

Report Title: Donside Paper Mills Urban Village, Aberdeen
Issue Date: 3rd December 2007
Client/Developer: Tenants First Housing Co-operative
Lead Designer: Halliday Fraser Munro Architects
Local Authority: Aberdeen City Council
Location: Aberdeen
Planning Ref: A7/0400
Details: Proposals for a Mixed Use Urban Village incorporating 315 residential units and retail, office and leisure uses at Donside, Aberdeen



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INTRODUCTION

This report relates to a planning application for the development of a Mixed Use Urban Village at Donside, Aberdeen, presented at an A+DS Design Review meeting held on 13th November 2007 in Aberdeen. The site is within Tillydrone, one of Aberdeen's futures Community Regeneration Masterplans, reviewed by A+DS in August 2006.

The project was presented by representatives of Halliday Fraser Munro Architects, DEP Landscape Initiatives and the Tenants First Housing Co-operative.

The meeting was also attended by a representative of Aberdeen City Council, Planning and Infrastructure.

A+DS VIEWS

1 General comments

We thank the project team for their presentation. We support the development of an Urban Village on the site, and the vision founded on Regeneration, Place Making and Community. As recognised during the review, there is a good approach to the integrated design of the site, addressing connectivity issues, providing community's facilities, designing a varied landscape and also an aspiration for local energy generation. We feel however, that some important issues should be addressed or refined as described below.

2 Context & connectivity

The site is very attractive, with its dramatic location with steep wooded valley sides on both banks of the river, which at this point runs from a swift-flowing river to a more gently flowing open stretch. We understand that flooding protection measures are already in place for this riverside development.

The isolated nature of the site is an issue and links to public transport connections will be critical to the success of the project. We feel that, with the considerable changes in level across the site, pedestrian accessibility should be improved, not only within the development and adjacent hotel site, but also to the nearby area and University, to provide an effective and enjoyable pedestrian network.

Although not part of this presentation, the possible third Don Bridge and its effect on the road alignment was alluded to during the review. In the event of this new crossing being realised, care should be taken to ensure that any new road relating to the bridge should be considered

primarily as a people-friendly environment with good connectivity across it, rather than a vehicle corridor.

3 Site layout and massing

We support the aspiration to create a place that has its own distinctive identity. However, the proposed street patterns seem to privilege an orthogonal grid laying on the flat platforms already provided in the site. More attention has to be given to the changes in level and the implications of the shading, in particular in relationship to the point blocks at the upper level along the Southwest edge overshadowing the site. The proposed layout does not fully acknowledge the site's unique qualities. The relationship of buildings to the water's edge seems uncomfortable and the changes in level are not fully exploited.

Due to the stage of the project, in which the design of the individual buildings has not developed, we cannot comment on them in detail. However, we expressed in the review perplexity about some of the indicative forms presented. We feel that the design for the crescent building is not adequate, in particular how it and the private external spaces relate to the public spaces, creating issues of privacy and accessibility and boundary problems with areas like the proposed formal garden cottage. The point blocks also raise similar issues.

We would like to see in the design of this project a contemporary approach which will reflect not only the local context of Aberdeen, but also the nature of the site.

4 Public realm

We applaud the clear intention of creating well designed and enjoyable public spaces across the development, and in particular the interest in developing home zone areas. There are, however, areas that need further thinking. The outlined location, layout and enclosures of the proposed village square do not appear to be very successful, as it becomes quite peripheral to the overall development as it stands. Changes, as outlined above, in the buildings' form and layout may justify in the future its present location, if a higher level of density and/or activity is brought to the riverside.

The improvement of public access to the riverside and establishing a pathway network close to the course of the river is to be applauded, but further thought has to be given as to how the buildings will relate to it, and improve the visual quality from and to the riverside area. There are inevitable challenges in balancing public access, flood protection and protection of existing wildlife to the riverside, but also enormous opportunities to create something special for the village.

5 Sustainability

We noted that mixed tenure was proposed and observed that management of common areas of ground would be very important. We are very supportive of the carefully considered approach to the future maintenance of the development, especially considering the large number of existing mature trees in the site, including the ones along the riverbank, protected by a Tree Preservation Order. Issues of durability and maintenance have to be also carefully considered when selecting materials and technologies to be used in the development.

The proposal to adopt the Code for Sustainable Homes is supported, and we note that the project team expect to achieve a code level 4 for the early development with the aspiration that code level 5 will be achieved for the later parts. We will also support the initiative to develop the Hydro scheme to generate energy in the site.

We would like to see the listed building in the site, Don Cottage, and its surrounding areas, more effectively integrated in the overall design, as well as the proposed hotel.

CONCLUSION

We support the development of the site as an urban village, and if all the above issues are addressed, we believe that this development could be an exemplar project, creating a quality living environment and giving priority to the needs of pedestrians. The approach of taking the landscape design as integral to the project, exploration of home zones, using different densities and the possibility of including some work-living units are all encouraged, and we look forward to seeing how the project successfully develops.

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