

Conservation and amenity inside the Alex Triangle

A submission by neighbouring residents on requirements for the planning brief for the Royal Alex site : 15 December 2009

Figures are attached as Appendix 1

The 'Alex Triangle' is the land within the Montpelier and Clifton Hill conservation area that is enclosed by Dyke Road, Clifton Road and Clifton Hill; the Royal Alex site forms the south-eastern part of the Triangle (Figure 1). Homes around the Triangle to the north and west - with an estimated 250-300 residents - have a direct view of the interior of the Alex site (Figure 2/3/4/6). Several have shared boundaries - for example, the garden/recreation area used by more than ninety retired people living in Homeless House to the north. Regardless of whether the final planning brief requires all, some or none of the existing Victorian buildings to be conserved, the hidden-from-public-view north west half of the site is vulnerable to development that is too high, too close to its neighbours and inappropriate in a conservation area.

Neighbours around the Triangle are tightly constrained regarding changes we can make to our properties in the conservation area, and we wish to see the same quality of constraint applied to the Alex site, in order that any development is indeed sensitive to its neighbours and respects the conservation of the townscape.

A public meeting of Triangle residents was held on December 2nd 2009; Councillor Sven Rufus was present as an observer. Following the meeting, residents from all parts of the Triangle have agreed the following submission regarding three principles to be embodied in the Planning Brief: (1) Height and proximity of new buildings, (2) Conservation inside the Triangle, and (3) Designing for a distinct space within the Conservation Area.

1 Height and proximity of new buildings

- a) **Steeply sloping land** It seems to us that previous designs have not taken proper account of the fact that any new buildings in the north-east part of the Alex site will be located literally on the top of a hill (the highest point of Clifton Hill - Fig 1) and that within a few metres of the north and west boundaries the land falls away two storeys or more towards neighbouring properties (Fig 3/4/5). The height of new buildings on the site therefore has a major potential impact on the amenity of residents to the north and west - casting shade, taking up the sky, obstructing sightlines, overlooking. *A three-storey building in the north-west corner of the site is a five-storey building (or more) from the standpoint of neighbours.*
- b) **Heights of existing Victorian and Regency buildings** Following national conservation guidelines, the height of any new building inside the Triangle

should be governed by the heights of existing Victorian and Regency buildings in the Triangle (as distinct from tall buildings on Dyke Road, for example). The Victorian lodge in the north-east corner (Fig 4/5) has eaves and ridge heights from 74 to 77 metres above datum; Regency terraced houses at 18-22 Clifton Hill (Fig 6) have eaves and ridge heights of 75 to 77 metres. *Maximum permitted ridge heights for new buildings should be specified in the planning brief, with reference to these.*

- c) **Set-back from the boundary** Because of the steep gradient, the Alex site looms over adjacent properties within the Triangle. Thus, proximity of new buildings to the boundary is especially important. Existing buildings close to these boundaries are one and two storeys high. Thus, for example, where the brief permits higher buildings, they should not be placed in the footprint of existing single-storey structures (such as short-life, modern buildings to the west of the site). It may be less ambiguous if the brief specifies a minimum set-back from the north and west boundaries, for buildings of the permitted height, including a requirement not to cast an increased depth of shadow over adjacent properties.
- d) **Roofs** Slate pitched roofs, as on existing buildings, should be required on all main buildings.

2 Conservation inside the Triangle

- a) **Space** The Triangle has a distinct character, as a large space with long, open sightlines, defined by Regency and Victorian structures on the periphery (Fig 1/6). By establishing principles of height, scale, rhythm and texture, the planning brief should aim to **echo and re-assert the quality of the Victorian space**.
- b) **Textures:** There is a diversity of textures in the Triangle (render, flint, dark red brick, slate, greenery) and the planning brief should require these to be echoed in the palette of textures in new buildings. Large areas of uniform texture should be avoided (see 'Scale and rhythms', paragraph 2c below).
- c) **Scale and rhythms:** The Triangle is a low-rise space with small-scale detailing. There are currently no structures rising higher than two storeys above Alex ground level and - as with the Conservation Area in general - there are few original structures with horizontal straight lines longer than about 5 metres (the ridges and eaves of Regency villas and terraces, for example, are interrupted by chimneys, firewalls and corbels, as well as changes in ground level) and no large uniform vertical planes (thanks to the projections of rear extensions, for example). Victorian buildings on the Alex site, which might possibly be conserved, are consistent with these scales and rhythms, and the planning brief should require any new buildings to adopt and adapt these principles too. It is important that monolithic, straight-edged forms such as those of Clifton Mews (which has large uniform planes of roofing and brick: Fig 2/3/4/6) should be ruled out by the planning brief.

- d) **Trees:** Currently the only tall objects on sightlines across the Triangle are mature trees (Fig 2/3/4/5/6). Some trees on the site have preservation orders, but all mature trees should be preserved. Planting of further trees should be encouraged by the planning brief as a large-scale contribution to the landscape and not simply as small-scale eye-level screening. A belt of trees and greenery at the northern and western boundaries would be worth encouraging, as a way of guaranteeing that buildings are not placed too close to other properties (paragraph 1c above).

3 **Designing for a distinct space within the Conservation Area**

- a) Regardless of the degree of buildings conservation that the Council's planning brief requires (all/some/none) there will be strong pressure on a developer to maximise the density of units in the north and west areas at the 'back' of the site. We welcome the appointment of a consultant to advise on whether Victorian buildings can realistically form part of a redevelopment on the site. At the same time we ask you to pay particular attention to our view that the conservation issue in the north and west areas of the site is not *old buildings*, but a *quality of space*; and to the fact that higher levels of conservation (meaning lower density of accommodation units) in the south and east will naturally increase the pressure on a developer to locate **inappropriately large and high buildings** in the north and west. For both reasons, strict rules on height are essential. The entire site should be protected within Conservation guidelines, not just part of it.
- b) The Triangle forms a large distinct space within the Conservation Area with its own character, different from the street frontages. The planning brief should thus make it clear that **different design principles** are needed for the north and west of the site on one hand (relating to the Triangle) and the south and east on the other (relating to Dyke Road). Developers should be made aware that it will not be acceptable to develop a standard elevation formula or structural module, and to roll this out across all sections of the site.

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