



thecockburnassociation

Edinburgh's Civic Trust

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27 January 2015

14/05263/AMC - St James Quarter

Approval of matters specified in condition 23 (i), (iii), (vii), (ix), (x), (xi), (xvi) and (xvii) of Planning Permission 08/03361/OUT relating to number of residential/commercial/business units, design of external features and materials, pedestrian and cycle access arrangements, treatment to adopted roads or footways, car parking venting, servicing, surface water and drainage, and hard and soft landscaping details | St James Centre Edinburgh EH1 3SS

The Association has studied this application in detail. We are supportive of the redevelopment of this site which will see the removal of what many consider to be one of the ugliest blots on Edinburgh's urban landscape. The introduction of a bold gallery design in a geometrically pure crescent shape linking Multrees Walk to Waterloo Place is welcome as is the new emphasis given to the approach from Little King Street and potentially in the future from Register Place. We are supportive of the urban design improvement of narrowing Leith Street to something resembling its original building line and with this removing the pedestrian barrier and traffic island down the centre of the street. We welcome the removal of the pedestrian bridge to the Greenside car park, which though of an interesting modern design does considerably impede views up and down Leith Street as well as segregating pedestrians from the street, causing loss of vitality. We would strongly suggest that these improvements are linked by a planning condition to the narrowing of the street which brings about considerable development gain for the applicant to ensure that they do take place and would hope that as part of that the redundant bridge structure might be relocated to provide a crossing point in another part of the city, such as over the Water of Leith or in Leith Docks.

We are also supportive of the re-introduction of a new St. James Square following the grid layout, though not the orientation and dimensions of the original set at an angle to the adjacent first New Town, which creates some continuity with the past. We have (and had at outline stage) mixed views about the introduction of a rotunda building in the square; there is certainly a long historical precedent for such structures working well as urban design set-pieces but there is an equal argument that the whole scheme would benefit from an open space here so that this was a true square of very high quality and, unlike any other square in the city, paved, of intimate scale and surrounded by retail frontages. As for the rotunda building creating a skyline feature on the axis of the George Street vista this was the cause of considerable controversy in 2008 when a so-called glass “gherkin” design was proposed along the lines of a miniature 30 St. Mary Axe in London. At outline stage after public consultation this was portrayed as having been dropped although the bulk massing did remain in the approved floor plan perimeters. We cannot comment on this detail design in this application as it remains as a gap in the drawings, however as part of this design layout we would comment that there is a good case both economically in terms of quality of environment attracting high rents and on aesthetic grounds for there not being any rotunda building at all and, that as a feature breaking through the skyline and compromising the silhouette of the Melville Monument in St. Andrews Square when viewed from George Street and on numerous other vistas across the city, any feature would have to be of the highest aesthetic quality and make an undoubted positive contribution to the skyline.

Edinburgh new town is made up of individual buildings which combine to form city blocks. Servicing is dealt with effectively by service lanes, which allows a clearly articulated public realm, with a strong pedestrian experience. Public and semi-public spaces tend to be located between buildings, framed by buildings, linked by a clearly defined and successful network of streets. This successful approach to place making, which is recognised by the United Nations World Heritage status, is not as evident in the proposals as could be achieved. This forms a fundamental part of the Cockburn Association’s concerns about this development proposal. The current St James Centre is in essence an internalised shopping centre which shows little regard for its surroundings. Such an approach is incompatible with such a prominent location within the city. The development proposals attempt to address some of the recognised concerns associated with the St James Centre, however the displayed approach attempts to create a ‘wall paper’ edge to a large internalised building, rather than reconsidering the building form to address issues already evident in the existing building. The new proposals, like the existing centre, contain a mixture of uses. The existing centre has proved neither adaptable nor flexible. The office block has remained empty for a decade and a half, the upper

level retail element was not successful and has been converted into a spatially uninspiring food court. The pedestrian experience on Leith Street is secondary to that of vehicles, with large vehicle entrances crossing the public realm. The overall inflexibility of the current building is demonstrated by the proposals to demolish it, a process which began only 35 years after its opening. Many of the problems with the centre are shared by the current proposals:

1. Use of limestone instead of buff sandstone as a cladding material

We find this a quite absurd notion that in order to draw precedent from the likes of Primark, various bank buildings in George Street and the red sandstone of the Portrait Gallery (as referenced in the supporting documents) this entire quarter in the World Heritage Site should be clad in limestone so as to declare its modernity and difference. We feel that the designs of the elevations in themselves will be quite adequate in conveying that these are not 18th Century buildings. Much of the story of Edinburgh is to do with under-statement and economy of means, attitudes which gave rise to a remarkable urban fabric of continuity and homogeneity. Unlike any other development project in the city St James is about a whole quarter and trying to repair the urban grain; it is not the place for “standing out”, but for “fitting in”. The statements that limestone is easier to install or that there may not be adequate supply – on a building project expected to last several years – are not convincing. The project could justify the re-opening of a quarry and there are numerous examples in Edinburgh (at Fountainbridge) and in other cities of pre-fabricated concrete panels clad in buff sandstone being used economically and without damage occurring.

We are mindful of the impact any public foyers at higher levels will have when lit up at night, in conflict with the city’s domes and towers but also of the impact exterior lighting will have should this mass of building be floodlit at night. The lighting of the Primark building on Princes Street has been a cause of ongoing concern and we would suggest the need for a lighting design strategy for the whole St James site. Lighting up the white limestone, or the desired sandstone, cladding in some garish hue every night would be most unwelcome.

This point about the materials is crucial. There is plenty of stone, all of Comely Bank was built from Northumberland sandstone, so that must be a pre-requisite. **The Association is strongly opposed to any cladding material other than buff sandstone being used at St. James.**

2. Creating an active frontage on Leith Street

Leith Street leads naturally from north and east Edinburgh to the plateau that Princes Street provides, and is an important connector to South Bridge and south Edinburgh. It is, of course, a street of considerable historical significance in its own right.

It is very disappointing that in a major redevelopment project that will see the existing centre demolished down to its foundations that more is not being done to address the main flaws of this typical 1960's shopping centre design, its inward focus and lack of active frontages facing onto neighbouring streets. With the redevelopment we want to see shop units re-instated on Leith Street, which may require changing the internal vehicular circulation to some degree. The existing arrangement at Leith Street is completely 'dead' and exacerbated by the gaping vehicular entrances for trucks and cars which broadly remain unchanged in the new proposals, despite being portrayed as gated, which would not be their appearance in use. However this issue is not simply about cosmetic appearance and what things look like, but about creating active uses which will generate pedestrian activity. There is potential blight to existing businesses and these need to be retained to create the footfall on the street, and as another connector to the Omni cinema complex and shops.

The proposed vehicular entrances off Leith Street are incompatible with its narrowing and creating active frontages, particularly if vehicles are to enter from the opposite carriageway. We feel strongly that these have to be reworked, perhaps utilising a truck turntable internally, so that all of the entrances are off St James Place and Elder Street where they are not part of a main thoroughfare.

As part of the re-design of this elevation we would welcome the creation of an elevated pedestrian terrace, such as existed historically. This would create another active frontage for shops and could tie in with an external staircase for pedestrians approaching the mall at grade level from the Greenside car park, in lieu of the existing pedestrian bridge.

People approach St James from Waverley and the Old Town via Calton Road and from the Greenside car park. According to the applicant's analysis in 2008, 6% of the pedestrian traffic comes from the footbridge across Leith Street, 17% from Leith Walk (shown going straight into John Lewis, not walking up Little King Street), 22% from Multrees Walk and 49% from Princes Street.

3. Reworking the main “cliff” elevation as viewed from Picardy Place

One aspect of the existing St James Centre is that despite its bulk it is often only seen as part of a glimpse view behind other more attractive buildings. This is not so in the view from the east on Picardy Place and Leith Walk where the broad sweep of the street and the low profile of St Mary’s Cathedral gives an uninterrupted vista of the whole development. The Design Statement claims that this might be mitigated by the proposed hotel if developed on the central space, but long views will inevitably remain because of the road layout. It is clear that the designers have attempted to address this with a set of broadly classical compositions in vertical arrangements relating to the layout of upper floors. These give the appearance of designed frontages to internal uses which they are not – many partly contain fire stairs and other utilitarian features which will be illuminated throughout the night. As for the shopping centre levels, these elevations are to faceless internal service corridors relating to goods delivery so any elevation treatment is disconnected from the interior.

We feel that the elevations on this façade are not successful and need to be re-worked. There is a precedent for such “cliff” elevations in Edinburgh on the meandering elevations to the Water of Leith valley on the Moray Estate at Moray Place, Ainslie Place and further west at Roseberry Crescent. The characteristic of these is a consistent roof-line, a clear expression of the formal geometric line of the front street on the other side, whether curved or octagonal, great height – eight floors is not uncommon – and an ad-hoc ‘un-designed’ approach to window fenestration expressing that these are the backs of buildings, albeit within a homogenous overall pattern.

At the lower levels facing St. James Place the blank shopping centre appearance needs to be addressed and we would like the applicant to consider a thin veneer of single-aspect student housing in this location – it might be little more than 4m deep but it would give the elevations a real content and would go some way towards making this a safe and secure elevation that was self-policed at night. Student housing is the most lucrative development-type outside of central London offices according to industry analysts so despite the minor loss of floor space at the rear of some shop units this should encourage viability. There could be other uses, staff rest-rooms and so on, but we would hope to see design development which gave this façade some content.

Related to this we note the concerns expressed at outline stage in the Environmental Impact Assessment about noxious gasses emanating from the three floors of underground car parking and the risks of venting these at ground level, as proposed now. Apart from the fact that these

ventilators take up considerable wall length on the elevations and are often near proposed seating areas, as on Little King Street, we believe that they are not being used creatively to give the elevations some depth and interest. Edinburgh's New Town skyline is characterised by rhythmically placed masonry chimney stacks and if the air vents from all floors were taken up to the roof of the building these could be a welcome addition to the façade treatment.

The present composition of stepping back roof terraces with feature trees is reminiscent of an Italian hill town. Whilst this is a seductive association it is confused here adjacent to the real Calton Hill. The Association supports green roofs but not the inclusion of trees at upper levels which distorts a reading of Edinburgh's dramatic natural topography.

4. Future adaptability, phasing and losing office use from the quantum of development

A sad feature of the existing St James Centre is that despite its careful planning it became obsolete within 35 years of its completion, yet it is surrounded by 18th Century buildings which have gone through a variety of uses and are still relevant today. Whilst the centre is being re-planned we would like to see some evidence at design stage that different permutations of users have been considered and that, on the valid planning grounds of sustainability the new quarter is future-proof.

We note that the quantum of development has changed considerably from 2008, albeit within agreed limits. The quantum has also changed now from that put forward last May in application 14/02070/AMC. (It appears to be a reduction, though at outline stage there was a caveat that all of the uses would not be built to the maximum and there appears to be a little creative accounting in the discounting of the mall areas and link bridges from the ancillary space total.) The Association is concerned about two aspects of the quantum, first that office uses have been dropped entirely from the scheme yet this is the most highly accessible location in the S. E. Scotland city region and secondly, that a large amount of retail use is proposed against the backdrop of declining High Streets which has been a cause of Government-level alarm, as evident by the Portas Review in England and the Fraser Review in Scotland.

The issue is not about whether the present consultants have assessed the market correctly in what they propose to build now, but how the building as built can cope with the situation if they have not, or if circumstances change. We note that four floors of retail are proposed. This could boost Edinburgh's retail offering or, if demand continues to decline, it could displace shopping from existing locations and cause decline elsewhere, particularly if the mall owner

offers incentives. There is no way to legislate for this, but it is reasonable to ask how the development would respond if demand does not materialise for all floors of retail. Could the upper level of shopping where footfall will be lowest be converted to offices, for example and what would be the implications for windows, fire escape and access, etc.?

With regard to office uses this formed a large part of the economic justification for the redevelopment at outline stage, in the form of permanent job creation. While demand for offices has slumped, this may be a temporary situation and we would like to see a strategy in the quantum of development that sees an element of office use retained in the mix of uses until it has been trialled that no demand (for a situation five years hence) exists. This would dovetail with comments above about adaptability.

We have no concerns about the introduction of a cinema into the quantum of development, but note its location at roof level. Whilst this is a good location structurally to achieve large room areas it is a wasted opportunity to put dark, inherently internal uses on the upper floors where the views and daylighting is best. With reference to the above considerations about future proofing it would be useful to see how the proposed basement structure and floor heights could be adapted to cope with a cinema there, should retail demand not materialise. We would hope to see some building in of future spatial potential to cope with new demands as they might develop.

Lastly, it is a concern that in a building project of such magnitude that will take years to complete and which may be financed in stages, where the benefits of development mostly accrue at completion, with the economic cycle the building may not reach completion as intended. Some realistic approach for phasing should be demonstrated to address the risks to the city and its citizens. The layered nature of the project is such that it has to be built from the bottom up, rather than across the site so phasing should consider what would happen if the project had to be halted at varying heights because of financing problems. Could the retail element be brought on-stream if the housing component was un-built, for example?

5. Achieving some spatial integrity in the gallery design

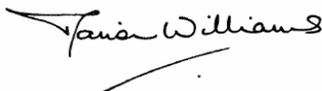
For many users the experience of the building will be primarily an internal one, of which the gallery is a key component. We welcome the Design Statement references to the Victor Emmanuel galleria in Milan and the Gum department store in Moscow, both exemplary designs though very different to what is proposed here in their width and provision of internal open space. We are concerned that the gallery walkways may be too narrow for the footfall

the applicant is hoping to attract and that there is a lack of milling space and clear views of retail outlets on other floors. As an interior space the gallery design will be outwith any planning influence yet it will form a significant part of Edinburgh's urban architecture. We would be hopeful that at this stage some greater commitment could be made in detailed design development to how the gallery will actually appear, covering things like the structure, finishes, handrail design, glass roof, internal views etc.. This is a significant design in itself and it would be helpful to know what is fixed, as in the Galleria in Milan and what is shop front, subject to occupier influence. We would expect that a design framework could be developed with the applicant which could be referenced by the city. At present there is no evidence that the gallery will meet the high aspirations suggested.

With regard to the gallery's users we note the intention to partly close the mall at night, which conflicts with the city's design brief for the site as set out in 2007. Opening the routes at night to pedestrians is desirable but it can only be achieved if there is a safe environment supported by different users, such as the residents above using the mall for access. At present the mall appears to be very much a shopping mono-culture and we question whether it has been integrated properly into some of the other aspirations for the site.

We hope that you find our comments useful in considering the details of this application.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marion Williams". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Marion Williams
Director