

# **SOUTHWARK DESIGN REVIEW PANEL REPORT**

## **15 JANUARY 2018**

(Confidential in advance of a Planning Application)

**Chair:** Toby Johnson

**Panel Members:** Artur Carulla; Jonathan Clarke; Niall Monaghan; Deborah Nagan; Steve Webb

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### **Ruby Triangle**

Architects: Farrells

Applicant: Avanton

Planning Consultant: GL Hearn

#### **Project Description:**

This proposal is for a comprehensive, residential-led mixed use redevelopment of the site. Ruby Triangle falls within the allocation Old Kent Road Sub Area 3 within the emerging Old Kent Road (OKR) Area Action Plan (AAP). The proposals are informed by extensive pre-application discussions with LB Southwark (LBS) Planning and their masterplanning team (Stitch Architects) and seek to meet the aspirations by:

- Creating 'Tier One' tall buildings – including a 46 & 38 storey towers;
- Providing around 1,200 high quality new homes – including 35% affordable housing;
- Replacing existing commercial accommodation and reinstating retail frontages to OKR - offering modern, flexible retail and employment densities and incubator hubs;
- Providing a new high quality public realm – including a new park; and
- Providing a new community sports hall for Old Kent Road – providing four full-sized courts.

It is envisaged that the proposed development will create a new piece of central London, with the tall building elements considered to reflect the direction of the OKR AAP.

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The Panel welcomed the opportunity to review this important scheme in the Old Kent Road Opportunity Area. They thanked the Applicant for their clear presentation and noted that they had been briefed about the main principles of the recently published Old Kent Road Draft AAP. The presentation included a brief history of the site, existing land uses and ownerships, the current urban and historic context, the strategy for height across the site, ground and basement plans, general arrangement plans and cross sections and a brief outline of the proposed materiality for the lower buildings.

The Panel investigated:

The extent of basement

Degree of visibility – key views were not presented

Quality of the streetscape and proposed pavement widths on Ruby Street

The current nature of Ruby Street

The future masterplan for the neighbouring AAP sites

Location of car parking

Cycle storage

Main access points to the towers

Micro-climate and wind impact

The urban rationale for the towers, their proposed siting and their heights

How this proposal relates to the linear park

The distance between the towers

The options tested for the design of the sport centre

The active frontages onto the central green space

The implications of the current design on the neighbouring site

The dual- aspect units

The percentage of single-aspect units

How the tenures would be distributed across the site

The communal amenity space

The phasing strategy

The detailed design and materiality of the buildings

The Panel acknowledged that this was a challenging proposal on a key site in the Opportunity Area and they acknowledged how the design has tried to respond to the principles set out in the AAP. However, they raised a number of fundamental issues with this proposal, its urban rationale, public realm, technical justification and quality of design. They invited the Applicant to return to the DRP when they had addressed their concerns.

### **Tall Buildings**

Whilst the panel noted that the AAP identifies areas of higher density around key nodes on OKR and the site is on the edge of one of these, they questioned whether this justified buildings of the scale proposed, and whether the site was able to accommodate buildings of this scale. They noted that a key justification for buildings of scale is that they should deliver key public benefits and exemplary design. The panel questioned whether either of these are being met with the current design.

### **The context**

When they considered the relationship of this proposal to its context (both in its current and future state) the Panel stressed the importance of the existing streets, spaces and places immediately around the site. Whilst the Draft AAP masterplan studies may offer a crystal ball view of the area, the surrounding streets will still be the main ways to access and appreciate this site both in the shorter and longer term. Added to that, a proposal which includes two substantial towers should be accompanied by exceptional quality of design and urban design. In order to demonstrate its exceptional quality of design and demonstrate the need for the towers in this location the Panel expected to see a detailed and thorough urban rationale for the proposed urban form and heights in order to justify a 42-storey and a 38-storey tower on this site. This should be a ground-up approach and include a narrative for the streets, the places and spaces, the townscape views, connections and desire lines in the immediate surrounding areas and a clear understanding of the existing context from the Old Kent Road itself to the wider residential district to the north and even London-wide.

### **The public realm**

The Panel highlighted the contribution of the public realm to any scheme that includes tall buildings. In this case the public realm starts at the main street frontages on the Old Kent Road, Sandgate, Ruby and Hyndman Streets. Beyond the street frontages, the design of the public realm should extend to the new space created at the centre of the site – currently proposed as a ‘green heart’ – in order to demonstrate accessibility to the public, its quality of design and its sense of purpose. Assuming the logic of the draft AAP, the success of the public realm will rely to a large degree on the quality of landscaping, the generosity of its proportions relative to the proposed height and the way it is used by the public. The size and proportion of the public realm, both on the street frontages and in the centre, will affect how the proposed blocks and towers are experienced at street level. The Panel

raised substantial issues over the quality of the quality and generosity of the public realm and asked the Applicants to develop this further and to demonstrate with plans and cross sections how these important public spaces will be used and experienced.

### **The existing buildings**

When they considered the approach to the two existing retained the Panel felt they added charm interest to the proposal. These buildings are located on a primary frontage and access route to the site from the Old Kent Road. As such these retained structures should be considered, not only in the context of the elevation of Old Kent Road frontage, but also as an integral part of the public realm in and around the site. The Panel asked for more information about these buildings and how they will be integrated into the proposal.

### **Ground Floor Uses**

In respect of the ground floor uses the Panel questioned the fragmented nature of the design and the distribution of the commercial uses. They felt the arrangement and distribution of 'artist' studio space felt like an after thought, and could struggle for suitable occupants if it is not consolidated in one location, is bright and airy, and demonstrates that it responds to the needs of the end-users. They asked for a robust and convincing strategy for the marketing and use of this space as well as more information about its detailed design to better understand how it will relate to the street scape and the public realm. The panel did not accept the architect's assertion that the sports hall would animate the public space – the combination of the need for rebound screen and the requirements for safeguarding will lead to views in and out of the sports hall being obstructed. In addition to this the Panel commented on the predominance of car parking and service spaces on the ground floor facing both the street and the open space which, together with the sports hall, could present large expanses of inactive frontage, affecting the quality of the public realm. They were not convinced that these service spaces and uses could not be accommodated in the basement including the footprint of the buildings.

### **Technical studies**

The Panel raised a detailed issue in respect of the technical studies that have informed the design which had not been presented to them. They asked the Applicants to ensure that studies into the sunlight/daylight and wind and micro-climate impact of the proposal both on existing and future occupiers as well as the public realm are prepared and presented to them. This is especially important in relation to the public realm around the base of the two towers and Ruby Street. The modelling should include the current and possible future position as set out in the draft AAP masterplan.

### **Architectural design**

In terms of the detailed architectural design the Panel were not able to endorse the proposal. They raised significant concerns over the initial design for the block on the Old Kent Road. As a key building on the Old Kent Road the proposed design lacked distinction and composition to demonstrate how it has responded to its context. This is especially evident in the large blank flank at the prominent corner with Standage Street. They were not able to comment on the design of the linear blocks on Standage Street and Ruby Street because these had not been presented in detail. The presentation included very little information about the detailed design of the towers, their materiality, plan-form or architectural composition. Beyond the rationale and justification for the proposed heights (raised above), the Panel raised significant concerns that these substantial tall buildings had not demonstrated their quality of design.

They also raised significant concerns over the quality of the accommodation and in particular the predominance of single-aspect units (currently 50%) and the unacceptably high level of single-aspect north facing units (currently 8-9%). They asked the architects to

present the detailed flat layouts and to demonstrate how they will meet and exceed the minimum Residential Design Standards.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Panel were not able to endorse this proposal. They feel that high rise, high density developments of this kind have a substantial impact on their urban setting, and as such need to pass a higher threshold in terms of assessing what this impact is, mitigating any detrimental effects and enhancing the environment. The panel are also concerned that part of the 'green heart' that is being proposed as a key public benefit of the scheme, falls outside the site boundary, and that there was little assessment of the character and nature of the existing streets that bound the site. In the absence of this higher threshold and more rigorous scrutiny of high density schemes, the panel fear that the AAP will be used to justify opportunistic and piecemeal over development of small sites, with each proposal leaving future developments to provide the public realm strategy and improvements that are required to support such high density schemes.

The Panel felt that a lot more needed to be done to justify the proposed height, scale and arrangement; the nature and quality of the public benefits that could be delivered; and they raised technical and detailed design concerns about the impact of the proposal on its context and future occupiers. The Panel challenged the Applicants to review their proposals and to address their concerns and invited them to return to the DRP in advance of a planning application.