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**HERTFORDSHIRE DESIGN REVIEW PANEL**  
**143 London Road, St Albans 30/06/15:**  
Barry M Shaw, Barry Shaw Associates (Chair)  
David Jennings, EPR Architects  
Hugo Nowell, Urban Initiatives Studio

**Confidential**

14<sup>th</sup> July 2015

Dear Shane,

The Hertfordshire Design Review Panel was convened on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015 to review a proposal for the demolition of an existing dwelling, and the re-development of 11 flats and 3 mews houses with underground parking, at 143 London Road, St Albans.

The proposal is at the pre-application stage of the planning process and is therefore confidential.

A representative from the Local Planning Authority (St Albans City & District Council (SACDC)) was not present. The reason for this is that SACDC will not participate in or support design review at this time.

The Panel agreed that it was with regret that the Local Planning Authority was not present to set out their key planning priorities and concerns, especially as the National Planning Policy Framework<sup>1</sup> recommends that "*Local planning authorities should have local design review arrangements in place to provide assessment and support to ensure high standards of design...*"

The Panel strongly advised that this report should be shared with SACDC.

### **Declarations of Interest**

It was declared that a relative of the lead consultant worked with EPR Architects. The Chair acknowledged this and was satisfied that there was no conflict of interest.

### **Presentation, Site Visit & Q&A**

The project architect (PA) presented the Design and Access Statement and outlined the planning background and design concept underpinning the proposed scheme, which involves the demolition of an existing 2 storey dwelling, and the redevelopment of 11 flats and 3 Mews houses.

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<sup>1</sup> 7. Requiring Good Design, paragraph 62.

The presentation and site visit was followed by a Q&A session with the Panel that explored the applicant's proposal in more detail.

### **The proposed scheme**

The site is elongated, 19.5m wide and 90m long, and covers an area of approximately 1800sqm. It is orientated on a north-east to south-west axis, flanked by residential development, with a main road (London Road) to the front, and open fields to the back. The site is accessible, served by 5 bus routes and is a 9 minutes' walk from the town centre/ railway station. The site is not in a conservation area and the trees along the front boundary with London Road are subject to Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs).

The design concept seeks to deliver an architecturally innovative, contemporary sustainable residential development, constructed from a high quality palette of materials including brick, aluminium cladding, and timber architectural detailing.

The proposed scheme is divided into two blocks, a 3 storey block of 11 flats which is set back towards the front of the plot and a 1.5 storey terrace of 3 mews houses located to the rear. The block of flats has been designed to look like a 'large house,' with a series of blocks and voids and a tiered front elevation, rather than a continuous block of apartments with balconies.

The proposed scheme is served by an underground carpark with stair access to the mews houses. The landscape strategy seeks to conserve the existing character of London Road, protecting important trees (subject to Tree Preservation Orders), including a notable Horse Chestnut at the main entrance. Communal spaces are landscaped and include a central courtyard and amenity space.

### **Panel Q&A**

The Panel raised the following issues and questions.

- What is the planning vision for London Road?
- Who are the likely inhabitants of this development?
- There is an eclectic mix of existing buildings along London Road and as such there is no common 'language.'
- Is this scheme appropriate to this site – applying an urban solution to a suburban location.
- The sinuous and sloping nature of the ramp access to the underground car park is challenging for manoeuvring vehicles, and results in disturbance to residences from revving vehicles and headlights.
- The impact of the ramp upon the root protection area of the existing Horse Chestnut tree.
- Practicalities surrounding pedestrian and vehicular access, particularly to the rear Mews houses, e.g. visitors, refuse collection and deliveries.

The PA outlined how the development layout and design responds to the key site constraints and responded to the Panel's questions.

In general there has been intensification of development along London Road; likely inhabitants are to be first time buyers, downsizers and couples who may work in

London. The scheme has sought to create a continuous street scene, and soften building elevations by using permanent planters.

The long and narrow shape of the plot results in a unique site layout with the block of flats towards the front of the site and the mews housing located to their rear. The location of the block of flats reflects the neighbouring building lines in order to ensure the continuity of the street scene. The location of the Mews houses reflects the rear building line of the neighbouring residential development at Magnolia Gardens.

The houses 'step down' in scale and mass towards the rear site boundary, and windows are angled, in order to reduce the impact upon neighbouring properties.

## **Panel's observations**

### **Overview**

The Panel welcomes the imaginative and contemporary architectural approach to the proposed development. The Panel agree that the proposed scale/mass and mix could be appropriate for this area which is undergoing change. However the challenging nature of the site and its context - a long and narrow plot, calls for a unique design response.

Whilst the scheme as presented is considered an imaginative solution, the Panel is not convinced the design concept can be justified in terms of the block arrangement and mix. As presented the Panel considers the scheme as over development in its current mass and mix.

Concept alternatives were not offered, nor a reason for losing/ changing the mix, albeit a need for family homes in St Albans. The Panel would like to have seen a stronger justification for the proposed housing mix based on an understanding of local needs, and the exploration of alternative development layouts and densities.

### **Development layout**

The Panel has severe reservations about the functionality of the scheme on this restricted site. These include the relationship between the block of flats and the Mews houses, the legibility of the Mews houses due to their location behind the block of flats, and the unusual access arrangement to the Mews houses via the underground car park.

The Panel is of the view that the development layout is an urban solution applied to a suburban location, which on balance is not justified in this context.

The inclusion of Mews houses to the rear of the site raises complex issues surrounding the functionality of the whole scheme –i.e. the practicalities of everyday life, covered below. Due to these functionality concerns the scheme is seen as over development. As such the Panel is not supportive of the inclusion of Mews houses within this scheme.

### **Mews Houses**

Conventionally houses are arranged around streets with an address. Due to the underground parking, there are no surface roads and no independent access to front doors, which creates an unattractive arrival to a property. A lack of street frontage to the Mews houses raises issues regarding how the houses are perceived, and in

particular how they maintain an independent address from the block of flats, which is a fundamental requirement of good practice.

The legibility of the Mews Houses, especially for visitors and delivery/service men, due to their location at the rear of the plot, means that all public access to them is gained via the private block of flats, with pedestrian access at ground level and vehicular access via the underground parking. This is an unusual arrangement and is not supported by the Panel.

### **Flats**

In principle the Panel supports the layout and design of the block of flats, particularly in their scale, mass and siting within the plot.

There is however concern regarding the layout of the ground floor flats and the opportunity for daylight and passive solar gain, especially where rooms are single aspect and/or are in close proximity to neighbouring buildings.

### **Access & Parking**

The Panel is supportive of underground parking but recommends that the ramp is flipped and straightened, parallel to the south-east site boundary, allowing direct access into the car park and providing greater protection of the Horse Chestnut tree. In doing this the frontage of the development can also be positively enhanced due to the need for less concrete surfacing.

The Panel recommends that consideration is given to the headroom needed to allow for domestic deliveries.

### **Landscape and amenity**

The quality of the landscaped spaces require more detailed development, in recognition of their orientation and size, and residents use of these spaces now and in the future.

The Panel recommends that the relationship between external and internal spaces requires further resolution, such as the relationship between the Courtyard and the ground floor flats. For example the close proximity of communal seating to residential windows negatively impacts upon the occupant's privacy.

The Panel is concerned that the proposed typology of spaces is predominantly for adults, and discourages the inclusion of formal/informal play spaces.

### **Sustainability**

The Panel is supportive of the intention to incorporate green roofs, solar PV and sustainable drainage solutions into the design of the scheme. The scheme has not however addressed issues of future adaptability/futureproofing. In its current design the Mews houses could not be adapted, for example, for wheelchair users.

### **Materials**

Greater attention needs to be given to the detail, quality and palette of materials used. High quality brick should be considered, such as Danish brick.

### **Submitted information**

The Panel was presented with a suite of documents and plans to communicate the design approach. The Panel questioned the accuracy of some of the drawings that could appear misleading. These need revisiting and further detailing, for example the approach to fenestration, timber screens, and the palette of materials.

### **Conclusion**

The Panel supports the imaginative and contemporary architectural approach to the proposed development, but is not convinced the design concept can be justified in terms of the block arrangement and mix.

The Panel considers the proposed development layout to be an urban solution applied to a suburban location. As presented, in its current mass and mix, the scheme is considered over development which on balance is not justified in this context.

The Panel is not supportive of the inclusion of the Mews Houses to the rear of the site, which raise complex issues regarding the functionality of the whole scheme. However, the layout and design of the block of flats is supported by the Panel, particularly their scale and mass, and siting within the plot.

Given the concerns of the Panel as outlined in this report, the Panel strongly advises the exploration of alternative design responses to this challenging, long and narrow plot.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Shaw". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mr B. M. Shaw, Chair Hertfordshire Design Review Panel