

Feedback on design of Tottenham Mews and the Network Building, based on pre-application packs discussed 2nd and 9th June respectively.

Network Building

This is a prominent corner site and it addresses different conditions on each of its three elevations. The proposals appear to have been prepared to maximise floorspace and internal flexibility without explanation of considerations given to the context and contribution to the streetscape. The design team should carry out a contextual analysis and provide a more considered justification of the approach to massing and design. A response to the three different conditions needs to be reflected in the design of the building.

1. **Tottenham Court Road** – retail high street with wide pavements and high pedestrian footfall.
 - Context study should look at what are other successful corner buildings on TCR, which buildings engage successfully at ground floor with the street and what can this building contribute as a prominent corner building on TCR?
 - This elevation needs a strong retail base which contributes to supporting the retail character of the street and which provides flexibility of retail space and an engaging and characterful edge to the street. The current proposals fall short of achieving this.

2. **Howland Street** – the east/west connecting street.
 - This elevation needs to make the best of its prominent location by contributing more positively to its two corner conditions. The removal of the Cypress Place break in the frontage provides an opportunity for an unbroken and comprehensively considered elevation which can locate the entrance at various positions along its edge while still remaining highly legible.
 - The inset ground floor may provide some relief to passers-by at the entrance but the characteristics of the area of pavement created are not such that they would be designated as new public open space under policy A2.
 - The office entrance on this elevation provides an opportunity to contribute to activating the public realm but further consideration is required of the location/ number of entrances serving the commercial building and how these would contribute to more successful street edges.
 - The presumption is for retention of existing street trees and the proposals need to take account of this. The removal of the street level plinth and vents is strongly supported, however the building line from ground upwards should not come forward of the line of the existing main elevation.

3. **Whitfield Street** – the side street with narrow pavements and limited activation of the street by buildings on either side of the road along this block.
 - The southern end of Whitfield Street, towards Howland Street, is dark and hostile due to its narrowness and the scale of buildings on either side, resulting in a poor pedestrian environment. This block of Whitfield Street feels unloved and unengaging, a sense that is exacerbated by the secondary elevations presented along the city block. The design response on this elevation must be to enliven the streetscape, from street level upwards.

- Proposals that increase the building height and mass will add to the canyon effect and so measures should be taken to improve the pedestrian environment.
- The draft site allocation local plan document (SALP) and the Fitzrovia AAP talk about finely grained buildings and highlight the opportunity to improve Whitfield St with regular entrances and activity. We are not convinced that the long narrow strip of ancillary office space along this elevation will enliven this façade at street level. See below for more discussion.

Public open space

As advised previously, the closure of Cypress Place as a public right of way and the loss of the area of public realm can be supported in principle where a suitable contribution to improving public open space is provided as part of any scheme. The closure of Cypress Place enables significant improvements in efficiency and value of the building floorplate. We acknowledge the widening of the pavement along Whitfield Street as a positive move, however the building makes very limited gestures towards matching the value of those benefits with a commensurate improvement to the public realm. A re-evaluation is required of how this building can contribute meaningfully to improved street life and quality of public realm.

We discussed the merits of locating the entrance on the corner of Whitfield St/Howland Street as a means towards making a more meaningful contribution to a positive reciprocal relationship between the building and Whitfield Street and we are unconvinced by the argument that was put forward against such a move.

Furthermore, it has not been demonstrated that the ancillary office space along Whitfield Street has the capacity or flexibility to enable animation and engagement to be brought to the street along this edge. The depth of the floorspace provides limited scope for active use, being secondary in scale and treatment, and it seems likely that it may instead revert to being a typical lifeless extension of the office reception. We consider that greater programme/design efforts need to be made to avoid this happening. We remain convinced that it would be put to better potential use as smaller individual workspaces with front doors to the street.

We strongly encourage you to re-examine the core arrangement and look at reducing the extent of floorspace given over to back-of-house functions at this level, with a view to finding a better way of creating useable active space at street level.

Massing and scale

Officers are concerned that the rigour and uniformity of the massing and design expression do not allow the building to respond to the place and in particular the three varying conditions of the elevations.

The existing building (and the massing of the adjoining Qube block before it was redeveloped) has a distinctly cut back scale which mediates with its neighbours. The proposed does not acknowledge this contextual response to the local conditions and needs

further work. The projecting building line of the upper floors along Whitfield Street must be removed so that it does not project forward of the existing elevation line along the block.

Other items: Network building

For future design sessions on the Network Building please provide a set of original scaled existing drawings (including sections and local context and opposing street edges in block plan form) and a matching set of proposed drawings as a separate part of the advance pack. We need a higher level of detail than is provided in the slide format in order to provide fully considered feedback.

14-19 Tottenham Mews

Context

- Charlotte Street CA, Howland Street Character Area.
- Positive contributors: Tottenham Mews 6- 12 (consec)

Surrounding townscape

From Charlotte Street Conservation Area Appraisal:

The Mews Areas

6.37 These quiet streets are characterised by narrow entrances, sometimes beneath buildings, shared, generally cobbled surfaces and a range of commercial uses within former mews properties or subsequent 19th century workshop buildings. The interest in the buildings is in the retained large ground floor doors and small scale of the mews buildings, the large workshop windows, the doors at upper levels often with hoists that would have enabled the delivery of materials, and the retained surfacing. The roofs of the buildings are generally concealed by a parapet. Charlotte Mews, Percy Mews and Tottenham Mews all retain some interest in their more humble commercial buildings. The prefabricated buildings on Tottenham Mews detract from the overall character of the street.

The mews is made up of predominantly brick buildings, fenestration has horizontal emphasis, large openings - doors and windows at ground floor. Character of mews is of a hardworking ground floor that has a direct and open connection with the street. As with the Network Building we expect to see a contextual analysis and more details about how the design responds to the immediate characteristics of the mews.

Scale/massing

Overall the scale and massing of building is generally acceptable. The flatter façade is more fitting with the mews character than the illustrations in the previous iteration.

Street engagement

The improvements to the width of the link to Bedford Passage are welcomed, however more needs to be done to the street level interaction with passers-by.

From a design perspective our strong preference for the site is the option containing the basement, which allows for a more active ground floor and engagement at the passage end. For the same reason our preference is for the two ground floor flats to be modified to provide individual front doors to the street. We would also welcome the exploration of alternatives to locating the substation on the street elevation.

Design response/materiality

Brickwork is characteristic of the conservation area and mews and is considered an appropriate response. A continuation of the brickwork to ground level would be more in keeping with the mews character, whereas the stone base brings a degree of refinement which does not sit so well in the context.

The design uses a strong grid and rhythm with a regular fenestration pattern which reinforces the sense of the building as a single entity. The grain of buildings in the mews is more irregular and we would like to see this characteristic translated more into the design. The elevation grid explored in the pre-app pack indicates horizontal and vertical datums and patterns but doesn't explore grain. The plot is more than twice the width of the next largest building and has the potential to dominate the townscape in the mews.

We discussed the possibility of adding more irregularity at roof level to help break up the apparent size of the building, although this may not be sufficient to achieve the required change. Other options may present themselves as part of the context analysis.

We consider that the ground floor would benefit from additional prominence in height. Changes to its arrangement and materials may also support more vertical connection between the ground floor and the levels above, which may help with breaking down the singular sense of grain.

We discussed the use of more traditional roof materials for the top floor cladding.

Other items: Tottenham Mews

We await details of the assignment of homes on the Mews to Intermediate/Social Rent so that our Affordable Housing development co-ordinator can provide feedback on the suitability of mix, commentary on layouts and accessibility etc.

We would welcome the opportunity to review the daylight data which underpins the general conclusions in 3.15 of the pack. We wish to see the daylight data for the proposed homes.

We need to see more consideration of sustainability, in particular a response to local air quality and a system of sustainable drainage. Please note that the policy emphasis on SUDs solutions expects measures such as green roofs and swales/rain gardens to be explored before subterranean holding crates.

Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee (BCAAC) have provided comments on the draft SALP wording for the Tottenham Mews building. The CAAC is an important local stakeholder and we strongly urge you to make contact and engage with the CAAC before

the next design meeting so that they have an opportunity to contribute to the design at this early stage.

Gavin Sexton
19 June 2020