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James Shipton  
Great Portland Estates (St Thomas Street)  
33 Cavendish Square  
London  
W1G 0PW

1/06/2018

Our reference: DCC/0917

### **London Borough of Southwark: New City Court**

Dear James Shipton,

Thank you for submitting the proposal for New City Court, St Thomas Street for Design Review. The proposal was reviewed by Design Council Cabe at a meeting on 16 May 2018.

#### **Summary**

The proposal at New City Court are clearly a huge improvement in design terms on the existing built fabric on the site and a significant potential contribution to the economic and social life of an already productive and growing part of the London Borough of Southwark. The strategic position of the site presents a number of challenges and opportunities that the design team have approached with creativity and intelligence.

The acceptability of the scale of the building, being far higher in comparison with the immediately adjacent urban form, needs greater and clearer justification. London Borough of Southwark has to balance the benefit of the development against its visual and experiential impact on the Borough High Street conservation area in which the site sits. The panel considers that further work to the ground floors and public spaces in the proposal could mitigate the perceived negative impacts of such a tall building on this site. As a pointer to how this may be done the panel suggested a more radical approach to the historical context.

The panel was supportive of the provision of a garden space on the fourth floor but encourage the design team to reconsider the route to the garden from the ground floor, the position of the lift and the choice of planting. The panel was encouraged by the rigour applied to environmental assessments but would encourage physical wind testing and resultant solutions to eliminate downdrafts which could undermine the quality of the ground floor public space.

#### **Height**

The panel considers the height of the tower at New City Court to require further justification in design terms. We acknowledge the efforts undertaken by the design team to respond to these concerns and reduce the height of the building through previous iterations of the design. However, the isolation of the tower from other tall buildings in the area and its proximity to the historic buildings within the conservation area clearly lead to a significant

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impact on the conservation area and on historic views, both locally and within the London View Management Framework.

In the presentation, the height of the building was partly justified on analysis of tall building clusters in London including the immediate area around London Bridge. However, owing to the relative isolation noted above, the panel do not consider the proposed building to be part of this cluster, if indeed the existing morphology can meaningfully be called a cluster. The panel would welcome further clarification from the Local Authority on its own interpretation of appropriate heights in this area given the proximity of the Shard, the tallest building in London, and of Guy's Hospital Tower whose height the proposed tower is designed to match. What is needed is a spatial plan that covers the area to the east of the Conservation Area, defining where new tall buildings may be appropriate, for example as a series of punctuations along St Thomas Street, as has already begun to be established. In such an example the proposed tower at New City Court might form the western end stop.

It is unclear whether the height of the building has been informed by knowledge of other proposals for tall buildings in the local area in the planning pipeline, which would be a material consideration in evaluating height at this site.

### **Context, conservation area character and public realm**

The panel was impressed by the work undertaken to research local character and the attention to details of architectural and industrial history, in particular the yard typology that has informed the design.

The panel encourages the client and design team to be even more courageous and radical in breaking with office development conventions to create a truly heterogeneous urban public realm that is open to change and to diversity of people and uses, so capturing the vitality and edginess associated with the yards. The yards were insalubrious and unsafe and should not be romanticised, but there is an opportunity here to recover the energy and variety that thrives in historic urban fabric.

The panel was impressed by the proposed creation of a new entrance to the underground station together with the new public space to activate Kings Head Yard and integrate it into the public realm. The proposed development promises to seize a unique opportunity to enhance connectivity and public realm in the area.

We support the principle of defining the lobby of the tall building as public realm and applaud the design team's application of this approach as demonstrated in other commercial office buildings. We appreciate the way the security line has been positioned at the back of the lobby to make the lobby more public than private.

We also note the influence of the industrial warehouse and rail bridge features on the design of the tower facade. We consider that the design of the lobby could take more from the industrial elements of the context. For example, Borough Market and parts of London Bridge station derive much of their atmosphere from being underneath large scale infrastructure which forms a high 'ceiling' overhead. We strongly recommend exploring



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how the lobby could similarly be conceived as found space under the tower structure, with its walls fully opened up at least in good weather to make it truly part of an active public realm.

The panel welcomes the retention, repair and restoration of the historic terrace on St Thomas Street. In order to support a unique character to the area and wider regeneration efforts we recommend that different uses are explored for these buildings, perhaps as affordable studio space for new enterprises. This would support the vitality and diversity of use referred to above. It would also align with the GLA comments on other use of commercial space on the site as well as act as another reference to the plural histories of the conservation area as a space for industry, trade and services.

### Environmental impact

The panel are encouraged by the results of current studies on environmental impact of the proposal and are confident that more will be done to ensure that the tall building does not adversely affect the area surrounding the tower or fail to meet standards for sustainability.

However, we recommend exploring and testing alternative design solutions to mitigate wind effects. There could be downdrafts from southerly wind and winds across the northern façade may affect the tighter public place that links St Thomas Street with the centre of the site. We have some reservations about the simulation methodology, even though it is calibrated against physical wind tunnel data, and ask that the project team continue with wind testing utilising physical wind tunnelling approaches if available.

We were also encouraged by the strategy to design internal spaces for flexible use. We agree that this could reduce waste during construction and fit out while also attracting a greater variety of tenants in industries not currently associated with such commercial spaces. We recommend that this strategy is pursued in other areas of the proposal, as already demonstrated by the incorporation of battery storage and ongoing discussion of material choice.

### Gardens

The panel welcomes the provision of a publicly accessible green space within the tower. The position on the fourth floor is a considered and strategic one, taking advantage of the key historic views across Southwark and the local conservation area.

Although the panel is aware the project team has sought advice on the type and species of plants that would thrive in this environment, we recommend that the design team explore planting native species within the garden to provide a contextual link to other green spaces in the local area and avoiding unnecessary water and energy use to support exotic species.

While we applaud the aspiration to make the garden publicly accessible, the journey to the garden from the ground floor is disappointing. A visibly negotiable route to the garden from Kings Head Yard and the Underground exit would enliven the design and could even connect the garden seamlessly with ground level public space. The panel considers the current position of the lift to be unfortunate, as it obstructs southerly views and light from

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entering the garden. We recommend another position is found and integrated into the broader approach to access to the garden space.

The panel questions the need for the garden to be entirely glazed in. A possible alternative would be to conceptualise the garden as the roof of the lower floors and linked as discussed above with the public realm. Such openness would improve views out and be more comfortable in the summer.

Finally, we are concerned that future developments to the south may reduce the quality of the garden by interrupting southerly views and sunlight. As recommended elsewhere, we recommend that the project team consider how the area might grow and put in strategies for the garden to accommodate such change.


### Façade

While the panel is generally supportive of the detailing and material choice across the elevations, we believe further thought is required for all the facades and particularly the southern one. Our concern is that environmental factors such as solar gain and comfort may have not yet been explored fully.

The panel recommend an exploration of on how photovoltaic arrays, including translucent types, may work across the façades.

Thank you for consulting us and please keep us informed of the progress of the scheme. If there is any point that requires clarification, please contact us.

Yours sincerely,



### Theo Harrison

Design Council Cabe Advisor

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### Review process

Following a site visit, (and) discussions with the design team and local authority and a pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 16 May 2018 by Sunand Prasad (Chair), Kay Richardson, Amanda Reynolds, Simon Hudspeth, Jonathan Ward, Julie Fletcher. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

### Confidentiality

Since the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application, the advice contained in this letter is offered in confidence, on condition that we are kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of a planning application. We reserve the right to make our views known should the views contained in this letter be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). If you do not require our views to be kept confidential, please write to [dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk](mailto:dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk).

cc (by email only)

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### Attendees

|                    |                             |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Simon Allford      | AHMM                        |
| Haydn Thomas       | AHMM                        |
| Sara Martins       | AHMM                        |
| Robert Romanis     | AHMM                        |
| Pippa Walden-Jones | DP9                         |
| Hugh Morgan        | DP9                         |
| Peter Stewart      | PSC                         |
| David Farries      | GPE                         |
| James Shipton      | GPE                         |
| Victoria Crosby    | London Borough of Southwark |
| Michael Tsoukaris  | London Borough of Southwark |

### Design Council Cabe

|               |                     |
|---------------|---------------------|
| Theo Harrison | Design Council Cabe |
| Tom Perry     | Design Council Cabe |