



City of Edinburgh Council

Application for planning permission ref: 15/02892/PPP

Application by Fountain North Ltd at land adjacent to 194 Fountainbridge

Objections to the application: executive summary

This submission is presented on behalf of Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative and the Grove Community Garden. It is supported by Tollcross Community Council who will also make a separate submission. It relates to a planning application submitted by GVA Grimley on behalf of Fountain North Ltd (hereafter referred to as Grosvenor), and dated 18 June 2015. Although it is described as an application for planning permission in principle, Grosvenor is also seeking approval for detailed proposals for the north building (A1), a public square, a pavilion and other matters.

We have no objection in principle to the development of this brownfield site which has been lying empty for nearly a decade. A development of appropriate quality and form would be welcomed by the community. We also want to acknowledge the good relationship that the local community has enjoyed with Grosvenor, in particular the generous support that has been given to the Grove Community Garden.

However, we have serious reservations about the application that has been presented. We cannot, of course, match the huge resources that Grosvenor can deploy to pursue the application, but we have focused our attention on three key issues:

- the **process**, especially the timing and scope of the application, the consultation exercise managed by Grosvenor, and the tendentious nature of the supporting documentation
- the content of the **proposals**, especially the excessive height and monolithic form of the three blocks, the very poor architectural quality of the detailed proposals, the applicants' failure to respond to the expressed concerns of the Edinburgh Urban Design Panel, and the proposed phasing of development
- the failure to adequately address the immediate **urban context**, especially the opportunity created by the EDI masterplan for India Quay.

These issues are discussed in more detail in the following pages. Quite simply, we believe that the proposals brought forward by Grosvenor are not remotely good enough. We have been encouraged by the focus on placemaking in the recent EDI masterplan for India Quay, but the Grosvenor proposals feel like a backward step. **We therefore recommend that the Committee should:**

- **grant permission in principle *for the proposed mix of uses only***
- **refuse all the other matters contained in the application, namely:**
 - the proposed quantum and phasing of development, and
 - all the detailed matters including proposals for Building A1, the public square and pavilion and the public realm
- **advise the applicants to:**
 - engage with Council officers, the community and EDI before developing a revised masterplan for the site, and
 - seek the advice of the Urban Design Panel before submitting a revised application

We want to assure the Committee and the applicants that the community is keen to make a positive contribution in the months ahead. With goodwill and imagination the prize of an attractive, diverse, lively and liveable new centre for Fountainbridge is still attainable. The key sites owned by Grosvenor and the Council will have different and complementary roles to play, but they must be connected seamlessly with each other and with the wider urban network. The scale, form and perfunctory architectural treatment of the development proposed by Grosvenor reveal that, despite the comforting PR-speak of the design statement, this is an exercise in profit-driven development pure and simple. We depend on the Committee to protect us from this lowest common denominator approach, and to ensure that the next iteration of the proposals takes up the challenge of placemaking and community building.

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PROCESS

We assume that the application complies with planning law and regulations. However, the process has been flawed in a variety of ways.

- The application was submitted in mid-June, on the eve of the school holidays. Even the applicant has acknowledged in an email that the timing was “not ideal”. Given the scale and significance of the proposed development, the timing of the application was, at best, a serious error of judgement and, at worst, a deliberate attempt to avoid scrutiny and disenfranchise the local community. We are grateful to the City Council for extending the deadline for objections, but the time available has still not been adequate: local Councillors, planning officers, the author of this submission and even the developer’s senior representative have all been on holiday and the two community councils concerned are in recess for the summer.
- The application is for *planning permission in principle*, but Grosvenor is also seeking permission for a range of detailed matters, including the design of the north block (Building A1), a public square and a pavilion. We understand that this is permissible, but in practice it is a very ill-advised way to proceed. The range of uses proposed is not contentious, although there will be a debate about the balance of those uses and a desire to see community activities explicitly included, but the detailed proposals are hugely problematic and it is disappointing to see them introduced by stealth, under cover of “planning permission in principle”. For real transparency, the sequence should be: (i) agree the uses, (ii) agree a masterplan, including building heights/forms, connectivity and design principles, (iii) submit detailed proposals.
- The application and the supporting documentation make numerous references to a public consultation process. We welcomed Grosvenor’s decision to share its plans for the site, but we should be under no illusion about the nature of the process. It was managed and funded by the applicants and they have had editorial control over the reporting outputs. This was a carefully stage-managed process and in no way independent. The Design & Access Statement makes partial and misleading use of the outcomes: a range of opinions were expressed but there was a clear consensus on the need for a permeable built form, green infrastructure, and appropriate building heights and forms.
- Much of the case presented in the Design & Access Statement rests on comparing the present proposals with the previous 2006 masterplan. This is disingenuous: the developer has long since abandoned plans to proceed with the original proposal for this part of the Springside site, but we are being invited to welcome the new scheme on the grounds that it is not as bad as its undoubtedly dismal predecessor.

The test should not be “is this better than 2006?” but “is this the quality we expect in 2015?” The answer to the latter question is “clearly not”.

- We understand that the Design & Access Statement is an advocacy document designed to secure support for the application, but this is a notably tendentious and self-serving piece of work. As well as the issues noted above (consultation and the previous consent) the document seeks to bury the reader in irrelevant information (for example, pages of pointless “key views” – although page 220 does reveal that the definitive arrival-in-Edinburgh view of the Castle’s western profile will be obscured from the Western Approach Road). The document is loaded with jargon and, in places, utterly meaningless. This semi-literate passage from page 177 is a typical example:

“The SpringLine inspiration for the northern street as both a space forming hierarchy, and a patterning of the streetscape, is played out over this public space. By continuing this typology we are able to give the residents a cognitive mapping of the Site. They have a conscious buy-in to a wider lifestyle choice by becoming a resident, but this approach is a reinforcement of that with both style and substance”.

PROPOSALS

- The planning application is accompanied by a *quantum of development schedule*. The floorspace/units set out in the schedule will, if approved, represent a *de facto* approval of the building heights and plans; for this reason we recommend that they should be specifically refused.
- The Design & Access Statement includes an axonometric view of the key features of the Grosvenor proposals (page 7). This reveals:
 - an exceptionally intensive pattern of development with three monolithic blocks spanning the width of the site (east-west), only mitigated by the proposed square in the SE corner
 - building heights - the north (A1) and south (E) blocks loom over the neighbouring buildings by a full two storeys
 - crude linear forms with no north-south axis to encourage movement through the site or relieve the intimidating bulk of the buildings
 - the huge central building (D) is a closed perimeter block ranged around an inaccessible internal courtyard: a security zone rather than a city building
 - potentially more palatable alternative forms are presented for buildings D and E, and a flattering perspective view of the latter has been used extensively for PR purposes; but the small print confirms that there is no commitment to these options: the big block forms used in the key features diagram are therefore the only reliable guide to what is intended.
- Detailed designs have been submitted for the proposed north building (A1). This miserable, lumpish scheme puts the soothing language of the Design & Access Statement into sharp relief. At the east and west end, the building rises a full 9 storeys, with an additional rooftop lounge on the east side. At its highest point it looms 3½ storeys above the Phase 1 Springside apartments. As the submitted drawings show (see below) the scale of this huge block, which runs the entire breadth of the site, is intimidating and oppressive and it is a barrier to movement; the architectural treatment is feeble: a rambling, incoherent composition which doesn't even pretend to aspire to quality. This design is beyond disappointing, it is an insult.



- The Design & Access statement offers a partial and misleading account of the presentation of the scheme to the Edinburgh Urban Design Panel. In particular, it omits any reference to the fact that the Panel, to quote their report, “expressed concern regarding the scale, linearity and orientation of the northern block fronting the West Approach Road”. In correspondence the applicants’ agents have confirmed that the scheme has not been amended in response to these concerns.
- Detailed proposals are also included for the proposed public square in the south east corner of the site and a pavilion which would be located in the square. Plans for a square at this location were welcomed at the consultation events, but it would be premature to approve the detailed proposals until we have a satisfactory masterplan for the whole site. The purpose of the pavilion – and hence its size – remains unclear, but in any event the design offered here is dreadful: a bland, half-hearted, tawdry scheme with no redeeming features.
- We are also deeply concerned about the proposed phasing of the scheme. The applicants plan to develop the site from back to front, starting in the north. This sets alarm bells ringing: the failure to deliver development on the vacant site F, on the south edge of the original Springside development is a long-running cause of concern. It would be much better if, having brought forward an acceptable masterplan for the whole site, Grosvenor were encouraged to move first on the south frontage, thus speeding up the healing process in Fountainbridge.

CONTEXT

- One of the most successful features of the first phase of development at Springside was the way in which the apartments were woven into the urban fabric. Although the benefits have not yet been fully realised, the development works with the existing streets (Upper Grove Place and Brandfield Street) to knit the new with the old. Melvin Walk establishes an important pedestrian link between Haymarket/Dalry and Bruntsfield/Tollcross. All this is admirable and to its credit the new scheme extends the east-west links as far as Drysdale Road, where any semblance of coherent urban form breaks down.
- Grosvenor's positive track record in this respect makes it even more disappointing that their new proposals are so lacking in ambition. In fact, they can only be seen as a backward step. The plan is dominated by monolithic, impenetrable, linear forms. In particular, it makes no attempt to respond to the cues offered by the EDI masterplan, especially for land west of Gilmore Park. Here a site of broadly comparable scale is organised around a permeable grid of 5 city blocks, with three blocks ranged along the Fountainbridge frontage and addressing the Grosvenor site. Although these comments should not be taken as unconditional approval of the EDI masterplan, there is no doubt that it is a welcome step up in terms of placemaking and urban design. The proposed street grid should provide the platform for a network of green walking and cycling routes spanning Fountainbridge and helping to build a lively and attractive local centre. But the Grosvenor proposal rejects the opportunity: far from encouraging north-south connections, it is deliberately designed to discourage them by steering pedestrians around the perimeter of the site.
- In the light of this analysis, it is hardly surprising that the proposals have nothing useful to say about the Western Approach Road. The anti-urban form of this road is not Grosvenor's fault, but the aspiration must be to transform it by degrees into a city street, by slowing traffic, reducing the width of the carriageway, making it safe for pedestrians and cyclists and encouraging built development. Grosvenor and the City Council should be working together to develop an agreed approach to the north side of the site. What we are offered is a row of trees in a futile effort to conceal the bulk of the north building from motorists, and to obscure the view of the road from the flats.