

Design Review

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**SSE site**  
**53-55 Vastern**  
**Road**  
**Reading**

**SSE site, 53-55 Vastern Road, Reading, Berkshire RG1 8BU**  
**Reference: 1191**

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Report of Design Review Meeting

Date: 24 April 2019

Location: Reading Civic Centre, Bridge Street, Reading, RG1 2LU

**Panel**

Anthony Hudson (Chair), Architecture, Housing  
Robert Rummey, Landscape Architecture, Urban Design  
James O'Callaghan, Engineering  
Annabel Keegan, Urban Design, Transport Planning  
Murray Smith, Architecture, Public Realm

**Also attending**

Timothy Cantell, Design South East  
Jonathan Markwell, Reading Borough Council  
Katy Walker, Berkeley Homes  
James Cook, Broadway Malyan  
Ioana Nica, Macfarlane and Associates  
Eve Ladden Timbers, Barton Willmore  
Rebecca Marshall, Barton Willmore

**Site visit**

A full site visit was conducted by the panel ahead of the review

This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application

## Summary

This scheme shows a keen understanding of the disconnect between town and river – ‘finding the Thames’ - and sets out to resolve it, but has not yet found an effective way of doing so. In this, it is handicapped by having a site with a bite out, since part of the larger area originally allocated for housing is withheld from redevelopment, and as a result the straightforward link south from the new footbridge envisaged earlier is no longer possible.

The panel seeks a rethink of the resultant compromised pedestrian/cycle link through the site to give a clearer and palpably public route to and from the footbridge. The scheme should offer a more legible gateway to the river from Vastern Road, and provide a more inviting route between the two. We see this as a street through the development. The scheme could also do more to relate to the river and should certainly offer a connection at towpath level.

The height and massing are broadly acceptable. The river frontage should be less dominant and more modelling north-south would be helpful, reassessing where the highest blocks are. We doubt that the warehouse typology is set to work well at the height and complexity envisaged; the scheme would better be honest about being residential.

It was good to see this scheme before planning application stage but a review earlier in the process would have made it easier for us to comment on strategic options before detailed work had been undertaken. The panel would be glad to see the scheme again if that was thought helpful.

## Background

This is a proposal for some 193 homes and a cafe. The residential consists of a range of 1, 2 and 3-bed accommodation in a mix of tenures including open market, rented affordable and shared ownership affordable. The application site area is 0.767 hectares resulting in a density of 252 dwellings per hectare.

The site is located to the north of Reading town centre, between Vastern Road to the south and the River Thames to the north. There are two-storey traditional houses to the west and a recent low-rise development of flats facing the river at the north-eastern corner of the site.

Christchurch Bridge, a pedestrian/cycle bridge over the River Thames, has recently been constructed. It connects to Christchurch Meadows and Caversham beyond. Its southern landings, steps and ramp to the towpath, lie immediately north of the centre of the site.

The site is part of the Scottish and Southern Electric (SSE) landholding that derives from the power station here until the mid-20th century. SSE still occupy the eastern part with electrical equipment. The site for development thus has something of a dumbbell shape, with substantial frontages to the river and Vastern Road, but a much narrower neck connecting them – the whole flanked to the east by the retained operational equipment.

The Reading Station Area Framework and the Reading Central Area Action Plan assumed the entire SSE site would come forward at the same time. The location of the bridge was presumably predicated accordingly and an avenue offering a straight connection south

was envisaged. However, it has become clear that part of the site needs to be retained by SSE and such a visibly direct link is frustrated.

The site is allocated by Reading Borough Council for residential use. Requirements include maintaining and enhancing public access along and to the Thames; a high-quality green link from north of the station to the Christchurch Bridge; and development to take account of mitigation required as a result of a Flood Risk Assessment.

There have been no planning applications for this site or the wider landholding in the recent past. The scheme is at pre-planning application stage. Pre-application discussions began in October 2018.

## **Link from Christchurch Bridge**

The panel shares the Council's disappointment that the larger site allocation is not coming forward for redevelopment. We support their insistence on a high-quality link through the site connecting Christchurch Bridge to pedestrian routes to and through the railway station but appreciate the challenge of making this successful on the site currently available.

Even so, we consider the scheme has further to go to meet the need in (a) providing a link legible from Vastern Road; and (b) forming a route that is as attractive and safe as possible within the scheme.

On (a), for someone walking or cycling from the station and reaching Vastern Road, it would be hard to work out where to go next, as the scheme stands. The analysis and aspiration in the scheme to connect the town centre to the river has not yet translated into an effective solution. We call for a bolder approach with a more obvious opening leading into the scheme and on to the footbridge. It should read as a street from Vastern Road, not a minor opening to a courtyard as it appears now. Removing the oversailing units would open views into the scheme and give the route more of a street character.

Bolder use of landscaping especially creating a street-scale volume of trees would give a clue that here is the street/route to take to get to the river. Such a powerful landscaping gesture could continue south to accentuate the route and to fulfil the Council's aspiration for a green route from river to station. The opening on Vastern Road should be seen as a gathering point for people, drawing them in and onward.

On (b), the bifurcation into two parts - one level, one ascending, neither generous - is questionable. The service road tends to recall schemes of the 60s and 70s where vehicular and pedestrian movements were rigorously separated - a concept both outdated and inappropriate here. Safety is pertinent, since a ramped route running south looks likely to encourage cyclists to excessive speed.

We ask for investigation of ways to bring pedestrians and cyclists down to ground level near to the bridge, allowing for a single, level and wider route southward. A single route could be a shared space; or at least its priority made clear.

Servicing of the café would also be somewhat compromised, as delivery vehicles would be required to drop off within the proposed car park, and deliveries transported on foot via the proposed ramp to the café frontage.

The route should offer at least a glimpse of the river for orientation, not be hemmed in by buildings on the riverside. A direct line of sight to the bridge is not feasible but is to the river.

The way the bridge connection runs through a building tends to make the route seem private. If it ran between buildings, perhaps above riverside trees, with a glimpse of a street beyond, then it would be more legible and encouraging for those going south from the bridge.

A single route could benefit from a stronger relationship to the mews housing. It would help the scheme to reflect the north-south grain of the residential streets to the east, countering the east-west emphasis of the blocks.

A ground-level route could have entrances to blocks on it and hence a more street feel (whereas the ramp shown seems lifeless). Views from the ramp into bedrooms would be avoided. Where undercroft areas persist, they should be given a use if possible, such as workspaces.

Should a single route at ground level not be feasible then we'd seek replacing the heavy-handed ramp with a lightweight structure that as it were extends the bridge. It would need to be more than a ramp.

Where and whatever the route is it needs to have some combination of landscape design, art, active frontage, openings, places to linger and other devices to make it attractive and evidently a public, not a private, route. Water (using run off) could be deployed as an animating device bringing life and movement to the route. It could be coupled to a lighting scheme to aid way-finding at night. And a ground-level route could benefit from a bolder landscape design strategy than a ramp, with substantial trees.

The public realm issues could be analysed and explained better with some wider site connectivity drawings.

## **Riverside place**

The relationship between scheme and river, we suggest, misses the full potential of the site.

We are aware that ground-level access between riverside and scheme is hindered by the change of level, but ask that ways are found for the two to connect, without having to ascend to the bridge and down again.

The scheme could enjoy the river by engaging more with the water, giving places where people could watch the activity on the river and enjoy the views – celebrating the glorious Thames-side setting.

The café overlooking the river is a good step in this direction; but there is some way to go to make a place here at the conjunction of towpath, bridge and scheme.

## Scale and massing

Generally, the height, scale and massing of the scheme did not trouble the panel, but we have some comments nonetheless.

The way the scheme addresses the river – picking up the point just made – seems heavy and abrupt. It obliterates views south from the bridge. We've already mentioned a visual link north-south. We hope this frontage could be less cliff-like, and more relaxed and interactive with its setting.

Arranging the substantial quantum in a series of blocks makes sense but we felt the modelling was predominantly east-west, and more variety north-south would be helpful. The tallest element might work better in the middle of the site. It should be given a coherent design approach, losing the box at the top (that makes it seem taller) in favour of something less heavy. Possibly, the tallest tower could exceed 11 storeys, provided the design was of very high quality, becoming a slender and elegant landmark, pre-eminent in the scheme, not peeping a mere storey or two above its neighbours. By increasing accommodation, this might offer relief to the riverside.

The scheme will need to be assessed in terms of both short-range and long-range views. We would stress the views from the town centre, from Christchurch Meadows and obliquely along the river, including Reading bridge.

## Architecture

The panel was not wholly convinced by the warehouse typology. If reference is to be made to the site's industrial past, then a power station has more logic (and the words are shown on the riverside front): at least the large brick blocks might be complemented by some smaller, lighter buildings with more glazing. If the warehouse reference is adhered to, then it would work best in lower blocks on the river frontage, with simpler detailing (currently it feels elaborate for warehousing) and more apt materials.

On balance, it is probably better for the scheme to find its own language. It is very hard to make a typology that works at one level of scale to succeed at this complexity of heights. The extreme verticality of the blocks and the awkwardness of the pitches atop tall blocks make this point. These are apartments and might as well look like apartments.

We did not see elevations for the east of site which would be very visible from the town. This relates to consideration of the future incorporation of the SSE site if it ever becomes available, a possibility not really responded to in the scheme.

Sun and wind studies were not presented, but clearly these are important considerations. Among matters to ponder are the shading of the north-facing public space by the café, the impact of the mews on the existing terrace, and the mews itself from the blocks to the south.

The mews are diminutive for a reason, but the internal elevational height of the mews buildings could potentially be slightly increased, to improve the balance of the site massing, subject to daylighting. We would favour a vigorous vertical rhythm that would help bind the mews into the rest of the scheme.

The panel could accept the loss of the locally listed building: a remnant lacking meaning.

## **Environmental sustainability**

The energy strategy was under-played in the presentation. We heard some suitable aspirations but would have hoped for low energy by design to be more prominent and integrated from the outset. Relying on experts to sort out issues later is not the ideal approach. It was not clear how over-heating of south facing units was to be tackled, for instance. We hope the issue of climate change will impinge on the design in many ways, including the selection of low-carbon materials. Water-source heat pumps would be worth examining.

The number of north-facing units, especially when also single-aspect, is a concern – though we realise some of these will enjoy fine views.

We commend the low parking ratio and consider this to be appropriate for such a central and well-connected location, near to the railway station.

This review was commissioned by Berkeley Homes Western Ltd with the knowledge of Reading Borough Council.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Since the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to the addressee and those listed as being sent copies. There is no objection to the report being shared within respective practices/organisations. DSE reserves the right to make the guidance known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed to remain confidential, this report will be publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application and to any public inquiry concerning the scheme. DSE also reserves the right to make guidance available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please let us know.

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