

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED MULTI-STOREY CAR PARK, BROOK STREET, CHESTER (APPLICATION 11/03999/FUL)

Chester railway station needs more long-term car parking. The existing car park is inadequate and shabby. However, the proposed structure represents gross overdevelopment and is the inevitably poor design response to trying to cram too many vehicles onto an unsuitable site. It would severely detract from the setting of the railway station, which is a listed building, and from the appearance of an important 'gateway' to the city centre. The location of the structure also pre-empts other options for the use of the site that have been suggested in the One City Plan and ought to be considered in detail. There are other sites nearby where car parking for the station could be constructed less obtrusively.

Introduction

- 1 The Chester Archaeological Society was founded in 1849. From its inception it has campaigned not only for the proper care of archives, archaeology, and historic buildings but for sympathetic, high-quality modern design. Its members are residents of Chester, west Cheshire, the Wirral and north-east Wales and many are 'active citizens' with a personal commitment to the long-term interests of the city.

Background

General

2. The Council has set out the standards by which it wishes to be judged in terms of the architectural quality of new developments in the One City Plan, p 20: 'New developments must be of a quality standard to sit proudly and comfortably within the city's sensitive archeological and architectural environment'. One should also be able to infer from its appointment of one of its members as a Design Champion that it takes the subject seriously.
- 3 The Design Manifesto, section 2 states: 'Other parts of the city, perhaps some of development from the mid- 20th century, are neutral and hardly register in the mind or memory. Yet other parts register as being particularly unattractive, uninviting or jarring or, at worst, even hostile. In recent years there have been a number of developments which, by general consent have fallen short of the level of excellence of design to which the city aspires and which it deserves'. A glance at the maps in the volumes of the Chester Characterisation Study supports this statement and shows just how much of the city is now classed as 'negative environment'.
4. These general considerations should inform all planning decisions, and, indeed, should be emphasised to applicants (and this Society will therefore continue to repeat these points as long as necessary in commenting on development schemes). The city cannot afford any more poor or even mediocre buildings, and it is the responsibility of CwaC (as it seems to accept - in theory at least - in the One City Plan) to refuse permission for their construction.
5. We would also draw your attention to the following timely statements made by the Prime Minister in his letter of 20 September to the National Trust (as reported in *The Daily Telegraph* on 21 September) (italics are ours):

'... the [National Planning] framework insists on high environmental standards and *good design*'.

'*Poorly-designed and poorly-located development* is in no-one's interest'.

'...sustainable development has *environmental and social dimensions* as well as an economic dimension.'

'Our reforms will streamline this [the planning] system, making it *easier for communities to influence the decisions* that make a difference in their lives'.

'Our aim is to secure a planning system that ... *protects the interests both of today's communities and of generations to come*'.

The station site

6. A *propos* of the present site, the Chester Characterisation Study, fascicule H Station Gateway, p 19, lists as a 'key detractor': 'Land at the northern end of Brook Street, north of the Cocoa Rooms - currently occupied by an open car wash and a series of one-storey pre-fabricated shop units. This is a poor environment for this historic street at its approach to Station Road'. On p 21, under 'Summary: Character assessment' it states: 'Station Gateway: Critical - a strong townscape set-piece and arrival point at the City'.
7. Given the status of the railway station as a listed building, Planning Policy Statement 5 is also relevant. Policy HE7.5 states: 'Local planning authorities should take into account the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to the character and local distinctiveness of the historic environment. The consideration of design should include scale, height, massing, alignment, materials and use'.
8. The One City Plan, p 26, envisages a transport interchange on the site in question, with parking on the former Enterprise Centre site. Considerable car-parking is also envisaged in the outline proposals for the Central Business Area, to the east of City Road.

Comments

9. As the Society has pointed out in its response to the One City Plan, *re* the functions to be located on this site - or any other - these decisions need to be informed by a long-term view of the City's needs rather than being driven by individual planning proposals. In particular, the Council needs to think through in detail and decide on its long-term transport infrastructure (bus and coach routes, stops, layover points and interchanges, car parks) before deciding on the location of particular facilities.
10. We understand the short-term advantages and convenience in terms of finance and land ownership that lie behind the present scheme. However, the resulting building would be an eyesore that would be with us for perhaps half a century or more.
11. The proposed development is a classic case of trying to 'squeeze a quart into a pint pot'. The current car park site is awkwardly shaped and the need for light in Archway House precludes the development of the whole of it at more than one level. We understand that the height of the structure is determined by the number of cars it needs to accommodate to be financially viable. The result is a nine-storey tower that would dominate the station (a Listed Building), Station Road, and the wider area with its height and bulk. It would be far too tall to blend with the existing station structures, and too broad in relation to its height to be elegant. Regardless of how the building might be finished, its very size is incompatible with the design aspirations and recommendations set out above. It would not 'sit proudly and comfortably within the city's sensitive ... architectural environment'. It would be 'particularly unattractive, uninviting [and] hostile'. It certainly would not 'make a

positive contribution to the character and local distinctiveness of the historic environment ... through [its] height [and] massing’.

12. In recent years much effort and money has been devoted to improving Chester station, although we would argue that more could still be done, internally and certainly externally. As suggested in the Characterisation Study, it is desirable for the clutter at the western end of the station to be removed, allowing the elegant ramp of Hoole Road Bridge and the adjoining steps to be appreciated. There is indeed the opportunity to create a pleasant entrance to the city for travellers by rail. At a stroke, the proposed car park would undo much of the good work that has been done and create a bleak, ugly environment.
13. We hesitate to suggest a specific alternative site, as we believe (as stated above) that this decision needs to be the result of detailed analysis, but when so much land in the immediate vicinity of the railway station is under consideration for redevelopment, there seems to be absolutely no reason for squeezing a car park onto an unsuitable site where it would be an aesthetic disaster. We believe that it should be possible to accommodate the necessary parking on a slightly larger site with fewer constraints, thus avoiding the need for such a high structure. We look to the Council to take a long-term view of the matter and facilitate any land deals that may be necessary to secure a satisfactory outcome.