

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

NOTES OF MEETING Tuesday 15th May 2012

Agenda and notes (where appropriate) can be viewed at the Council's website at:

<http://www.merton.gov.uk/living/designandconservation/designreviewpanel.htm>

Panel Members Present:

- Councillor John Bowcott (Chair)
- Tony Edwards
- Jon Herbert
- Tony Michael
- Victoria Perkins
- Andre Sutherland

Apologies

- John Fyfield
- Terry Pawson
- Marcus Beale

Not Present

- Sir Duncan Michael

Council Officers Present:

- Paul Garrett

Declarations of Interest:

- Marcus Beale declared an interest in Item 1 (intended to bid for future work)
 - John Fyfield declared an interest in Item 3 (works for owner of the building)
 - Tony Edwards declared a past family friendship with one of the school governors for Item 1, but not considered sufficient to exempt him from the meeting.
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Item 1: Pre-Application, King's College School

Pre-Application – notes confidential

Item 2: Pre-Application, 247 the Broadway

Item withdrawn at applicant's request.

Item 3: Application, Wimbledon Bridge House

The Panel welcomed the plans to improve the appearance and setting of this highly visible town centre building. They noted that it was the start of a process of improving the whole building. Given the prominence of the building, importance of the setting and current exceptionally poor public realm surrounding this part of it, the Panel were particularly passionate that improvements here had to be a step-change and offer no compromise.

A series of minor improvements should only be accepted if a more fundamental improvement was found – after thorough investigation – not to be possible. The improvements also had to be seen in the context of, and complement, the nearly completed major public realm and decluttering improvements to the surrounding town centre, and the fact that the main town centre bus stop was outside the building. These facts and opinions set the scene for the Panel's views and its eventual verdict.

Firstly, the Panel noted that there were a number of improvements it supported in the current proposals, and the thinking behind them, clearly and succinctly explained by the architect. They also noted that the space was a particularly complex area to re-design successfully. Level changes, the emergency staircase, retail frontage and bus stop activity were perhaps some of the key issues.

Comments on proposal

The Panel welcomed the removal of the canopy, the redundant brise-soleil, and the replacement of the railings with high quality glass and steel furniture. Improvements to the quality of the main entrance steps were also welcomed in general, and the attempt to manage the difficult and cramped relationship between the office entrance and the bus stop. There was general support for giving more space back to the public realm and the attempt to declutter and simplify the appearance of the space. There was also good support for the overall improvement in the quality of materials and enhancement of the office entrance area.

The main feature raised as an example of how the current proposals seemed something of a compromise was the replacement of the (well used by all) ramp with a lift (for disabled access only). Although this current situation was seen as an accident of design (and not as it was planned), it nevertheless introduced a degree of inconvenience (having to go down the street then up the steps again), as well as introducing a large new structure into the street (the lift), which itself took up space.

The Panel felt that the applicant should explore the possibility of removing the railing in front of the Next shop entrance, even if this meant introducing some steps or a slight downward then upward ramp, or finding some other solution, as this was a key pedestrian congestion point in the route from the station to the office and shop. The minimal lowering of levels should not reduce effective visibility of the shop-front and would be balanced against increased footfall.

Whilst there was an overall decluttering effect, it was felt that the introduction of two new walls – hiding the lift and escape stair, and in place of some of the steps – introduced a sense of enclosure, rather than the openness being created elsewhere in the town centre with the removal of planters and railings. It was felt that this could create a sense of oppressiveness for pedestrians. It was also suggested that the lift could be on the south side of the steps, as part of the proposed wall, that this wall could be stepped back a bit and include seating for bus passengers.

Suggestions for more fundamental change

The Panel felt it was possible to develop a more elegant solution that achieved more fundamental benefits, and that this needed to be explored first, even if it meant deferring or withdrawing the application. It was felt that this needed to be done in partnership with the Council and be seen as part of the existing town centre enhancements. It was felt that the applicant should see the proposals as part of a wider pedestrian orientated public realm enhancement, rather than simply enhancing the access to their office, and that this should be the principle that guides the development proposals.

It was felt that a solution that tried to achieve the original aim for a level access to the office building, and which gave space to the public realm where it really needed it, should be sought. This meant the 'high level' route to the office had to divert around the escape stair. This required taking a thin wedge of space from the current low level pavement, and the removal of the recently installed (but little used) lay-by. The possibility of this needed to be explored with the Council.

The gain for the public realm and pavement, as well as securing a clear demarcation between the stairs to the office and bus stop, could be achieved by reversing the curve of the steps/proposed wall and removing the circular feature which served little purpose. This could transform it from a bulging convex curve of steep steps to a recessed concave curve, creating a wide pavement where it is currently narrowest and most congested. Although this would give a narrower stair entrance, it would create a clear demarcation of use and possibly allow a stretching of the length of the stair to provide a more comfortable riser gradient. Through negotiation with Building Regulations on Part K and M of the regulations there was also scope to reduce the quantity of hand railing which was seen as excessive.

The Panel debated for a considerable time what was the most appropriate verdict given the proposals put forward and dire need for improvement in this

area. The Panel welcomed the willingness of the architect to discuss the Panels suggestions with his client. The fact that the proposals were at application stage, and that they felt there was the possibility for a much better solution, given time and partnership with the Council, they felt this needed a clear signal to the applicant to pause and investigate this further, thoroughly and in good faith. Whilst this dictated the verdict, the Panel was clear in that it did not wish to discourage the applicant in seeking to improve this part of the town centre an entrance to it's important building.

VERDICT: **RED**