

# Design Review Panel

21.06.06

DRP/R02



## Meeting 2 Report **\*\*FINAL\*\***

### Projects

Former Plymco Site (Norman's), Budleigh Salterton – Barratt Homes  
Minster Court, Axminster - McCarthy & Stone  
Dunards, Sidmouth

### Panel Members

Cllr Andrew Dinnis, Heritage & Design Champion (Chairman)  
Kate Little, Head of Planning & Countryside Services  
Peter Lacey BSc, BArch(Bath)  
Maggie Bolt, Director, Public Art South West  
Gita Rae (Lay Member)  
Isobel Wilson (Lay Member)  
Tim Woolgar (Lay Member)  
Steven Power, Urban Designer & Design Panel Coordinator

### Other Attendees (site visit only)

Cllr Douglas Hull, Ward Member Axminster Town  
Cllr Ray Franklin, Ward Member Budleigh Salterton  
Cllr Lesley Roden, Ward Member Budleigh Salterton  
Cllr Christopher Giddings, Ward Member Sidmouth Town  
Cllr Chris Scott, Chairman of Planning Committee, Axminster Town Council  
Dr Geoff Alpin, Otter Valley Association  
Miss Kirkcaldie, Town Clerk, Axminster Town Council  
Andrew Carmichael, Principal Planning Officer (and round table discussion)

### Circulation

All of the above.  
Cllr Andrew Moulding, Ward Member Axminster Town  
Cllr Jed Falby, Ward Member Budleigh Salterton  
Cllr Marcelle Boote, Chairman Development Control Committee, Ward Member Dunkeswell

### Meeting Date

Monday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2006, 9.45am (all day)

### Venue

Council Offices, Knowle

## **Summary**

The Design Review Panel (DRP) reviewed 3 projects around the theme of flats and apartments. The projects are located in Axminster, Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth. The panel visited each site and met representatives of the local community at all of the projects.

Overall the panel were particularly impressed with the Minster Court project in terms of the contribution it makes to the townscape of Axminster and helping to form a strong gateway to the historic centre.

The panel were also impressed with some aspects of the development on the former Plymco site in Budleigh Salterton and especially the way some of the new terraces blend into the existing Victorian terraces along adjacent streets.

Of the three, the panel considered Dunards to be the least successful project in a number of ways including its contribution to the townscape of Sidmouth, architectural design, materials, detailed design, landscaping and the quality of construction. The panel considered the project to be especially disappointing given its location opposite a listed building, Green Gables, and partly within the town's Conservation Area.

## **Overarching Themes**

The most successful projects (or parts of them) responded well to their site context and successfully integrated into the existing townscape.

The need for a good hard and soft landscaping scheme is vitally important to the success of projects. Space should be designed in to allow landscaping to mature and not be unduly constrained.

The rush to judge landscaping schemes should be resisted and time should be allowed for schemes to reach a degree of maturity.

The design of open spaces and play spaces (formal and informal) can significantly add to the quality and success of developments. Designs should be imaginative and not fall back on standard solutions. Alongside this the Council should consider its open space adoption guidelines to encourage more creative designs.

The entrances to buildings, the 'gateways', should be designed to be welcoming and as part of the overall design. They should be in proportion with the rest of the building.

The streetscape of a development should be carefully considered especially in respect of the use of materials and the location and co-ordination of services. The spaces that people walk through and the materials they walk on are as important as the design of individual buildings.

Projects were most successful where they responded well to the scale of development in the area and how they relate to the human scale. Buildings and spaces must mediate between these two pressures to arrive at a scheme that works in terms of the macro and micro scale (townscape and human scale).

Little consideration appeared to have been given to the issue of sustainable development and the need to reduce energy and water use. Whilst some designs, terraces of houses etc., are more thermally efficient than others none of the schemes seemed to use solar energy and solar orientation.

The potential for public art was not exploited in any of the projects and was a missed opportunity. The creative design of open areas and play spaces and architectural details could have added to the quality of the developments.

The junctions between new and existing development should be treated carefully as it can be the point of most design tension but also most potential. Standard solutions, such as bollards, are an easy but unimaginative solution to a difficult problem.

Key features of a development, such as balconies, entrances and boundary treatments should be designed with care and imagination to make the most of them and enhance the overall design.

## **1 Former Plymco Site (Norman's), Budleigh Salterton (DRP02/A)**

### **1.1 Urban Design**

This scheme has good links with the existing housing to the north and east of the site in terms of massing, and visual appearance. However, the less dense nature of this development does not compare as favourably with the surrounding residential areas.

There is good cohesion at the start of the scheme, close to Upper Stoneborough Lane, with relatively close knit spaces and a positive sense of enclosure. The cohesion of the scheme starts to break down towards the middle and end of the development due to the large open spaces and the turning head.

The success of the relationship with the adjoining allotments was questioned.

Generally there was little defensible space to the houses and flats. One is able to walk very close or right up to the dwellings and therefore the privacy of residents could be compromised. It was noted that the affordable houses did have some defensible space and that this was a better approach.

In terms of the flats, the panel thought that the affordable housing block of flats was the most successful in terms of its design, how it addressed the street and its relationship to the adjacent houses.

Although the fences gave a sense of enclosure they detracted from the sense of place – the development did not *feel* like Budleigh Salterton and could have been better resolved.

The flats development with open garages created a good sense of enclosure and had a more human scale compared with the larger stand alone blocks.

### **1.2 Highways Design**

It was recognised that the road had been designed to slow traffic speeds by winding its way through the long narrow site and this had been successful.

Although the layout of the road was considered successful in terms slowing traffic speeds and creating short vistas it was felt that the road was laid out first and the houses and flats arranged along it rather than creating good spaces and allowing traffic to move through it. There was a lot of road space, and therefore tarmac, although it was broken up to a certain extent by the use of brick pavers.

The use of a large number of plastic bollards, separating the development from an adjoining street was particularly disappointing. The panel thought that there were more imaginative and attractive ways of achieving the same separation.

The need for such a large turning circle was questioned as refuse vehicles and the like can and do manoeuvre around and through smaller spaces across the district.

### **1.3 Scale and Massing**

It was thought that the site is sufficiently large to avoid the use of 3 storey development – perhaps better design of the open spaces and highways could have resulted in only 2 storey developments. The 3 storey blocks seem to be out of context, are not as elegant as they might be and had a poor roofline.

### **1.4 Landscaping and Open Space**

The panel felt that there is sometimes a rush to judge the landscaping of projects. Time must be given for landscaping to establish and to mature. However good landscaping is no excuse for poor architectural and urban design.

It was thought however, that parts of the scheme did not seem to allow enough space for the trees and soft landscaping to mature into. Overall, the panel thought there appeared to be little consideration of the need for a landscape strategy.

There was a lot of hard landscaping, especially around the affordable housing part of the project but it was thought that some of these spaces were good informal play areas. Some of these spaces felt safe and secure and were well overlooked by the dwellings. In essence the scheme was self policing in part.

The design of open spaces could have been more creative as little consideration seems to have been given to how these spaces will eventually be used. Standard solutions have been used ahead of considering the needs of the site and project.

The flats did not have any private outside space, whether on the ground floor or balconies on the upper floors. The residents of the ground floor flats could not easily use the outside space and have to leave the block via the communal entrance area rather than their own homes. The inclusion of patio/French doors could add to the quality of life of some of the residents.

### **1.5 Practicalities**

The practicalities of day-to-day living appear not to have been considered, such as the need for external bin stores rather than dragging bins through the dwellings to the kerbside for collection.

There is no provision for bike parking and all of the play areas and open space appeared to be on or adjacent to the road.

### **1.6 Materials**

There is extensive use of PVCu, which detracted from the appearance and the perception of quality of the development.

The front doors, a crucial element of residential design, were generally poor but better on the affordable houses. The extensive use of half glazed doors again detracted from the visual appearance of the area.

### **1.7 Sustainable development**

There was no evidence of sustainable development such as water conservation or use of solar energy.

### **1.8 Recommendations**

The most successful part of this development are the close knit streets and spaces that had a more human and intimate scale but they need to be carefully designed to prevent overlooking and loss of privacy issues.

The orientation of buildings and rooms is an important design consideration. Main rooms should face the street and be orientated towards the sun to create pleasant and well lit rooms.

Car parking should be designed at the back of the development to 'release' the street for people.

Play spaces should be well designed and attractive. Poorly designed and maintained spaces will quickly detract from the quality of a development.

The Council should consider reviewing its adoption standards for open spaces so that they have some flexibility. In this way developers may propose more imaginative play spaces and open areas without worrying about whether the Council will consider them for adoption. Early discussion of the possibilities and options is crucial to this process.

Careful consideration should be given to the entrances of flats and apartments. The entrance to the central block of flats was out of proportion, too small, and always in shadow therefore appearing dark and uninviting.

The integration of services should be carefully considered to avoid the pepper potting of access covers within the pavement and open spaces. This detracts significantly from the quality of the open spaces and streets and sets a poor tone for the whole development.

Ensure that landscaping proposals are realistic and that a reasonable amount of time is allowed to reach a degree of maturity. Alongside this it is important that landscaping is allowed the space to mature into and not be unduly constrained.

Materials should be carefully considered as the dominance of some materials can detract from the overall appearance.

Design with the needs of sustainable development in mind especially the need to conserve energy and water.

Look at ways to exploit the potential of a scheme in terms of the creative design of open areas and play spaces. This should include the potential for public art.

The junctions between new and existing development should be treated carefully as it can be the point of most design tension but also most potential. Standard solutions, such as bollards, are an easy but unimaginative solution to a difficult problem.

## **2 Minster Court, Axminster (DRP02/B)**

### **2.1 Urban Design**

The design of the building differs on each facade and the changing faces respond to well to their context. However the panel wondered whether the design of the building was trying to be all things to all people rather than having a distinct character of its own. Perhaps a more contemporary design would have worked well. It was noted that this development looks very similar to other McCarthy & Stone developments and it could better reflect its local context through more consideration of the townscape context.

The building, due to its size, height and mass creates a positive gateway and helps to funnel you into the town centre. The panel considered the new townscape to work well as the more open approaches to the town are closed down by the new building before it opens again in the heart of the town outside of the church. The building appears solid, a bookend to the town centre.

The building also works well where it overlooks the Tesco supermarket and car park. The design is layered with an good combination of mature landscaping and building.

The varying window sizes works well, adds interest to the facades and describes the hierarchy of internal rooms.

### **2.2 Detailed Design**

The panel thought that the balconies added to the overall design and were a fundamental part of the success of the project but that they very much appeared as 'bolt on' items rather than an integral part of the design.

The balconies offered a great opportunity to add to the quality of the development and to use a bespoke design.

The double balconies were not a successful as the single balconies. The varied depth of some of the balconies was not needed or successful.

There was overuse of standard 'catalogue' steel railings along to main frontage, echoing the more historic use of railings further down the road away from the flats, associated with the former engineering works. The older railings however, had been designed specifically for the engineering works and this idea could have been carried forward into the new development.

The large and dominant signage detracts from the development and perhaps it is better to consider this as a part of the overall design as it may be in place for some years.

### **2.3 Materials**

The red brick added a good element of tonality to the visual appearance of the building.

The success of the relatively extensive range of materials was questioned. Brick, render, stone, painted steel work and PVCu are all used. Some panel members thought that the diversity of materials added to the character of the development where as others felt that they detracted.

### **2.4 Quality of life and amenities**

There was divided opinion as to the quality of life of residents living on the Western Road side of the scheme – the main road into the town. This is a busy and noisy road but some panel members thought that some residents would enjoy looking out on this bustling road.

Although the main entrance is tucked away from the main elevation and near the car park, it works well and responds to the needs of the residents who may often arrive and depart from the parking area.

The amenities are well designed such as a secure electric buggy park close to the entrance.

All of the flats look outwards and visually connect with the rest of the town and the ground floor flats open out onto the surrounding gardens.

### **2.5 Summary**

Overall this was a successful project in terms of urban and architectural design. The building sits well in its context and adds positively to the townscape of Axminster, creating a strong gateway to the town centre. The design makes good use of the existing mature landscaping on the site.

The building seems well thought out in terms of its functionality and the amenity of residents.

The poorly designed and detailed balconies detract from the overall quality to some degree. The potential for using bespoke metal work to the new railings and the balconies has not been exploited but could have added a greater level of design quality and interest to the development.

### **2.6 Recommendations**

Explore how the site context can inform the design of new development and add to the sense of local distinctiveness in terms of the use of materials, colours and details etc.

Identify those key features of a development, such as the use of balconies, and take steps to ensure that they are designed as an integral part of the scheme rather than a bolt-on element.

Encourage the development of a sympathetic and well considered palette of materials that works well within its context and enhances the overall design quality.

### **3 Dunards, All Saints Road, Sidmouth (DRP02/C)**

#### **3.1 Design**

Dunards was roundly criticised for its poor overall design and in particular its architectural design, materials, detailed design, landscaping and the quality of construction.

The panel was told that the front third of the site is in Sidmouth's Conservation Area whilst the rear of the site is not. The site is also opposite Green Gables, a listed building. The panel considered the overall design of Dunards to be very poor given this context and it detracts from the overall quality of built environment in this part of the town.

This scheme was considered to be a poor pastiche of more historic architectural styles. The building is ill proportioned especially the entrance porch, which was described as a miserable apology of an entrance.

This is an example of how not to design in context. It appears as if the building just happened rather than it being designed - this was particularly disappointing given the good location within the town.

Although there is no overarching architectural style across the town, Sidmouth has a long history of architectural whimsy and of being adventurous. This development does not extend that tradition.

The building has a quasi-Georgian side, facing All Saints Road, and a more modern façade facing the rugby ground. This can be designed well but needs to be done so with good attention to detail.

The rear elevation is hard up against the rear site boundary and feels very exposed as it overlooks the rugby ground. Whilst the flats on the main elevation overlook a tarmac car park.

The former building is an important consideration in assessing this new development. The ratio of solid to void in the previous building is not carried across into the new design.

The panel understood why planning officer's recommended refusal of this application and supported that position. However, the panel was informed that it was approved by Development Control Committee.

#### **3.2 Sustainable development**

The decision to demolish to existing building rather than reusing it was questioned on environmental grounds. Could the former building have been reused and extended?

There seems to be little or no consideration of environmental sustainability. There is extensive use of hard landscaping that appears to be non-porous.

#### **3.3 Materials**

In terms of materials, the building does not reflect its context. All of the surrounding buildings have some element of render and not solely brick.

The richness of the building's context is not used to inform the design. There is a range of materials, colours and details in the area that could be been used to enliven the design.

#### **3.4 Summary**

Overall the design of this scheme is poor and detracts from the visual appearance of the area.

Little consideration seems to have been given to developing a good landscaping scheme, the use of materials, colours, the setting of a listed building and the impact of this development on the Conservation Area.

### **3.5 Recommendations**

Take time to observe and understand the context in which a development is being proposed to ensure that it adds rather than detracts from the character and quality of an area.

Consider using materials that reflect the building traditions of the area to help embed new development into its site.

Design with the needs of sustainable development in mind especially the need to conserve energy and water.

Consider quality of life issues such as the proximity of car parking to accommodation and the sense of exposure or enclosure that can be created through good architectural and urban design.

Allow space (and time) for landscaping to soften the visual impact of development.

Take a holistic view of the architectural design to ensure that all elements of a building work together to produce a coherent design.

Keep different elements of the building in proportion and express the hierarchy of spaces and features.

Look at ways to exploit the potential of a scheme in terms of the creative design of open areas and play spaces. This should include the potential for public art.

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### **Background Papers**

- ❑ Project Summary – DR Mtg 2\_Sht 1 - Plymco
- ❑ Project Summary – DR Mtg 2\_Sht 1 - Minster Court
- ❑ Project Summary – DR Mtg 2\_Sht 1 - Dunards

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