

Report Title: Mixed-Use Development at Lothian Regional Council HQ (George IV Bridge, Edinburgh)
Issue Date: 5 October 2005
Client/Developer: AMA
Lead Designer: Allan Murray Architects
Local Authority: The City of Edinburgh Council
Location: Edinburgh
Planning Ref.: 05/02094/FUL
Details: Proposal for mixed-use commercial/ leisure facilities development at Lawnmarket/ George IV Bridge (in a Conservation Area and the World Heritage Site)
PDF version:



INTRODUCTION

The project was presented at a Design Review Panel Meeting on September 6th 2005 by representatives of Allan Murray Architects. The meeting was attended by representatives of Edinburgh City Council and Historic Scotland.

Following the meeting, a report dated 5th October 2005 was forwarded to the Project Team and to the Council with the following observations.

A+DS VIEWS

1. Presentation

1.1 The architects were commended for the clarity and thoroughness of their presentation; for their analytical approach; and for the quality of thought that had gone into the design of the building.

2. Existing building and the case for demolition

2.1 The Lothian Regional Council Headquarters, built in 1968 to designs by Sir Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall and Partners, would be largely demolished were this proposal to be realised. The plan was seen as interesting because of the way in which it reinterpreted the pattern of the Old Town. The attempt to contextualise the façades by breaking up the Lawnmarket and Victoria Street elevations was acknowledged. The façade to George IVth Bridge was seen as less successful and the lack of any active frontages to the street was a major shortcoming.

2.2 The architects explained that re-use of the existing building had been considered. After extensive investigations, it was established that structural constraints rendered it inappropriate for conversion into a hotel. Low ceiling heights and differences between internal and external ground levels also imposed limitations on re-use. From the information provided, the Panel was not convinced that all the alternative options had been fully explored and until this was done the case for demolition was not fully proven.

2.3 It was recognised that, within the context of the period, the original architects had to address the same issues that Allan Murray Associates had to consider now. The Panel also agreed that any argument for the building's demolition would have to take into account the quality of its planned replacement.

3. The Public Realm

3.1 The quality of the public realm was discussed. The new building would have a larger footprint than the existing one, with a consequential reduction in the amount of open space in the centre of the site. Although the Panel acknowledged that the existing courtyards were under-used and not particularly attractive, the potential loss of open space was a concern. It was crucial that permeability within the site was maintained and that there were truly public open spaces within it.

3.2 The way in which the building would open itself up to the pavement at ground level was commended and in this respect it improved upon the existing building which presented a solid façade. Although the width of the pavement would be increased to accommodate the extra activity that the open façades would generate, the Panel remained unconvinced that there was sufficient space for pedestrians, particularly where part of the pavement would be lost to a bus and taxi drop off.

3.3 The solidity of the pillars on the corners of the building, both on the George IVth Bridge/Lawnmarket corner and between Victoria Terrace and Victoria Street, was also discussed. They seemed unnecessarily obstructive.

4. Elevation to George IVth Bridge

4.1 The Panel commended the way in which the Lawnmarket and Victoria Street elevations had been articulated. In general terms, they were an appropriate response to their context.

4.2 The elevation to George IVth Bridge was less convincing. The difficulties imposed by the location were acknowledged. There was a lack of clarity in the treatment of the elevations which needed to be addressed. The existing building had been designed with a degree of rigour and coherence which was not out of place within the classical and structured context of George IVth Bridge. In comparison, the complexity and lack of boldness in the current proposal seemed out of place.

4.3 The erosion of the tower elements at ground level seemed incongruous and put into question the whole conceptual basis of the design. The Panel also mentioned the lack of openings in the elevations of the tower elements at the Lawnmarket and Victoria Street 'ends' of the elevation, resulting in blank façades.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Comparison between the current proposal and the building now on the site brought to light many similarities between the two. In both cases the architects had responded to the challenge of designing a building with frontages onto three streets all with very different characteristics, with more success within the contexts of Victoria Street and Lawnmarket than that of George IVth Bridge. The new designs presented active frontages to the pavements, which was an improvement, but the reduction in the amount of open space within the site might be seen as retrogressive. An improved public realm was not yet guaranteed. The design for the new building also lacked the coherence and rigour of its predecessor, particularly evident in the over-complex façades to George IVth Bridge.

5.2 A sound argument in support of the demolition of the existing building remains critical to the success of this Planning Application. It was up to the planning authority and Historic Scotland to establish whether a case for demolition had been made with regard to the condition of the existing building and whether it could be potentially converted for other uses, but the quality of its replacement also needed to be considered as part of the argument. The current proposal showed some promise in this respect, but the shortcomings that had been identified would need to be addressed before it could be considered of sufficient standard to justify the loss of the building which it would replace.