

London Legacy Development Corporation Quality Review Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: McGrath Site

Thursday 17 June 2015

Level 10, 1 Stratford Place, Montfichet Road, London E20 1EJ

Panel

Peter Studdert (chair)
Andrew Harland
David Bonnett
Tom Holbrook

Attendees

Allison De Marco	LLDC Planning Policy and Decisions
Rachel Gleave	LLDC Planning Policy and Decisions
Hannah Lambert	London Legacy Development Corporation
Deborah Denner	Fortismere Associates

Apologies / report copied to

Anthony Hollingsworth	LLDC Planning Policy and Decisions
Esther Everett	London Legacy Development Corporation
Amy Thompson	London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Shay Bugler	London Borough of Tower Hamlets

1. Project name and site address

'Wickside' (McGrath Waste Transfer Station), Hepscott Road, London E9 5HH

2. Presenting team

Guy Forrester	BUJ
Frank Green	BUJ
Roger Castle	BUJ
Robert Sakula	Ash Sakula
Bridget Snaith	Shape Landscape
Wayne Glaze	Material Architects
Austin Mackie	Austin Mackie Associates Ltd
Sven Munder	Creative industry consultant

3. Planning authority's views

Planning officers attended a pre-application meeting with the design team the day before this review, and are keen to have Quality Review Panel comments on the current proposals.

The planning authority is keen to ensure that the scheme is consistent with the broader masterplan for Hackney Wick, which includes a new north / south route anchored by Hackney Wick Station and connected to Neptune Wharf by a new bridge across the Hertford Union Canal.

Detail of the design for the eastern part of the site will be dependent on the exact configuration of the bridge and its approach, plans for which are still evolving.

It will be important that the proposed mix of uses for the McGrath site complements the planned new neighbourhood centred around the station.

4. Quality Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel has significant concerns about the current designs for the McGrath site. The quality of information presented at the review was not at the level required to make a convincing case for the development of one of the most significant sites in the Legacy Corporation Area. There are many positive aspects to the brief for the site – including the retention of existing buildings, mix of uses and emphasis on cultural industries. However, whilst the panel has previously stated that the masterplan could provide the basis for a successful scheme, the detailed design proposals do not yet achieve this. The panel recommends significant further work to clarify the character of place the development will create, and improve the quality of architecture and accommodation. The panel continues to think that expanding the design team to include other architects would add to the richness and quality of the development. More detailed comments are provided below.

Masterplan

- The Quality Review Panel has previously stated that the masterplan proposals for the McGrath site have the potential to form the basis of a successful scheme.
- At the previous review, the development character was discussed, and the recommended further work to explore this.
- The current scheme provides greater detail on building design and architectural expression, within the masterplan – and this information increases the panel's concerns that a clear and coherent vision for the character of the development is lacking.
- More detailed comments on development character are provided below in relation to the four sub-areas of the site: Wansbeck Square and the Bear's Head Building; Trego Square; the Kelday Quarter; and Pharos Yard.
- The panel also thinks the hierarchy and character of routes through the site requires further thought – for example to differentiate between commuter routes, and leisure routes, and demonstrate accessibility e.g. through provision for taxi drop off.
- The panel continues to think that – given the scale and diversity of the site – additional architects could add to the richness of the scheme.
- Whilst two buildings have been allocated to architects other than BUJ – Ash Sakula and Material Architects, the panel does not think this is sufficient to bring the diversity, and additional skills that will be required for the scheme to be a success.

Landscape

- Landscape design has the potential to be a particularly positive aspect of the scheme, and the panel broadly supports the current approach, but would welcome an opportunity to comment on this in more detail at a future review.
- For example, the panel will be interested to know how the character of each 'yard' differs, and would like to see visualisations that illustrate the quality of the public realm.
- Some preliminary comments on the courtyard / yard spaces in each area of the development are provided below.

Wansbeck Square

- The panel has significant concerns about the design of the Wansbeck Square area of the McGrath's site, and thinks substantial further work will be needed to improve this.
- The layout of the residential accommodation creates very deep units, accessed via long dark corridors, which will not create the best possible quality of flats.
- This layout creates a high proportion of single aspect flats, which will not benefit from through ventilation, and west facing flats may suffer overheating. The panel thinks single aspect flats should be avoided wherever possible.
- The panel also recommends omission of the two storey extension of Block F into the courtyard, as this creates very deep plan accommodation, and compromises the quality of the courtyard.
- The arrangements of uses within each unit would also benefit from further thought, for example the panel questions the decision to arrange ground floor units with bedrooms facing the courtyard, and living rooms and conservatories facing the street.
- If the courtyard becomes an attractive garden for residents, providing living spaces facing onto it would maximise their enjoyment of this space.
- It should be possible for the landscape design to provide sufficient defensible space for bedrooms to be workable towards the street – particularly as this is not a vehicular through route.
- Alternatively duplexes could be designed to avoid bedrooms at ground level.
- The panel is also concerned about the quality of the commercial space facing the A12, which is very shallow in plan, and likely to suffer overheating because of the extent of glazing, and west orientation.
- The noise of the A12 would also suggest large areas of glazing would not be desirable for the commercial building.
- The architectural also appears inauthentic – because of the decision to design each large block to look like several buildings, which does not reflect the internal arrangement.
- The panel continues to think that the proposed block along Wansbeck Road could be improved by fewer changes in height, and a simplified building form. This would be a more honest expression of the internal layout required by its end user.

- If the aspiration for Wansbeck Square is to create a diverse collection of buildings – this could be achieved with a layout including more party walls, and by involving more architects.
- However, the design of Wansbeck Square could be equally successful as two big urban buildings.
- Either approach could be successful, but combining ‘big building’ plans with ‘multiple small building’ elevations is unlikely to achieve high quality architecture.
- The concept of productive landscape in the courtyard is welcome, but this space should be designed to accommodate a wide variety of uses.
- The panel is not convinced by the openings to the car park – and thinks the quality of the courtyard for residents should be prioritised over the quality of the basement car park.
- The inclusion of fairly large scale brewery as part of Wansbeck Square may not be appropriate, in such close proximity to residential accommodation.
- Whilst the brewery could create an interesting landmark, see from the A12, it is also likely to cause environmental health issues that the planning authority will need to consider.

Bear’s Head Building

- In broad terms the panel supports the design of the Bear’s Head Building by Ash Sakula. This provides a creative and characterful response to a highly challenging triangular site, next to Wansbeck Road and the A12.
- The brick elevation facing the A12 has been designed with a random pattern of window openings, with textured brickwork surrounds. The panel think this will have an enjoyable abstract quality.
- However, care will be needed to ensure that the placement of windows still allows views out from the flats – for example by someone who is sitting in a chair or wheelchair.
- A similar elevation is proposed to the North East, which the architects think will suffer from noise, even though it faces away from the A12.
- However, whilst there is an attractive coherence in the design of the building between two fin walls, other options could also be successful.

- For example, it would be interesting to consider how this elevation would develop, if there was greater emphasis on maximising views out of flats, or perhaps building on the concept of vertical greening.

Trego Square

- Trego Square includes an area of land outside the ownership of the developer for the McGrath Site, and also a building to be designed by Material Architects, appointed less than 2 weeks before the review.
- These two factors mean the panel cannot comment in detail on the proposals for Trego Square at this stage, but some general comments are provided below.
- Block B2, to be designed by Material, should be developed in collaboration with the architects responsible for the rest of Trego Square.
- The scale currently proposed for Block B2 seems excessive, in relation to the surrounding development.
- The panel would encourage non-residential use, such as a pub or shop, ground floor level in Block B2, due to its prominent location on the corner of Allamouth Road and Lock Road.
- Block B2 does not seem an ideal location for family units – as the only amenity space it provides is balconies.
- In terms of the broader proposals for Trego Square, the design team will need to show that development within the current site boundary, will not prejudice future development on neighbouring land.
- As with Wansbeck Square, the panel is disappointed by the extent to which the residential layout relies on access via long dark corridors, and single aspect flats.
- The panel is also not convinced of the value of conservatories facing the street – and thinks where possible living rooms should face the courtyards.
- Whilst the masterplan proposes traditional streets to the perimeter of Trego Square, the residential typologies proposed create highly complex building edges.
- The panel thinks that significant further work will be needed to improve the layout of residential accommodation at Trego Square, as well as its architecture and landscape design.

Pharos Yard

- Pharos Yard is potentially one of the most exciting elements of the McGrath development, because of its mix of uses, re-use of existing buildings and canal frontage.
- The presence of an art gallery is welcome, although careful thought will be needed about attracting visitors, to ensure this is viable.
- Servicing and deliveries will also need careful consideration, for example to allow the printers to operate, without compromising the experience of pedestrians.
- Pharos Yard includes the landing point of a future bridge, and the panel would encourage collaboration with the LLDC's design team for this bridge, to ensure it is well integrated into the landscape design.
- A zig-zag ramp is shown to provide access to the bridge – however this would take up a lot of precious waterfront space, and the panel would encourage alternative solutions.
- As with other elements of the scheme, the panel thinks the extent of corridors, single aspect flats and ground floor bedrooms should be reconsidered.
- The panel also think more a more sophisticated architectural response to the retained historic buildings will be needed, for development in this area of the site to fulfil its potential.
- Further information is also needed to describe the character of the yard spaces, and their use – which may contrast with other courtyards elsewhere in the development.

Kelday Quarter

- Well thought out access arrangements will be essential to the success of the Kelday Quarter – which includes restaurants, commercial space, studios and a market lock up, as well as residential development.
- For this mix of uses to work successfully together, careful thought about deliveries, refuse collection and servicing will be required.
- As elsewhere in the development, greater clarity about the character of place that will be created is needed – for example, on Allamouth Road where several different residential typologies line a short stretch of what is intended to be a traditional street.

- Whilst the idea of townhouses with studios at the end of their garden is attractive in principle, the panel does not think these should be designed with access from the open space facing the canal.
- This is the largest public space in the development, and is likely to be used for a variety of activities including informal football.
- In this context, the panel would support design of the studios with blank walls facing the public space, which could support climbing plants, as an extension of the landscape design.
- More thought is also needed about the detail of the landscape design, to make the most of the potential to create an attractive waterside space.
- The panel also support the concept of a walled café garden, which promises to be a quirky space for people to stop as they walk along the canal towpath.

Next steps

- The panel would welcome further opportunities to comment on the proposals for the McGrath site, before a planning application is submitted.
- Given the scale and complexity of the site, scheduling reviews for individual plots, would be helpful to allow full discussion of all elements of the scheme.
- A further opportunity to review the landscape design for the scheme as a whole would also be welcome.
- At future reviews, it may be easier to explain the complexities of the designs for each block with a Powerpoint or pdf presentation.