

Design Review: The Shard

Designed by Renzo Piano

Building Workshop

Southwark

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We welcome the opportunity to review this scheme at an early stage prior to a planning application being submitted. We applaud the client for taking the bold decision to acquire this site and therefore be in a position to deal with the station's public approach and entrance comprehensively; CABE's only, but significant, concern with the Shard of Glass proposal is its failure to substantially improve the public realm at London Bridge Station due to the constraints of the site. This scheme now allows the client to address CABE's concerns and we therefore consider the tower proposal to be incomplete without this project. CABE supports the opportunity this project provides to undertake a comprehensive approach to providing unprecedented improvements to one of London's major rail terminals.

We are delighted to note that a building of this scale in this prominent location is designed by an eminent architect and proven team. As with the tower, the involvement by the architect throughout the project will have a considerable bearing on whether the proposal will achieve the highest quality; we would hope that this will be the case.

We have two areas where we think some further thought is required; the first with regard to the landscape proposal, and the second with regard to the clarity of the detail of the architecture.

Landscape/public realm

We feel that the landscape proposal at the moment lacks the clarity and richness of the architecture. At the very least the landscape proposition should be of the same quality and clarity as the tower and New London Bridge House. Fundamentally, the space needs to improve the public environment and provide a clearer more legible part of the city. Whilst we think that at a strategic level it does this well by providing a direct visual link to Southwark Cathedral down London Bridge Street and focussing pedestrian movement onto this street, we think in detail the proposal is less convincing. What should the space be about, how should it work? We would like to see how the design emerges from an analysis of the opportunities and constraints of the site, for example what of the sunlight and the impact this might have on the behaviour of those in the space? Are there opportunities to allow light down to the underground concourse below? We recognise that this is clearly a place of movement which is dominated at the moment by the demands of buses; we think it should nevertheless be a great place to be and respond at a detailed level to making it a memorable, attractive urban landscape. At present we do

not feel that the landscape proposal is being tackled with the same level of commitment and rigour as the buildings.

This leads us on to note that unfortunately the one thing that the architect has no influence upon is the issue that creates the most confusion and conflict in the space, namely the presence of buses. It was evident that the design team has done what it can to provide a solution that allocates the required space to buses and defends the provision of space for pedestrians. However we feel that, given the demands by Transport for London for significant bus space, there is simply too much expected of this space to allow the improvements to be as comprehensive and significant as they should be. The development of the two buildings presents an unparalleled opportunity to ensure that the public realm in and around London Bridge Station is upgraded to the highest quality. If the townscape around the station can be dealt with in a comprehensive way we see no reason why buses cannot stop on the surrounding streets. This proposal provides an undeniable improvement on the current situation but does not fundamentally change the nature of the space. We would strongly urge Transport for London to look again at this issue in the light of urban design principles.

Architecture

We recognise that this is early days for the design of the building and we are pleased to be able to offer comment at a useful time in the process.

We think that this is an acceptable location for a building of this scale; there are a number of taller buildings around it of some height and mass. A building of quality at the south end of London Bridge would be a welcome addition to the townscape view across the river from the north. In addition, we support the architect's proposition that the main pedestrian route from the station should be London Bridge Street; we think that the opportunity provided by the design to open the view of Southwark Cathedral to the commuters leaving the station is to be applauded and the way the proposal responds to the sinuous geometry of the railway is very promising. The visual connection between the station and the Cathedral is at present blocked and we think that opening it out creates the potential to make it an important local view in this part of London. In terms of its scale, massing and detail we think this building should relate to the tower. We note that the tower is angular and elegant in its design and we feel that something of this nature needs to inform the design of New London Bridge House. At the moment there appears to be a lack of clarity

between the various representations of the building, with some indicating a more horizontal composition and others more vertical. It seems to us that the vertical fractures should play a more meaningful role, for example the winter gardens suggest transparent vertical intervals that allow a more fragmented language to emerge which would correspond to the articulation of the Shard. As with any proposal, its quality will depend as much on getting the detail right as getting the underlying strategy right, and in this respect, we wonder how achievable it is to make the sparkling surface work. We think that further work is required to test the elevations of the proposal, to get the relationship between opacity and transparency, and horizontal and vertical right.

In conclusion, we recognise the inherent complexities of this project and applaud both the client and the architects for approaching it with such vigour. We think that the proposal has the potential to be a fine addition to this significant part of London and we support it subject to the concerns we raise above. However, we think there is further work to be done to create a really good public space next to the station, by not just the design team but all the public agencies involved in taking this proposal forward and we urge them to work closely together to ensure that the opportunity this scheme provides is not wasted. Finally we think that this scheme and the tower proposal are of a piece and cannot be considered separately. We hope that the local planning authority ensures through its negotiations that this major public space will be delivered irrespective of how the two projects are phased and delivered.

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