



Comments on Councillor Gottlieb's Alternative Approach Paper of 5.11.14

by the City of Winchester Trust (using his headings)

Introduction

The paper is of course right to stress that Winchester is a modern town with a historic past, but it is very important that while respecting the past we embrace the future because this is what the City has always done, making generational change one of its most significant characteristics. No previous development has endeavoured to copy the past but has used the prevailing style of design in its own way. Like the designs or not, the proposed Silver Hill is neither "mundane" nor "commonplace"; it is a very special and striking new development cleverly related to the past by one of the country's leading architectural practices. (Education Architect of the Year and Masterplanning Architect of the Year at the BD Architect of the Year Awards 2014.)

It is also quite true that re-development of a central area on this scale has never arisen before in Winchester, which means that there is no precedent for how it should be done, and it is therefore bound to be controversial whatever the solution. It is easy to dream up nice ideas, but it is a dream in itself to imagine that all would ever agree on how it should be done. The suggested process of involving both experts and public, has been going on for nearly 20 years and there has been plenty of opportunity for all concerned to get involved if they wished.

Alternative Uses

Every one of the suggestions in his paper is an appealing idea, but are they realistic on the most expensive area of land in the City?

1. A permanent indoor market - this kind of market is not characteristic of English towns the size of Winchester probably because it is impossible to have them full of traders and customers every day of the week, which is what would be necessary for them to pay their way.
2. Small independent and artisan shops - is this all the shops or just a proportion? Would they be able to afford the high rents, and if they were, would they not be far more likely to undermine the existing shops in Winchester than what is proposed?
3. Serviced offices and low-cost space for new businesses - do such uses ever occur elsewhere in expensive new buildings on city-centre sites?
4. A boutique hotel possibly within the Woolstaplers' Hall - is this building likely to suit the very demanding requirements of the 21st century hotel trade without a complete internal re-build?
5. Restaurants and cafes - of course, just as there will be in the proposed development.
6. An archaeological visitor centre - sadly the English Project, a very exciting prospect, has been unable to fund a centre in the Woolstaplers' Hall and it is very doubtful if archaeology would be any more successful so it would require public funding.
7. An art gallery/multi-purpose venue - such things need very generous initial and continuing funding; in this case, from whom?
8. Outdoor performance space - funded by whom?
9. More civic amenity space particularly alongside the river - the space is already there along both sides of the river.
10. Integrated bus facilities - they are to be integrated although not in a bus station.
11. A renewable energy exemplar - it is intended that Silver Hill will achieve exemplar status by using combined heat and power; it would probably be difficult to use this site to generate adequate renewable energy.
12. A substantial number of dwellings - currently 177 without affordable housing, but if the government continues to allow lack of viability as an excuse to omit affordable housing, but would the suggested 50% be possible here in any case?

Architecture

The success of the project will certainly depend to a large extent on the quality of its architecture. Vitruvius defined the qualities of architecture as "firmness, utility and delight": buildings must be

structurally sound; they must serve their allotted purpose efficiently; and they must give delight. The quality of the first two with such architects as these can be taken for granted, but how about the delight? It is inevitable that some will like the buildings and some will not, and those that do not are unlikely to agree on an alternative that would work for this site and these uses. It is important to remember the uses because, for example, the Georgian architecture that is now loved by all (although this has not always been so) would have to be pastiche to suit a 21st century commercial development of this kind. So who, apart from the Trust Council, has assessed and generally approved of the design (subject to criticisms most of which have been met)? The Local Planning Authority, English Heritage, the South East Design Review Panel, the County Panel of Architects, and an unknown number of the public - hardly all those who are not objectors, of course, but presumably a good many of them. In other words, those who object must not assume they are the only people who know what is right for Winchester.

The question of small plot scale we agree to be important, and in our opinion this has been achieved by the architects without resort to pastiche, but we cannot agree that the development should attempt to appear incremental or that the street layout should be far more intricate and irregular. The proposed layout is already closely modelled on the very logical street pattern of the old city, with the exception of Friarsgate which is an example of bad twentieth century urban design that will be very greatly improved by the development.

Site constraints

Of the buildings suggested in this paper for retention, both the present Sainsbury's and Coitbury House are without architectural merit at best, but we too are sorry to lose the Antiques Market and the Oxfam building, but neither are buildings that should dictate the form of the development. Cross Keys Passage is unpleasant as architecture but a useful and interesting short cut; its role will become far more important and more heavily used so it needs to be wider, it will however be narrower than a street, and the exposure of the jettied east side will be a bonus.

The river itself is not part of the development site. The two streams running through the development area seem at first sight to have enormous potential. But they run well below the present ground level as can be seen where their source is open on the other side of Friarsgate, which makes them potentially dangerous in shopping areas and unattractive with the safety barriers that would be necessary. The present plan in the pedestrian area is to raise running water to street level, hopefully with ram-pumps that use the stream's own energy, and to expose the other stream at its natural level where conditions permit. Even so there are difficult health and safety measures to be met.

The Trust has persistently argued for a more active Friarsgate frontage than possible in the first application and inadequate in the initial Henderson scheme, to which their response has been good. There are now shop windows, a restaurant and the bus ticket office and waiting area fronting onto the road. There will also be high quality paving, bespoke bus shelters and tree planting. Moreover, the scheme includes (if the highway authority permits) pavement level crossings to the other side of the road.

Archaeology

This area is bound to have a wealth of historical remains below the ground, indeed most of this part of Winchester is built on a thick crust of previously demolished buildings overlaying the soft earth of the flood plain, and to display what is there might use most of the site, meaning that little of the area could be developed unless 'bridged' by the new buildings at enormous cost. With the Brooks Centre the ground was excavated to provide underground car parking, destroying the past. We understand that in accordance with the latest archaeological practice, the remains will be expertly surveyed and recorded before they are re-covered. A permanent exhibition of what is found would be very welcome if funding can be arranged.

Residential Use

If 40% affordable housing isn't viable on this site and the government therefore allows it be located elsewhere, what chance the suggested 50%? Besides, is so-called affordable housing what is needed in the very centre of the commercial area where it can be priced at 80% of market value, making nonsense of the word 'affordable'? It would be far better if funds derived from developer contributions and the

government's New Homes Bonus, could be used to create genuinely low-cost housing on a less expensive site or sites, but still within easy walking distance of the centre.

Retail

The proposed retail space is about 25% of Winchester's total retail floor area. Expert opinion varies on whether this is too much or not in the circumstances, but it would seem odd if the City's retail consultants and Henderson were wrong, especially as the latter intends to retain the freehold of the shops. However, the Trust's expert advisor believes a mistake has been made in the calculations and we have asked that this should be independently assessed and resolved before the scheme is determined. Opinion also varies on whether the new shops will help the City's existing shops or draw trade away from them. It is unlikely that those most concerned, the small retailers, will suffer from this type of competition, and the attraction of the High Street is unlikely to be diminished.

The Brooks

The enclosed cul-de-sac shopping experience of the Brooks Centre is not comparable as an example, and we have always held that it was a mistake for a town like Winchester where the shopping ambience is one of narrow open streets as is proposed for Silver Hill. We hope it will not be too long before the Brooks Centre is replaced!

Bus Station

When the Silver Hill regeneration was first proposed, there were many who said it was the wrong place for a bus station and that a proper transport interchange should be planned adjoining the railway station. The regrets of those who have used the bus station for generations is understandable, but transport technology is changing, and we are asking the authorities to investigate an integrated system that serves all the travelling public in the best possible way while the Station Area regeneration is at a formative stage.

Parking

Car travel is part of the transport challenge. In the years of demolition to make way for urban road improvements the Trust coined the phrase "traffic must adapt to Winchester, not Winchester to traffic" and most would now agree. Private car travel is part of the equation that must be taken into account in an integrated transport system, but it does not follow that it can only be accommodated by large central car parks. The congested central area traffic that is convenient (if frustrating) is also extremely unpleasant for a shopping and residential area, apart from creating illegal levels of pollution as it does now.

Practical Considerations

We are very surprised by the suggestion that WCC should add commercial development to its portfolios. It has neither the time nor the expertise, let alone the financial resources, all of which would have to be initiated from scratch in a new department. As it is, the Council struggles to meet its existing commitments with the present level of government funding. This is another dream solution.

Conclusion

So, although the Trust would always defend his right to object, we believe that Kim Gottlieb is peddling unrealistic dreams.