

09.11.2023

Dear David and Team,

Design:Midlands Design Review Panel – Thursday 26th October 2023
Design Review of Fulbeck Heights – Fulbeck (Our Ref: DMDR2334)

We write following the Design Review of Fulbeck Heights near Fulbeck and would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your team for utilising the Design:Midlands Design Review Service.

The Design:Midlands Panel members reviewing the scheme were Nils Feldmann (Chair), Alina Hughes and Lindsey Wilkinson adhering to the ten principles of Design Review.

Site Context

The site is irregular in shape. It is bounded to the east by the client's business (Vibraplant) and Pottergate Road which connects to the A17 to the north. To the south in part by an area of woodland, open landscape and a Public Right of Way (PRoW) which connects into Fulbeck. To the west by open landscape. To the northwest by the village of Fulbeck which is within a conservation area and comprises numerous heritage assets. To the north by a mature hedgerow, Holly Well Farm, and a PRoW along the site boundary which connects with the aforementioned PRoW and the village of Fulbeck.

Key features of site include the distinct topography with significant falls in site levels forming a 'ridge' and a 'bowl' central to the site; long views afforded from the site in particularly to the west and northwest; a mature landscape including the aforementioned woodland (to the south of the site), isolated trees and hedgerows to the north and south boundaries; recent tree planting (to enhance the biodiversity of the site) and beehives.

Access to the site is from Pottergate Road to the east.

The Proposed Scheme

The scheme proposes a multi generation home for David, his family and potentially David's in-laws. The drivers for the scheme are modesty, topography, views, Fulbeck village, a Roman villa and sustainability. The proposal comprises a house positioned at the top of the site levels along the ridge above the bowl.

The design concept draws on the village of Fulbeck by proposing a house comprising a series of connected buildings of different scale, mass and height with pitched roofs, arranged in a cluster on a plinth, and orientated to align with the views afforded from the site to the west.

The house is on two levels, with an upper ground floor and a lower ground floor. The upper level comprises the main entrance and central staircase connecting the floors, three bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, two offices, a studio and a garage (three vehicles). The lower ground floor comprises the master bedroom, kitchen / dining, a lounge, a formal living spaces and a gym.

The landscape proposals around the house comprise a range of hard and soft landscape spaces to the immediate house, these include a gravel courtyard to the front / main entrance, paved terraces to the south, west and north of the house, a lawn area to the south including an outdoor kitchen bound by a wildflower meadow adjacent to the existing trees / woodland and a linear lawn to the north. To the west of the house is a series of low walls, steps and terraces which includes a formal pond. A vegetable and fruit garden is proposed to the northeast of the house.

The wider landscape proposals include meadow long grass and new tree planting to the east of the house, new hedgerows which define the site boundaries and the formal and informal landscape, two ponds and new tree planting to the site boundaries and within the site itself. Photo voltaic panels are also proposed within the landscape.

Access to the site is as existing along a drive adjacent to the southern boundary and then is angled to align with the main entrance, through a set of gates into a central gravel forecourt.

Paragraph 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The intention is to build a case for development under Paragraph 80e of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government July 2021.

Paragraph 80 states:

Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

- (a) there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside;
- (b) the development would represent the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets;
- (c) the development would re-use redundant or disused buildings and enhance its immediate setting;
- (d) the development would involve the subdivision of an existing residential building; or
- (e) *the design is of exceptional quality, in that it:*
 - *is truly outstanding, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas; and*
 - *would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.*

The Panel's Comments

The Panel make the following comments and recommendations for your consideration:

Site analysis and studies

The Panel acknowledged the work undertaken and the comprehensive package of information presented comprising site studies (ecology, archaeology, minerals, flood risk and heritage); analysis of the immediate site context and Fulbeck village; landscape and visual impact assessment including Zones of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV).

The Panel recommended to undertake additional work to demonstrate a robust understanding of the wider landscape character, which was identified as a gap in the site analysis – what makes the setting special and what is its character. This work will assist in demonstrating how the proposals reference and reinforce the landscape character, in particular in understanding the impact of the proposals on the landscape.

The Client's Brief

Building a home on the site presents a unique opportunity. The scheme will be a multi-generational home for your family, children and potentially your in-laws. The proposals will need to meet the individual and differing needs of each member of the household. The Panel suggested undertaking a 'day in the life' exercise to illustrate the day-to-day living needs for each member of the family ie. weekday and weekends and different times of the day / year. This should include for example particular views to be enjoyed to/from the house, the level of enclosure and privacy as well as openness, relationship with existing landscape features, etc. A clearer assessment of spatial requirements (outdoor spaces) would also be beneficial.

The above will further equip the Design Team with in-depth knowledge to ensure the design of the house fully meets the needs of the whole family. The importance of designing for future needs should also form part of the exercise, ie. how the proposal can adapt to the needs of the family including elderly parents / in-laws.

The Panel emphasised the importance of translating the brief for the project, once clarified, into a much clearer overall narrative for the scheme and recommended that this be documented as part of the design process. Recording this process will help to develop the narrative which is essential to inform the design and make a convincing case for the development.

The Design Drivers

The design drivers for the site, in addition to the client's needs, include referencing the typology of Fulbeck village with a roofscape concept of clusters of buildings, views to and from the site. Further aspirations and inspirations include 'modesty', the typology of a Roman villa, a building which 'perches' on the ridge, and sustainability.

The scheme as proposed was thought to be unclear and a number of design drivers competing with each other – is the house modest? Is it perched? Which parts of the building are meant to be hidden, which parts are meant to be visible? What is the rationale for these design decisions? The Design Team were recommended to refine and distil the design drivers / aspirations. These should also be ordered within a hierarchy to understand which ones are the most important.

The site was observed to be close to but not within the village of Fulbeck. The Panel did not feel the proposals should follow the typology and character of Fulbeck rigorously and highlighted the risk of the scheme being perceived as 'Little Fulbeck'. Instead of the village, the Panel considered the precedence of prominent 'buildings on the ridge' in the wider vicinity, as presented during the meeting, a potentially powerful driver for the scheme. Encouragement was given to evidence the above, by providing examples of such buildings within the landscape and how the proposals could follow this pattern.

'Modest/y' appeared to be an important driver for the scheme initially, but the Panel was uncertain what 'modesty' means for this project, and as proposed the scheme was not considered to be modest in scale or appearance. The Panel recommended to communicate more clearly what is meant by modesty and how this has informed the proposals.

The overall ambition for a sustainable house which is Net Zero is very commendable. The Panel recommended sustainability should be explored and embraced rigorously as part of the design development process from the onset. Rather than designing a house first and then exploring

sustainability in later stages, this approach could help to reduce the need for solar panels / technologies etc.

The proposal for a house comprises a cluster of buildings forms, which leads to increased building envelope and surface areas. If this approach is pursued, consideration needs to be given to the question of whether the building could be more compact to reduce surface areas, whether parts of the house can operate independently of each other, for example the guest wing be heated only when needed, the provision of an unheated circulation space etc.

Optimising orientation in response to sun / shade is key to designing a sustainable building, enabling a positive and significant impact in driving the design of the scheme. The proposed material palette comprises timber frame and insulation, this will also impact on the design of the house (envelope thickness, glazing amount, etc.) which need to be considered at this stage.

Clarification on what is meant by Net Zero would be helpful to understand the aspirations, ie. which stages would be assessed (construction, occupation, cradle-to-grave, with or without off-setting, etc.) and whether you plan to achieve industry standards (RIBA 20230 Climate Challenge, etc.).

The significance of introducing a new development to the site and its setting, the impact of the scheme on views into the site which include views from the PRoW, and the strategy / approach for views (for example viewpoint 9 from Fulbeck, page 33 of the DAS) needs to be assessed against a set of criteria. The Panel did not consider the building needs to be hidden drawing on the positive contribution of exceptional architecture can have on a view.

The long and panoramic views from the site are a key element of the client brief and an important driver for the scheme, therefore the house has a broad elevation to the west, including the plinth, and the very prominent two-storey gable, which is accentuated further by the decision to spread out the accommodation into separate buildings.

The Panel believe there is opportunity to explore the potential for different parts of the house to experience and respond to the different views, rather than focus primarily on views to the west. The orientation of the house and its rooms should be considered alongside the outwards views to drive the layout and form of the house. This would enable the house to respond more positively to the site context, heighten the experience of the internal spaces when moving through the house, and relate better to the various outside areas during times of the day / seasons of the year.

The Panel were unconvinced by the references of the typology of a Roman Villa. If this is to be pursued, a stronger rationale needs to be provided on its relevance to this site and how it would inform the scheme in response to the client's brief. Clarification is also required about the proposed material palette, which is intriguing, but not illustrated fully in the visuals provided.

All of the above will greatly assist in further strengthening the narrative and a building with a coherent architectural language.

The position of the house within the site

The logic for the position of the house within the site was understood, but the Panel considered there to be an un-satisfactory dominance of views over orientation and sustainability in the "single-aspect

layout". The Design Team were recommended to undertake an exercise to test positions and layout of the house against the design drivers and aspirations. This work should be documented and appraised to explain how ideas have been considered / discounted / adopted. A clear explanation showing how the position of the house within the site has been arrived at will be valuable in contributing to a compelling narrative.

Landscape Strategy

The overall approach, components and tone of the landscape proposals was supported. The proposals will have an impact on the landscape, it is important to define what this impact should be, how the impact would be sensitive to the landscape character, and how the 'significant improvement to the setting' would be delivered. As stated before, a study of the wider landscape character is essential to informing the proposals.

The topography / site levels are an important and key feature of the landscape and the plot. From the information provided there was difficulty in understanding the level and significance of the proposed remodelling and its impact on the landscape character. The provision of supporting and detailed information including existing and proposed cross sections and images were recommended. Clarifying the approach to spoil during construction could also form part of the above.

This work along with refining the design drivers may result in a different approach, potentially one which lessens the intervention on the landscape.

As mentioned above the building has been designed with a strong focus on the west elevation. The Panel commented on the importance of the spaces to the north, south and west of the house, which offer different contexts, view and micro-climates to complement the outdoor areas to the west. Clarification on the drivers for the open space was encouraged, ie. what has informed their location, design approach, size, aspect, seasonal usability in particular those in exposed locations, and how the outdoor spaces connect both visually and physically with the rooms within the house.

With regard to the individual spaces, the space to the west (where the beehives are located), is where the site is sheltered from the wind. Further consideration needs to be given to the importance of this space and its relationship with the house.

As proposed the emphasis of the design is to the west / the perceived main frontage, while the entrance is to the east / the functional rear. The gravel forecourt is an important space, it is where the family, visitors / guests will arrive, and this needs to be reflected in its design. Encouragement was given to strengthen the design to reflect its role and a function beyond the movement and storage of cars.

Sequence of arrival

Access to the house will be from the existing street access along a gravel drive parallel to the site boundary which is then angled to connect into a hard landscape gravel forecourt formed by the garage and house.

The Panel encouraged further consideration be given to the position of the access as part of the exercise in determining the position and orientation of the house within the site. This should also include the experience of travelling along the route ie. what do you experience at various points along the route and are there views across the wider landscape above the ridges as alluded to in the presentation.

Summary

The Panel thank you and your team for the site visit, scheme information, presentation and for hosting the design review meeting. Adam Murray, Richard Shaw and Ariane Buschmann from South Kesteven District Council were also thanked for engaging and participating with the design review. The opportunity to discuss the proposals collaboratively with yourself, your design team and the local authority representatives was an excellent opportunity and a privilege.

The Panel considered there to be enormous potential in the site. The brief, the site analysis, the collaborative design approach and the design work so far, is essential in achieving the high bar set by paragraph 80e of the NPPF.

The next stage should address the following:

- Refine the client brief including undertaken an exercise to better understand the needs of each member of the family ie. a day in the life
- Strengthen the site studies to include an assessment of the wider landscape character, in particular in understanding the impact of the proposal on the landscape character
- Distil the design drivers and aspirations for site and house within a hierarchy – which drivers are the most important, what is meant by ‘modesty’, etc.
- Embed sustainability as a key driver from the start ie. orientation, form, massing, etc.
- Design the house and landscape with a coherent language, and
- Development of external spaces in response to use, orientation and connection with the house.

We trust that the feedback provided within this letter will prove to be of benefit to you in seeking a successful resolution and outcome for this scheme and provide an opportunity for further discussions with the determining authorities. We would be happy to provide further design advice as the project progresses and we will seek to ensure that the composition of the Panel remains the same throughout any ongoing review process.

Yours sincerely,

Dharmista Patel
Design:Midlands Design Review Panel Manager

Design:Midlands Design Review adheres to the ten principles for design review as follows:

1. **Independent:** It is conducted by people who are separate from the scheme promoter and decision-maker, and it protects against conflicts of interest.
2. **Accountable:** It records and explains its advice and is transparent about potential conflicts of interest.
3. **Expert:** It is conducted by suitably trained people who are experienced in design and know how to criticise constructively. Review is usually most respected where it is carried out by professional peers of the project designers, as their standing and expertise will be acknowledged.
4. **Advisory:** It does not make decisions. It acts as a source of impartial advice for decision-makers.
5. **Accessible:** Its findings are clearly expressed in terms that decision-makers can understand and use.
6. **Proportionate:** It is used on projects whose significance warrants the public investment of providing design review at national, regional and local level, as appropriate. Other methods of appraising design quality should be used for less significant projects.
7. **Timely:** It takes place as early as possible in the life of a design because this saves the most time and costs less to make changes. If a planning application has already been made, it happens within the timeframe for considering it. And it is repeated when a further opinion is required.
8. **Objective:** It appraises schemes in the round according to reasoned, objective criteria rather than the stylistic tastes of individual Panel members.
9. **Focused on outcomes for people:** It asks how this building or place can better meet the needs of the people using it, and of the public at large who are affected by it.
10. **Focused on improving quality:** It constructively seeks to improve the quality of architecture, urban design, landscape, highway design and town planning.