

DM/20/00912/FPA: Bus Station, North Road, Durham City DH1 4SG

Demolition of bus station and erection of a replacement including office space

City of Durham Trust Comment

1. Context

1.1 The City of Durham Trust welcomes the proposal to replace the bus station on its existing site but has reservations about the design and layout adopted and, as a consequence, its heritage impact and the likely quality of experience provided for bus passengers. Indeed, the original concept of a high quality experience afforded by an open concourse and a mezzanine level has been sacrificed by the appropriation of the mezzanine level for more office space. Furthermore, the concourse design, whether deliberately or accidentally, has prioritised the positioning of the toilets and the stairs to the offices over the provision of a clear unobstructed space for assembling, sitting and enjoying the new bus station. The Trust is therefore reminding the County Council that the first priority of this design is passenger satisfaction and safety. The representations that follow seek to provide a practical way of achieving this end.

1.2 The bus station is a transport focal point for both City and much of the County. Links with the Durham railway station are problematic and the redevelopment of the bus station should be an opportunity to create greater integration of bus and rail services.

1.3 The bus station is central to the regeneration of North Road and its design will set the standard for future development and refurbishment. It is therefore disappointing that this design is a missed opportunity to provide a model of good civic style and taste in the reinvigoration of the City's historic core.

1.4 Many of the deficiencies in comfort, safety and convenience of the existing building are remedied but the Trust would urge the County Council to make some further modifications to the appearance, accessibility, and safety within the financial constraints of the project.

2. The Appearance and Layout of the Building

2.1 The most disappointing aspect of the appearance is that it is anonymous and could be an office block anywhere rather than the entry point to our world heritage City. The Trust does not consider that the design has dealt adequately with the challenge of the rising slope of North Road either externally, where it has resulted in a rigid, unbalanced and dominating frontage, or internally where steps have been

required to cope with the height difference between the two entrances. The inclusion of so much office space has resulted in an extra storey which has not been mitigated in any way to respect the scale of buildings around it. We consider that the reverse monopitch roof with its parapet could still be modified to cut back the vertical face.

2.2 The particular combination of stone and glass chosen has resulted in an unnecessarily dominant street presence. The choice of stone is questionable in relation to this type of building in this location and for its relationship to the townscape. It also increases the prominence of the upper areas of the building including the rear and the plant room. This building has the potential to make an outstanding contribution to the street scene and thereby avoid the insensitive legacy that has been so characteristic of some prominent civic buildings in recent times.

2.3 The internal layout chosen appears to be at odds with the glass frontage design at street level. A central section of the frontage is partly dead because a potential clear view through the bus station will be blocked by a view of the rear of the ground floor toilets. The security benefits of a clear open view would be immediately evident simply by reference to the existing bus station where the frontage shops block any surveillance from the street.

2.4 Relocating the toilets to the northern end of the building would require the second entrance to be moved correspondingly southward in the frontage thereby reducing the disparity in levels between the two entrances. It ought to be possible to manage the internal layout to avoid steps at the upper entrance which we believe to be a critical failure in the design. There is also a risk at peak times of people using the steps for casual seating, blocking other users' access. One solution might be to provide a short down ramp from the north set of doors and a short up ramp from the south set of doors.

2.5 The increase in office space at the expense of the earlier concept to provide an attractive open mezzanine level means that the public facilities are now shoe-horned into the ground floor and it is at the expense of amenity, comfort and safety of the passenger.

2.6 While the heritage and design information submitted is comprehensive, some essential factors determining building form and shape are missing from the analysis and consequent impact assessments. This leads to underestimation of negative heritage and street impact. The context for this impact is provided by the proximity of the adjacent Manse and Church, Avenue House, the surrounding 20thC retail buildings, the World Heritage Site (the site being in the view to the WHS) and the City Conservation Area. It also appears in the foreground views to the listed railway viaduct. There are improvements that will result from the proposed building

profile in relation to the view to the WHS, the general street impact and the relationship with the adjacent stone Manse. However, an increased loss of WHS view at the south east end of the building has to be set against the removal of the substantial blockage caused by the existing buildings along the street and at the north west end. The negative impact on the Manse is reduced through removal of the existing building but the preferred design approach then creates its own substantial negative impact. The building's mass and design also have impacts in the Conservation Area.

2.7 In the light of this, the decision not to incorporate the adjacent Manse building into the design has resulted in the design of a building that has little respect for its older and more distinguished neighbour. It is the key opportunity referred to above that could have assisted in the reinvigoration of the street by refurbishing and repurposing a fine building.

3. The Trust's Recommendations

3.1 The Trust fully supports the abandonment of the earlier proposal to develop the roundabout site and its replacement by the renewal of the bus station on its existing site. It will provide a significant improvement for public transport users for many years. It is a vital element in the on-going task of stimulating the regeneration of North Road. It is particularly important that the best possible design is finally adopted which overcomes the challenges of a difficult and sensitive site within the Durham City Conservation area.

3.2 The Trust is convinced that further improvements can and should be made to fully realise the potential of the project. Much of our analysis was provided during the previous consultation, and there has been no response to our concerns about the negative impacts of the building. Continuous refinement of the design is desirable and should remain possible. The Trust therefore recommends that the following improvements to be considered:

External Design

3.3 The greatest impact on the design has resulted from the decision to create a level platform for the concourse and then to construct the building upon it. The height was then increased by adding an upper storey of offices for commercial reasons. This results in an increase of visible height at its lower south east end as it rises out of the falling street level. The height is more equivalent to 3.5 to 4 storeys than the 2 to 3 as assessed in the submitted documents. It must be said that much of the submitted analysis seeks to demonstrate that mitigation has reduced the impact of what is essentially a fairly basic office block in a sensitive location rather than identifying its crucial failings in enhancement and integration with its surroundings.

3.4 The detailing of the front façade with pavement to parapet vertical glazing/cladding and stone ‘stripes’ unfortunately emphasises its verticality and dominance over its surroundings. While Dunhouse Buff stone is an attractive local product, in this context it appears more prominent than other choices of material and this impact could be reduced by reconsidering the choice of material. In the same way, the impact of the stone framing ‘arch’ could be reduced in the rear elevation as could that of the plant room. The plant room would be less prominent if its material choice tied it into the prevailing roofscape. It should be noted that the rear canopy has been stepped to run with the change in level.

3.5 The cumulative impact of these intrusive elements is to create an uncomfortable relationship with the surrounding 20thC developments and to detract from the view down to the WHS, back to the Viaduct and within the townscape of the conservation area. It specifically creates a poor relationship with the Manse building, made worse by the large bus station sign and support column. It could still be modified to provide a good model for any future regeneration along North Road. The PV panels, greener roof and wall are, of course, welcome but they do not mitigate the negative impacts of the design.

The Trust recommends that:

- **There is a review of the potential for breaking the line of the frontage to a greater degree, e.g. stepping or fragmenting the frontage in a more balanced horizontal/vertical treatment that reflects the prevailing townscape.**
- **There is modification of the upper storey front façade and in particular reduction or elimination of the parapet and use of materials that reflect the roof pitch and materials of the neighbouring Manse thereby reducing its dominance and its verticality**
- **There is a review of the external finishes to select those that tie in the building in a more recessive way that complements the local townscape and roofscape. This should include the plant room, rear elevation and frontage stone and glazing.**

Internal Design

3.6 The loss of the proposed public access to the mezzanine level has had a serious impact on the amenity value of the building. There are two clear floors for offices and only one for the thousands of bus passengers each day. With all the facilities on the one floor, the result is inevitably a more limited and ungenerous

circulation and seating area with minimal facilities provided. Reorganisation of the layout becomes crucial in order to provide a concourse that is more accommodating than the current design allows. (The current threat to public health by public assembly may not be only a short term phenomenon. Generous space may become a feature of future design standards. Working from home may also be a threat to the provision of more office space.)

Here are some possibilities:

- **Consideration should be given to relocating the toilets to the north end of the concourse rather than being an unappealing backdrop to the very limited seating area.**
- **A consequential relocation of the second access would produce a more harmonious frontage and reduce the height differential between them. This might enable the steps to be eliminated with marginal increase of internal ramps.**
- **The stair access to the floors above should be moved to share the south public access where it can be fitted into the space adjacent to the end of the building.**
- **The result of these rearrangements will be to provide a clear concourse which is uncluttered by the toilets and staircase. It will enable more seating and circulation space to be provided in the centre of the building where it is most needed. The whole of the centre section of the concourse will be visible from the street thereby improving attractiveness, and there will be space for facilities such as café and left luggage lockers.**

Safety, Security and Circulation

3.7 The Trust feels that aspects of safety, security and passenger circulation could be further improved. The greatest weakness is the lack of an unimpeded view across the concourse because of the heavy proportion of stone cladding to glass, the blank frontage where the toilets are located, and the loss of the mezzanine level for public access. We would very much recommend that removing the toilets to the northern end of the concourse and moving the access southwards (as described above) should be fully examined.

3.8 The bus exit to North Road remains the same with the exception of the building arrangement including the step back and a chamfer that should improve visibility. However, the Trust remains concerned that without further improvements this will continue to be dangerous crossing point.

The improvements we recommend are;

- **to recognise that an increase in the public circulation and sitting area is desirable and to design all fittings and fixtures within the building to avoid clutter and obstructed views.**
- **to adopt a financial model that secures adequate maintenance and the presence of help desk and security staff, including neighbourhood wardens and police.**
- **to refurbish the paving from the roundabout to below the bus exit and to include a continuous pedestrian ramp across the crossing point that gives priority to pedestrians over buses.**
- **to eliminate the trip hazard caused by the low frontage wall in front of the Manse caused by the loss of its railings.**

Connectivity

3.9 For the regenerated bus station to be at the centre of an integrated public transport network requires there to be a greatly improved connection to the railway station. Despite this matter having been repeatedly raised throughout the consultation exercises, the only recognition of the essential role of information technology is the inclusion of a basic information desk.

It is recommended that:

- **The real time information displays need to be planned into the interior and not be retrofits after the building has been constructed. The travel information should include times of train services and shuttle buses to the station.**
- **Further physical improvements be made to overcome the distance and height separation of the bus and rail stations. This issue was repeatedly raised in the Council's previous consultations and remains to be addressed, including a condition requiring future external enhancements to be identified for implementation or safeguarding within six months of the opening of the rebuilt bus station.**

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Future Proofing

3.10 With concern growing rapidly about climate change, carbon emissions and air pollution, the provision of this new facility should be a tipping point in the rejection of vehicles powered by fossil fuels and the introduction of electric vehicles (and possibly hybrid vehicles in the short term). The Trust would urge that this should be fully addressed and not left as a matter of modification for a later date.

Recommendations are:

- **Inclusion of fast recharging of electric buses as a major design feature of the bus station and ensuring that future provision is fully allowed for.**
- **A review of passenger interchange and integration with existing national coach services and any future developments of this network to ensure that the design and layout will flexibly allow for this.**

Final Note

The Trust has welcomed the opportunities to participate in the development of the bus station design and will continue to offer its views. We hope in turn that the County Council will take them fully into account.