

Appeal Decision

Hearing Held on 24 March 2021

Site visit made on 31 March 2021

by J P Longmuir BA (Hons) DipUD MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 14 May 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/E0345/W/20/3263270
71-73 Caversham Road, Reading, RG1 8JA

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by S2 Caversham Ltd against the decision of Reading Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 191792, dated 5 November 2019, was refused by notice dated 16 October 2020.
 - The development proposed is the demolition of former retail warehouse and erection of a mixed-use building comprising 44 residential units consisting of x5 affordable units, 194sqm of retail floorspace (Use Class A1) at ground floor and associated car parking, cycle parking and landscaping.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. The description of development above is taken from the appeal form which tallies with the decision notice.
3. The third reason on the Council's decision notice related to the absence of a Section 106 agreement. However, this was jointly drafted during the appeal process and the wording was finalised at the Hearing, where upon the Council withdrew their objections.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:
 - the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area and;
 - the effect of the proposal on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset.

Reasons

The effect on character and appearance

5. Caversham Road is a busy and wide main artery through north west Reading, which leads to the town centre. There are wide footpaths along both sides of the road indicating it is a main pedestrian thoroughfare.

6. The site is within a discernible suburban part of Reading, which is west of Caversham Road. To the east is an area of modern commercial buildings on former railway sidings which back onto Reading station and the appeal site is prominent from the train. Northfield Road joins the west side of Caversham Road and the appeal site is on the corner.
7. The appeal site is part of the frontage buildings on the east side of Caversham Road and is segregated from the town centre by a railway viaduct. The frontage has low rise brick warehouse style buildings and an art deco fire station. Continuing northwards, after the Northfield Road junction, the tallest building is a modern storage facility of 3 floors, and thereafter northwards towards Caversham, the architecture is typified by Victorian buildings, two to two and a half storey in height, closely fronting the road.
8. The site is on a prominent corner with Northfield Road, which soon after the appeal site is a residential area. Except for Monmouth Court, an undistinguished modern redevelopment, and the side of the above storage building, Northfield Road is characterised by two storey uniform Victorian terraced houses with elaborate detailing, and small front gardens. The Victorian style is continued west of Northfield Road into the surrounding streets.
9. The appeal site includes two groups of buildings segregated by tarmacked car parking and access. The rear group of buildings are brick, at a height of two and a half storey. These would be retained in their current use as offices, whereas the frontage building would be demolished and replaced with a building of 7 storeys with pitched roofs fronting Caversham Road, dropping to a 5 storey flat roof to the rear.
10. The new building would be substantially taller than the surroundings, particularly in relation to the west side of Caversham Road and Northfield Road where it would appear unduly tall, diverting attention from the street level to a new higher skyline. It would appear dominating and out of scale, more appropriate to an urban centre rather than a suburban location.
11. The perceived height of the building would also be emphasised by its narrow footprint. This would lead to a pronouncedly vertical orientated building.
12. The proposal would drop to 5 storeys towards Northfield Road. However even at that height it would appear out of context. Additionally, the seventh storey element behind would be visible from parts of Northfield Road.
13. The elevations show a distinct ground floor level which would help break up the perception of the height. However, the top two floors would have elongated windows, which would accentuate the perception of height as the eye would follow their long length. Moreover, this effect would be emphasised by window mullions which would be eye-catching details at the highest point.
14. The elevations show that the southern wall of the seven- storey element would be blank. Whilst window outlines would be provided by some reveals, these would offer only very limited relief and interest to the otherwise large and high expanse of walling. Consequently, the building would appear austere and overly dominant when seen from the south.
15. The east side of Caversham Road is allocated for major re-development which is likely to involve some high replacement buildings. This site is the subject of a current application but has yet to be determined. In any event this area has a

different character being composed of large, modern commercial buildings whereas the west side has more traditional style buildings. Caversham Road forms a wide and assertive segregating boundary. This is confirmed by the Council's policy work for the area. Their analysis in the 'Townscape and Planning Constraints', copied in the Icen Heritage and Townscape Assessment, denotes the east side of the Caversham Road as a tall buildings cluster but not the west side. The 2009 Reading Central Area Action Plan shows the rear of the appeal site as a 'transition zone of low residential', whilst major development is only foreseen to the east side of Caversham Road.

16. I therefore conclude that the proposal would cause significant harm to the character and appearance of the area.
17. Policy CC7 of the Reading Borough Local Plan requires high design quality which maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area. The detailed criteria require a positive response to local context and the policy also makes reference to height and scale. Policy EN4 of the above Plan requires that the replacement building draws upon the historical qualities of the previous building. Paragraph 127 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) requires proposals are sympathetic to local character and history. The proposal would be in conflict with these policies.

Non-designated heritage asset

18. The proposal would result in the loss of the frontage buildings, which the Council has recently identified as a non-designated heritage asset, following a submission by the local community. Historic England's Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance 2008 advises on the components of significance: evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal.
19. The existing building has decorative brickwork, a low height with pitched roofs in various materials and notable window openings. It looks like a Victorian warehouse.
20. The site is a landmark due to its corner position, the openness of the street and alignment of Caversham Road. The massing of the buildings is broken into several linked elements which attract the eye, particularly a gable which projects northwards towards the view from Caversham Road. Distinctively large windows on the ground floor address Northfield Road and also suggest an industrial intent.
21. It is evident that the buildings were built between 1871 and 1877 and were designed and built as maltings for the well-known businessman and maltster Dowson. It supplied Simmonds one of the main brewers in Reading who lacked the capacity at the time and capitalised on the demand for barley following the repeal of its taxation.
22. The buildings were only in maltings use for 30 years but brewing was important to Reading, contributing to its social and economic development. Hence the buildings are helpful to show the town's growth and its links to the surrounding countryside which supplied the barley.
23. There have been some alterations to the original buildings. These include a ground floor shop window style projection with a sheet roof, but it is in muted materials and subservient to the front elevation. Some of the windows have been replaced but their openings and the surrounds are intact. Indeed, the

pattern of openings is notable. The roof covering to one part has been replaced by sheeting but that does not detract from a functional industrial appearance and emphasises the broken massing of the roofscape. Part of the rear of one building and the kiln have been lost but the overall shape, form and massing are very evident and readily suggest Victorian industrial buildings. The original use as maltings can be appreciated.

24. The proposal does allow the retention of the rear buildings. However, their setting would be dramatically changed by being adjacent to tall buildings, with no historic connection. Whilst the design is intended to make references to the original buildings' architectural features, the benefit would be denuded by the height of the new building.
25. Architecturally there are similarities between both sets of existing buildings in their height, scale, form, broken massing and distinctive rooflines featuring half hips and full hips. The detailing is similar with cills, arches /window openings, and some painted walls. Furthermore, historically the buildings were part of the same malting operation. Their architectural and historical value is largely as a whole, and the proposal would harm their group value.
26. The historic maps indicate that the building pre-dates much of the residential development on Northfield Road. The repetitive terraces are indicative of workers homes and the industrial buildings at the maltings do not appear out of place. Whilst the building on the corner of Swansea Road/ Northfield Road is permitted for redevelopment, there is a feeling of cohesion and connectivity between the appeal building and the Victorian surroundings.
27. Reference was made by all parties to the brewery buildings elsewhere which show Reading's past, in particular Simmonds at Fobney Street. However, this converted building has an overly fenestrated projecting balcony on its most prominent (eastern) elevation. It is also closely enveloped within an overtly residential looking cul-de-sac. I did not find that this setting evoked much sense of Reading's industrial heritage. In contrast the appeal site is very prominent and has a Victorian industrial appearance.
28. The existing building reflects the values of the Historic England Guidance, in particular, for its historic significance as an identifiable Victorian warehouse, built for the brewing industry and, aesthetic significance for its massing, form and in part detailing, as a landmark on a prominent corner. I therefore conclude that the building has significant significance as a non-designated heritage asset and its loss would harm the historic environment.
29. Policy EN4 of the Reading Borough Local Plan specifically addresses non designated heritage assets. It highlights the need to conserve architectural, archaeological or historical significance which may include the appearance, character and setting of the asset. It states that permission may be granted where the harm or loss are significantly outweighed by the benefits of the development. Policy EN1 of the same Plan covers the historic environment and includes non-designated assets. It seeks to avoid harm in the first instance and if not whether there is clear and convincing justification. Paragraph 197 of the Framework requires that the significance of the non-designated heritage asset is taken into account and a balanced judgement is required. The proposal would be in conflict with these policies.

Other matters

30. I note the submission of the legal agreement, which accords with the Council's requirements to mitigate the impact of a development of this type. It also meets the tests in paragraph 56 of the Framework. The Council at the Hearing stated that this resolved their concerns about the lack of provision for affordable housing, pedestrian/cycle facilities, car club and a skills training scheme. I concur that the submission would satisfy the concerns in the third reason for refusal.

Planning Balance

31. The proposal would provide an economic boost in its construction and indeed the section 106 agreement provides the opportunity of employment skills training. The 44 dwellings would also contribute to housing land supply, although the Council when asked at the Hearing stated that it was meeting its housing land supply requirements, nonetheless that is a minimum target. The proposal would provide 5 affordable dwellings within the development and provide a contribution for provision elsewhere which the Council confirmed could be readily used on their developments. The proposal would make use of a brownfield site, in a location extremely accessible to facilities and services. CIL/recreation payments would be a benefit but to some extent would mitigate the needs of residents rather than be a gain. The proposal would re-create an active frontage which would help vitality and surveillance. However, the carbon emissions saved by the energy efficiency of the new building would be likely to be counter balanced with the loss of the existing. A green wall is proposed but this would be small and have very limited benefit. Cycle priority works at the junction of Northfield Road/Caversham Road are also proposed.
32. However, individually or cumulatively, these benefits do not outweigh the significant harm the proposal would have on the character and appearance of the area and the significance of a non-designated heritage asset.

Conclusion

33. I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

John Longmuir

INSPECTOR

LIST OF APPEARENCES

THE APPELLANTS

Sam Berg	Director of S2 Estates
Tom Vernon BA(Hons) Dip TP MRTPI	Director at Quod
Daniel Rech (BA)Hons Dip TP MRTPI	Senior Planner at Quod
Laurie Handcock MA MSC IHBC MCIfA	Director Icen Projects
Dominic Chapman BA(Hons) BArch RIBA	Partner JTP Architects

THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY

Jonathan Markwell BSc(Hons) MSc LRTPI Principal Planning Officer

Bruce Edgar FRSA, IHBC, M.Phil, M.PIA, MICOMOS B.Arch Conservation and Urban Design Officer

INTERESTED PARTIES

Mary Neale MCIfA

Bell Tower Community Association

Evelyn Williams BA(Hons) ACA MBA Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee

Cllr Tony Page

Reading Borough Council

Cllr Karen Rowland

Reading Borough Council