

Web site: <http://www.DurhamCity.org>

5th March 2024

James Taylor
Citrus Group Limited
Suite One
4 Saddler Street
Durham, DH1 3NP

Dear James,

Prince Bishops Place Redevelopment Consultation

1. The Trust would like to thank yourself and the Citrus Group for arranging a very detailed and helpful consultation for its Trustees. We all found it very informative, and you were generous with your time. The Trustees thought it would be useful if we gathered our comments together and provided these in writing.

New uses

2. The Trust takes considerable interest in the provision of student accommodation in Durham and the negative impact it can have on its small and sensitive city centre. There has been substantial provision of PBSA spaces in addition to the six sites referred to in the 2020 County Durham Plan Policy 16. This proposal (comprising 408 student beds) is another considerable additional PBSA provision. As such it will be subject to the requirements of that policy (Section 2 a-g). The Trust will place significant importance on this aspect when making a response to the anticipated planning application.

3. We realise this point was mentioned in the meeting and you have been in contact with the University, as required by Policy 16: '*2 b. consultation with the relevant education provider pursuant to the identified need*'. The Trust will therefore be seeking reassurance that this significant increase in PBSA student accommodation is acceptable in relation to any University strategy covering student accommodation provision.

4. It is very encouraging to see the extent of retail envisaged as being retained in the proposals and the Trust takes cognisance of the staffing resource proposed in managing the PBSA to try to avoid a negative impact upon the retail and hotel users.

5. A concern not touched upon in the meeting is that the Policy 16 also requires no significant negative impact on leisure. The Trust has seen the extent of the mostly unplanned new leisure provision in the Riverwalk and Milburngate redevelopments and historic streets. It is concerned that the retail may switch to leisure uses in competition with the historic streets' increased leisure provision and that of the two new developments.

6. The new 100 bed hotel use is seen as beneficial to the city centre and to tourism. The switch of location to the Market Place end of the building with an entrance onto the Market Place works well. The Trust has a residual concern about the business case for a hotel that remains from its first response to these proposals. Noting that the operator is not known at this stage, an assessment that there is no negative impact on the existing visitor accommodation provision would be reassuring.

THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

Demolition of Existing Buildings

7. It has been a longstanding concern of the Trust about the loss of the William Whitfield car park building and the large, clumsy, and discordant elevations of the Prince Bishops complex. The demolition and reworking of the upper storeys is very welcome.

Design

8. In general, the new design approach taken does appear to be sensitive to its very prominent location that has a significant impact on the City's core and its approaches. The viewing we had was very helpful, but we will need to take a more detailed look at the actual proposals when submitted. There are points arising from what we saw that we would like to share with you in the hope that improvements may still be made.

9. The success of the Riverwalk river frontage, even if over dominant, was in its roofscape including pitched roofs. While the existing Prince Bishops frontage is an unsuccessful attempt to relate to Durham's roofscape, it at least offered a varied roofscape visible from many viewpoints.

10. There is scope in relation to local design influences for further refinement. While the current proposal is a considerable improvement over the existing, the regularity of the riverside block arrangement works against the organic grain of the City centre. The 'blockiness' it creates works against other parts of the design. In relation to the reference to the City and Castle walls, the original walls were varied by constant rebuilding and development, height, topography, and arrangement of defensive towers and were more irregular. A particular feature of the buildings that back onto the river frontages in the City centre was the introduction of oriel windows. Use of these in a contemporary approach might well be a route to introducing a greater element of irregularity and response to the local context. As noted in point 9, Riverwalk drew on the influence of Durham's tradition of gabled houses. The move within the new proposals to incorporate this influence is therefore welcome.

11. On the riverside frontage, the junction between the three story pitched element and its flat roofed neighbour does not work well and the two blocks need to be separated visually.

12. The western block is in a very prominent corner position commanding the approach down the A690, terminating the elevation from old Elvet Bridge, and turning the corner from New Elvet Bridge. It is monolithic and needs more work to break this down, possibly by fragmentation of roofscape and elevation detailing. Although not desirable for repetition, the existing tower solution does at least achieve the corner transition. The treatment of the lift tower also seemed on quick viewing to be substantial and over-massive and would benefit from design measures to visually reduce its scale.

13. There is a complex elevation arrangement around the riverside service entrance including a remnant of the William Whitfield building and there will be the lower part of the 'turquoise tower' to deal with. The Trust considers this a very important section of the building defining the riverside space and its relationship to Elvet Bridge and needs careful detailing. Although not wholly under Citrus Group's control, the riverside space landscaping needs a holistic solution that will stand up to the pressures of vehicle use and work as an historically appropriate pedestrian attraction.

14. The proposal to 'green' the lower elevation was felt to be a positive suggestion, subject to its appropriate management.

15. We did not view the Boots /Market Place elevations. The Boots façades need substantial repair, and any revised shopfront/hotel entrance will need to incorporate a more appropriate shop frontage as the current one does not match the rest of the elevation. We are not certain of what was to happen to the front elevation of the Next shop, but it is an important component of the Market Place.

THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

16. The proposal to remove the lean-to units on the entrance from the Market Place is an improvement and will provide a more successful entrance providing the new side to the Boots building is redesigned, particularly at ground level.

17. The roofscape will also need careful handling particularly where it is to incorporate solar panels.

18. As an additional point, on the A690 frontage, the slip road, roundabout and car park/services entrances into the development are less than pedestrian friendly and sometimes difficult to cross – this path arrangement would benefit from a pedestrian inclusive approach to resurfacing.

Conclusion

19. In general, the redevelopment of the centre is very welcome, and the design approach has much to recommend it. As noted, the Trust does feel that there are number of more detailed design issues that would benefit from resolution to bring forward a development that will fully and positively contribute to the City's important townscape. There is an opportunity to create a truly distinctive building.

Yours sincerely,

John Lowe,
Chair, City of Durham Trust

Copy to:

Stephen Reed
Development Manager
Planning Development
Regeneration and Local Services
Durham County Council