for use as family housing. To say this obviously means they do not understand the private HMO student market.

When you look at the planning context diagram and if it is a true reflection of the adjacent planning status then height does not seem to be an issue. Taking that into account the heights of the building elements/wings fit into the surrounding building context well, although we are concerned that there could be overshadowing and daylight issues between the 11-storey northern wing and potential buildings the Kawasaki site on the opposite side of the path to the proposed footbridge over the river, which has outline permission for a building of up to 36.5m height (application no.21/02141/P).

We note that the proposed future pedestrian footbridge and allocation of space for future steps up to the bridge are indicated in the landscape proposals but there is no commitment by the applicant (or other adjoining landowners) to contribute to the construction of the bridge. We consider this bridge is an important element of approved outline planning permission 21/02141/P and must be implemented as it will become the direct route between the University academic sites and student accommodation on both sides of the river as well as linking the wider Silverthorne Lane development area with the new south entrance to Temple Meads station.

We applaud the ground floor uses and its orientation opening-up the views and space to the floating harbour. The design could be improved at this level by swapping the cycle store and sub stations to allow a better and more active street frontage onto Avon Street. The access required for the sub-stations could be given through the accessway adjacent to the TQEC phase 2 building without too much difficulty. We would also suggest the windows on the ground floor to the floating harbour could be substantially larger and even increase the ground floor height to help daylighting and help enhance the design by opening-up views of the floating harbour, bringing the outside in.

Unfortunately, the overall design and look of the development is poor. The brutalist aesthetic is reminiscent of 1950/60s poorly designed and depressing council housing. It could be suggested that the design is taken from the old communist eastern block and mafia inspired tenement blocks of southern Italy and not any contrived ideas from the history of the site. This is one of the worst examples of student housing aesthetic in Bristol. This is particularly disappointing as the site is in the Silverthorne Lane Conservation Area and adjacent to the Listed Marble Works; the proposal does not conserve or enhance the conservation area.

The proportion of the scheme is all wrong, there is no humanity to the design. The architectural scale is wrong and thus there is no harmony, no balance or depth to the design. There is no clearly designed base or top to the elevations. It has obviously been designed to an extremely strict budget where the

architects have not been able to design a scheme that fits into Bristol history or clearly established architectural principles. We realise that construction viability is difficult, but that does not excuse submitting such a poor-quality design just to make more money for the PBSA investors.

The building is split into distinct parts defined by setbacks and changes in height which we consider can be used to enliven the building's elevations by applying different architectural treatments to each distinct element. More emphasis could be given to the external architectural treatment of the common area rooms on the corners of blocks.

We note the architect's intent to reference the historic use of the site (a Vitriol Works - creating brightly coloured chemicals) by use of coloured glazed bricks in key areas of the building, however, the extent is so minimal that bland grey brickwork predominates and presents a colourless and uninspiring building with no relationship to the Bristol red brick and stone vernacular.

There is a lost opportunity with the landscaping proposals. There seems to be too much hard landscaping and not enough trees, rain garden areas and soft landscaping. The idea of fencing off the courtyard is wrong; the public should be allowed to venture into this space from the harbourside walkway to encourage the mixing of students and the local population.

It is good that sustainability is a major factor in the design proposals, and we will be keen to see and read about the actual sustainability proposal in due course, especially the whole life carbon analysis and the sound /noise surveys.