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Dear Ken

**Re: St. Michaels, Jackson's Row, Manchester
Design Review – 28 July 2016, Manchester**

Places Matter! is pleased to have been asked to review this very important proposal for Manchester. It is not often that such a substantial site becomes available in such a prominent location in a city centre. The area has offered far too little to the vitality of the city for far too long. It would appear from the presentation that it is now possible to make changes in abundance creating a new 5-star destination bringing and adding value to the city core and contributing to a step change that could resonate across the city.

Given the plot dimensions and the ambition of the development proposals there is no other site in the vicinity that has this scale of potential regeneration impacts. It is essential that this scheme acts as a catalyst to the wider neighbourhood to encourage greater change through permeability, connectivity and responsive design, exploiting every opportunity for wider engagement.

Summary Introduction from Sir Howard Bernstein

Manchester is one of the few true engines for growth and therefore a national priority within the context of the Northern Powerhouse. The lack of activity on this site means that it is not currently contributing anything towards helping to realise those growth ambitions.

The congregation of the Reform Synagogue has been seeking better premises for many years.

The city has secured international institutional support for the development. This will convince international investors that it is safe to invest in Manchester.

This will improve the relationship of this area to the wider city providing better permeability and connectivity.

There is an emphasis on the quality of this development.

Summary Introduction from Gary Neville

This is to become a destination with quality public spaces and activity. This is to be a very high end development with inclusive public realm. There is a shortage of high value housing in Manchester city centre and this is the opportunity to provide it here. This sentiment was reiterated by Dave Roscoe as well.

There should be strong connectivity from Jackson's Row across to Bootle Street.

There is a need and demand for Grade A office space and a 5 star hotel in Manchester.

This is a 1.5 acre site in the middle of the civic quarter and is perfect for this type of development.

Scheme Introduction by Pete Swift

Although this site is in the civic quarter it is on the edge of other quarters. There is little green space in this area. This will make a new marker for the centre of the city.

It is understood that all the existing buildings currently on site are to be demolished. The only piece of historic interest to be rehoused is the bar from the pub which will be retained and inserted into the new pub location.

50% of the site will be given over to public space.

Panel Comments

This is a magnificent site location and brief. The panel sought to understand the proposals from the land use perspective, it appeared that the site was "working very hard" but in line with the SRF. The conservation issues are well documented and again, the panel sought to understand the extent to which these had informed the design.

The street hierarchy in order of importance is currently and will remain 1-Southmill Street, 2-Jackson's Row and 3-Bootle Street. The Southmill Street context is the most important one as it is the most civic and through the proposals will forge a much stronger connection to Albert Square. This will change the setting of buildings in the conservation area and the experience of the city between the Town Hall and the hotels and conference centre to the south. The panel's concern is that the new square responds appropriately to this agenda and that the office tower addresses the street edge appropriately. The panel questions the blank expression in the elevation and the introduction of "marker" elements and the hotel foyer extrusion.

The office entrance could orientate to Southmill Street or move inboard allowing a different active use onto the frontage. The panel understands that the intention is to locate the entrance to the proposed sky bar at the corner of the block where Southmill Street meets Bootle Street. This will help to animate the building frontage to a certain extent but the whole frontage onto Southmill Street should be re-considered. The black aluminium tower façade treatment seems to run straight into the pavement with no separation of expression at the ground floor level. This should be reviewed from both a functional performance and active frontage perspective

The low rise wing of the hotel separates the properties on Jackson's Row from the new square. There is a significant opportunity in the scheme to bring forward the re-activation of Jackson's Row and to entice pedestrians to move along this route thus spreading the regeneration impact from the development and reinforcing connections between Manchester's rich past and bright future. This will bring existing buildings into new focus and promote the street from 2 to 1A in the hierarchy.

Bootle Street is currently a service street and appears to remain as the service corridor in the development proposals. While the constraints of the programme are appreciated the scheme can do more in this area to avoid reinforcing the current status quo. Bootle Street can become a pleasant and active pedestrian experience and in doing so will promote others along the street to make more of the new context. Ultimately, this should be where pedestrians coming through the development from Albert Square and the new square emerge in multiple locations to link back into the fabric of the city and on towards Peter Street, Deansgate and Great Northern Square. Adjacent property owners will see a renewed energy and drive to upgrade their buildings to the south. Currently, the Sir Ralph Abercromby Pub steps

out to sit at the back of pavement along Bootle Street. This quirk in the street could be replicated in the new development recognising a sense of place and memory.

The panel questions whether the scheme is working hard enough at street level around the whole perimeter. There appears to be too much reliance on the principal approach from Albert Square. What will compel pedestrians to come through the space if not from that direction? Each component of the journey around the scheme should be thoroughly interrogated to maximise the place making potential and pedestrian experience. Every step, wherever you are, needs to feel enjoyable. The design team acknowledge that there is further design development needed – especially at the lower levels of the towers and the public realm interface.

The pedestrian link from Albert Square to this new destination must be strongly reinforced which at present is hampered by the scale and volume of traffic. The panel understands that this is under review by the Council. The walk to and from public transport stops should therefore be improved and supplant the present car domination.

The panel focussed strongly on the connectivity from outside this development into and through it. It is undoubtedly planned to be a great place to be in but it is important that in the long run people will want to return. There must be ease of visibility and movement for that repeated visit.

The panel understands that there will be additional stairs and lift providing a continuous route for the pedestrian visitor to the upper terrace, so that anyone approaching from the Albert Square direction can continue on their journey towards Peter Street and Deansgate and vice versa those wanting to rise up to the upper terrace from the Peter Street and Deansgate side can progress through to Albert Square to create a route through descending back to street level.

Setting aside the negative impacts on Jackson's Row, the panel is not convinced how successful the low level building which defines the edge along Jackson's Row will be, as a piece of architecture, when considering the less successful building edging Great Northern Square. A more open square would be more beneficial (as stated) – the level change with Jackson's Row can start to help with defining an edge if the single storey kiosk/hotel entrance and drop-off are removed/relocated.

There is concern at the entirely north facing lower square and how this will work. At the detailed level, the general consensus is that the lower square should be less cluttered and made more open.

The grand stair to the upper level needs to be thought of as a destination in its own right as well as the primary means of accessing the upper level.

Once elevated on the upper terrace there must be a strong and compelling visual connection back down to the street level so that for those below, the climb is inevitable and a delight. The upper level terrace might need to be made more visible – both looking out from it over the city and as seen from the streets below. The success of this is at the heart of the placemaking success of the scheme. It will be in part down to its visibility from surrounding streets and the ease of access to it but the specific proposal is unique and its ambition has to be tested before it is realised.

The juxtaposition, height, scale, massing and materials of the two towers were well articulated in the presentation. The panel is content with the narrative regarding the desire to have two different height towers in the configuration being promoted. There is a presumption to quality that sits within the developer's aspirations for the site which must continue to be developed and delivered.

The way that the regular grid private programme of the upper floors of the two towers meets the irregular public programme of the lower storeys and public realm is not fully resolved. The opportunity within the proposals, most particularly and uniquely created through the route to and views from the upper garden square, is to explore the change from the rigid private upper storeys to the public temporal lower storeys. This change from static to plastic form is worthy of further exploration.

The internal arrangements of floor plates at upper storeys were not reviewed in detail. There was concern with the single aspect and north facing apartments.

Summary

This development has the potential to be the catalyst which would help bridge the link to a regenerated Great Northern Square and change the character of streets in the vicinity.

This project can stitch the wider neighbourhood together and provide opportunities for more regeneration to occur beyond the red line boundary and to interface with the city blocks particularly to the south. The panel cautions that this scheme does not

become too exclusive and detached from the wider city without the wider vision into the neighbourhood beyond.

This is a comprehensive presentation and it is fantastic to see such ambition. You have made a convincing case for the tower shapes, the elevational treatments giving the buildings a similar but not identical quality and also providing glimpses of the Waterhouse tower of the Town Hall. The story behind the rising level change and the elevated public space are also very enticing.

Yours sincerely



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Design Review Manager

Cc:

Stuart Fraser, Make Architects
Anthony Kilbride, Jackson's Row Developments
Pete Swift, Planit-IE
Pat Bartoli, Manchester City Council
Dave Roscoe, Manchester City Council