Background

Elected members and officers at Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) explored issues relating to commercial edge of centre developments in medium sized towns and villages to inform future decisions in the Borough, with a focus for this event, on Leatherhead. The outcomes raised themes of re-use, sustainability, appropriate development form, movement and permeability, importance of the site to the town, the changing role of supermarkets as regeneration players, and enabling development for mixed use schemes.

The Building in Context Toolkit is an English Heritage South East regional initiative to help deliver better design solutions in historic areas across the South East. The event was organised by Kent Architecture Centre as part of the development of the Toolkit and facilitated by Tony Ingram, South East Regional Design Panel Member with contributions from Cllr. Tony Moore (MVDC); Clive Smith (MVDC); Nigel Barker, English Heritage (EH); and David Exeter, Aukett Architects.

Building in Context guidelines conclude that successful architecture can be created using various approaches: by following historic precedents closely, by adopting them closely, by adapting or by contrasting with them. Case studies chosen to inform this seminar broadly follow the latter two approaches to reflect the diverse nature of the site’s surroundings. The following case studies and conclusions arising point to certain lessons for all involved in planning applications. Proposals will need to be considered from a number of different aspects including design quality as an integral part. As Lord Rooker said in the House of Lords on 25th March, ’without proper attention to design, we will not deliver sustainable development’.

Introduction

‘Sustainable development of historic areas, reusing what we have already and at its best, not losing anything of significance that future generations would value’, was the message from Nigel Barker. Local Authorities can insist on good architecture, and guidance on how to go about this is plentiful from ODPM, EH and CABE, refer to panel left. The functions of these organisations overlap on new interventions in the historic fabric, in seeking good design and questioning what makes a place.

The Ludlow supermarket case study in particular demonstrates how skill and care can introduce large modern structures within the grain of historic buildings and that sensitivity to context and the use of traditional materials are not incompatible with contemporary architecture.

The Hereford restaurant is a clear case of good architecture generated from difficult sites. Developing the site as warehouses would have been more visually obtrusive and an opportunity missed to contribute to an important view of the Cathedral.

The huge changes in the nature of supermarkets were outlined by David Exeter, who charted their development from grocery sales outlets through to supermarkets as destination points and regeneration catalysts in partnership with others.

That good design does not stop at the front door; but extends into public areas beyond the building is a point well made in the case of the South Thames College partnership with Sainsbury’s, that animates the public frontage, as does the Ludlow example.

Discussions on site context, facilitated by Tony Ingram with contributions from earlier speakers drew on lessons from these case studies and the audience’s experience that ranged from poorly designed commercial development spoiling an important town approach, to a scheme that responded to its context in replicating a form of a natural landscape feature.

Case studies: Wandsworth

Landowner South Thames College partnered with Sainsbury’s to provide a mixed use development of a supermarket with 23 teaching rooms, learning resource centre, café and creche and has further been used as a key part of the revitalisation of this town centre. Winner of Wandsworth Council Design Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Borough.

Hereford

Detailed analysis of the evolution of the surrounding area informed the eventual shape and massing of the development to reflect the historic parallel rows following natural contours leading to the river (see etching). This enabled a design solution maintaining the view of the Cathedral and pattern of the surrounding development, providing a positive and imaginative response to the constraints of the site.

Ludlow

Contemporary materials, large footprint and form of the supermarket counterbalanced by incorporating elements drawn from site context: traditional materials, laid in a local bond; rhythm of existing street facades continued in the projecting two storey element that also signals presence of the building in the High Street: wavy roof attempting to imitate curves of the hills in the background setting and reduce bulk of the building.
The case study

Leatherhead’s Bull Hotel/Lidl site was chosen as a topical case study as such sites are relatively common and lessons can be replicated elsewhere within the district and the wider region. Similarly the need to accommodate large scale development in a medium to fine grained settlement and the global drive for more mixed use and sustainable patterns of new development are common issues faced by many towns.

Edge of centre sites in smaller towns can often be more prominent than their size initially suggests as, by their very nature, they are close to through routes or transport nodes, and can therefore be signifiers of a town’s quality to present and future investors and residents.

Development background

The former Bull Hotel site is adjacent to Leatherhead Conservation Area and was cleared through a notice issued by MVDC. Local Authority encouragement of a well designed mixed use scheme resulted in receipt of a planning application for a hotel with supermarket below and associated car parking. When the proposed hotel located elsewhere in the town, the design of a new scheme solely consisting of supermarket premises with parking, was not supported by the South East Regional Design Panel, although the operator, Lidl, was commended on attempting to achieve something beyond the standard ‘brick bungalow’.

Context

Addressing site gradient successfully is important, so new development responds well to its surroundings. Addressing the public realm, of pedestrian and road to the front and flank of the site is a key issue. The road junction in front of the site is a very poor urban space and the possibility of removing most of the signage at this junction and re-surface using different materials should be investigated.

The position of the site on the one way system and between the town, river and railway station, at edge of centre, ensures this site has a role of welcoming people into the town and any development will influence perceptions of the town. Living over the shop is characteristic of the town. New development within the town looked good when first completed but the materials have weathered poorly: quality and durability of materials for new buildings need close attention. Views into and out of the town can be obtained from surrounding countryside and add value to the town’s appeal.

Aspirations for the town and site

Sustainability of development of this site in the context of the town, for its economy and residents, is a key defining principle for new development.

The town’s needs were identified as: car parking close to the centre; a low-cost shopping outlet which doesn’t mean poor quality development; more housing and affordable housing close to centre that can be an economic generator for development on site not just about planning gain; and things for people to do.

There is a need to reconcile, in terms of site planning and economic goals and other public aspirations such as placemaking and to back ‘idealism with pragmatism’. Having regard to the case studies and the audience’s experiences of development from elsewhere, caution should be exercised to not allow development that downgrades quality. New development should be encouraged that will enrich Leatherhead and the lead can be provided by the Local Planning Authority through creation of a Development Brief.

Emerging guidelines

Emerging guidelines for the site emphasised the need for:

- Quality in new development in recognition of the impact the site has on perceptions of the town.
- Well designed sustainable development that contributes to surrounding townscape and countryside.
- People and vehicle movement and quality of public realm maintained and enhanced.
- Equal treatment of all facades that respond well to gradient.
- Mixed land uses providing activity outside usual retail hours and meets local needs.

The way ahead

A development brief for the former Bull Hotel/ Lidl site informed by the outcomes of the seminar.

A massing study to explore options for site development would inform future decisions and allay concerns of lack of visual enclosure, bulky development creating a canyon effect, framing views of countryside. The study could be carried out independently or as part of the contextual study for a planning application.

A thorough Context Study to support proposals.