30 November 2006

Mr John Benbow,
Liverpool City Council,
Regeneration, Planning and Building Control,
Municipal Buildings,
Dale Street,
Liverpool L2 2DH

Dear John,

Application Ref. 06F/1371
Site: Plot 7, Princes Parade, Princes Dock, Liverpool
Proposal: To amend application to erect mixed use development

The Merseyside Civic Society is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the above planning application. In summary, our view is that the above proposal should be rejected in its present form, based upon a number of criteria, in particular, the failure to demonstrate how the development, of such an important site, relates to its immediate surroundings. Before offering our principal comments, we note a number of significant features of the physical context of the proposed new development.

The scheme proposes a cluster of three buildings around a ‘piazza’ as part of the Princes Dock development. The plot is the closest in proximity to the Liver Building and Pier Head and fronts onto Princes Parade and the River Mersey.

The proposed mix includes a luxury hotel, spa, commercial and a large proportion of residential in a combination of two, one bed and studio apartments. It is understood that these proposals have been revised from the original application of May 2005, the most notable revision being the reduction in height of the proposed residential tower from ground plus 23 floors to ground plus 16 floors.

These proposals are most notable in their apparent lack of a contextual response to this significant setting. The planning package is disappointing in its lack of a wider contextual appreciation and analysis of the impact of this development, both in siting and massing, given the importance of this location and its potential contribution, not only to the world class waterfront but also as a counterpoint to balance the proposals at the southern edge of the Pier Head public space (Museum of Liverpool).

The proposal to encourage use of the proposed piazza as an extension to the Pier Head public space may be a legitimate premise but no evidence is provided in the documentation to support this proposition. The dearth of substantive urban design analysis to substantiate this aspiration is compounded by the uninspiring form taken by the landscape/public realm proposals.

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The design statement refers to a ‘family of buildings’ but what is questionable is the degree of genetic compatibility can be discerned between this disparate collection. This challenge is particularly evident when viewed from Pier Head, towards the hotel, which displays a different language of fenestration from the rest of the complex. There are no common datums or reference points with respect to the individual compositions which could offer the opportunity to achieve visual harmony. The proposed glass boxes, which are straddled by pilotti at the lower levels, vary in height from two storey to three storey and create visual confusion.

The reduced height to the tower has not been balanced with a reappraisal of the appropriateness of the proposed cantilever - and the overall composition appears lumpen and static rather than graceful and dynamic. Even at its reduced height, the relationship to the Liver Building of the proposed residential tower is uncomfortable as is the proportion of the main block facing the river, both of which lack any grace in their form.

The proposed materials give further cause for concern. The choice of reconstituted Portland Stone matches the tonality of the Pier Head complex. However, if viewed in its wider context, the framing initiated by the Mann Island proposals offers the opportunity for a contrasting palette which may be a more legitimate approach. In addition, the proposed self-coloured render and fritted glass presents a palette which is ubiquitous in commercial properties, but not necessarily appropriate for further re-use in a significant development on a world class waterfront.

The supporting documentation suggests that the architects have increased the number of units despite the tower being reduced in height. Investigation of the proposed mix raises the question of the sustainability of the number of studio and one bed flats. The ‘lights off’ phenomenon displayed by some residential blocks in the city would be hugely detrimental in this particular location.

Overall, the absence of adequate contextual analysis and robust narrative makes it very difficult to understand how the architects have arrived at this scheme.

Yours sincerely

Peter Brown (Dr)