Attachment 2 – Design Review Panel Comments

Wollongong Design Review Panel Meeting Student Accommodation for the University of Wollongong Building 120, Northfields Avenue DA-2014/1474

19th February 2015

Wollongong City Council Administration Building, Level 10 Committee Room 1

Present:

Gary Hudson, University of Wollongong Bruce Flint, University of Wollongong Sam Elias, Hutchinson Builders (Applicant) Stuart McDonald, SJB Planning John Chia, Group GSA Lisa Marie Carrigan, Group GSA Pana Tsironis, Instruct Corp

Jessica Saunders, Wollongong City Council Andrew Kite, Wollongong City Council John Wood, Wollongong City Council Mark Riordan, Wollongong City Council Vivian Lee, Wollongong City Council

Brendan Randles, Panel member

David Jarvis, Panel member

Project description

The proposal consists of a 7 storey building containing 215 units, providing accommodation for up to 261 post graduate students. An at grade secure car park containing 42 parking spaces is proposed to the east of the building. Communal facilities are provided for the students at the lower ground floor level.

<u>Context</u>

A Campus Master Plan was tabled by the applicant. The Master Plan provides an analysis of the current campus and outlines potential development opportunities on both sides of Northfields Avenue, the new bridge location and anticipated retail areas. The area within which this current application is proposed is relatively small and isolated from the main campus by the busy landscaped avenue, Northfields Avenue. From the master plan and discussion with the applicant the following was observed:

- A pedestrian bridge is proposed, linking this area and the adjoining residential neighbourhood with the main campus. The bridge is shown running through the centre of the current proposal; however it was advised by the applicant that the bridge is currently proposed to be located to the west of the proposal.
- A future built form, similar in scale to the current proposal will be located to the east of this proposal, fronting the corner of Northfields Avenue and Irvine Street.
- Buildings of a smaller scale will be located to the south of the primary building forms fronting Northfields Avenue. The intent of these buildings is to help provide a transitional scale with the adjoining residential neighbourhood to the south which consists predominantly of one and two storey single dwellings.
- A childcare centre will be located on the southern side of the proposed student residence.

The aim of any master plan is to set out a framework within which future development can progress in an ordered manner, ensuring that buildings are developed to relate to each other and their future context appropriately. Apparently, a number of iterations were prepared for discussion, with various options for childcare and parking, these options were not presented to the panel.

However, as currently proposed, the childcare centre will sit within the shadow of the proposed 7 storey student residence building. If this goes ahead, opportunities to provide both internal and external play areas that receive required solar access during winter months will be extremely limited. Consideration must therefore be given to how these two buildings relate to each other if a functional childcare centre with a good level of amenity is to be provided at a later date. If a reasonable level of amenity cannot be provided to the childcare centre alternative strategies should be explored. By locating the car park to the south of the proposed student accommodation and allowing the student accommodation to front Northfields Avenue a childcare centre with good solar access and an address to the main street can be provided. This approach would also allow a landscaped buffer to be provided between the student accommodation and the adjoining residential properties.

Scale / density

The main university campus is located on the northern side of Northfields Avenue. The master plan outlines a strategy to reinforce that side of the street with buildings up to 8 stories in height, defining the Campus edge, providing street definition, expressing a landscaped setback to reinforce Northfields Avenue character and allowing views between buildings to the landscaped grounds of the university.

The proposed student residence site is located on the southern side of Northfields Avenue, with Kooloobong Oval and the Botanical Gardens to the west, smaller detached buildings to the east and a small scale residential precinct to its south. In contrast to the northern side of the street's eight storey built form, the south will remain largely free of built form and be dominated by landscape. Given the very different contextual settings of the two sides of the streets, it is questionable that buildings of very similar scales are proposed on both sides of

the street. It is suggested that built form on the southern side of Northfield Avenue should provide a transition in scale between the main university campus and the surrounding area. A scale between 4-5 residential storeys is considered to be a more appropriate response to this site.

Built form

The applicant explained that the building entrance was located on the end of the building rather than in a more central location, to allow the communal north facing court yard to function as a single space secured from the street. It was also explained that the entry was positioned on the eastern end (as opposed to the west) to provide a more direct connection to the car park and provide separation from the pedestrian link connecting with the future bridge to the west of the building.

Though this configuration reflects a certain logic (if the car park position were to be supported), it does little to strengthen the typological parti of the building or engage with its avenue context. For example, an entry in between the two opposing limbs would better engage the courtyard and provide more autonomy between the two wings. If the building were able to be accessed directly from the Avenue, it would better activate the street and make better use of the lifts, and so on. However, as proposed, the current entry results in a building with a 60m long double loaded corridor serviced by lifts located at one end only. Travel distances from lifts to the western units are likely to be excessive in fact. Therefore, the Panel recommends that the building's circulation be reviewed. Ideally an additional lift – and entry - would be provided at the western end of the building or the lifts be more centrally located.

Amenity

Large communal spaces have been provided at lower ground floor level to service all of the 261 students occupying this building. Though these spaces provide important social spaces for a large gathering, they lack the intimacy necessary to help create social bonds between smaller groups of students. To help foster a greater sense of community within the building it is recommended that social spaces / living areas are provided on each floor. This will provide spaces that are used by much smaller groups of students, helping to form a bond between groups of student occupying the same floor.

Two bed room units located on the corners of the building are configured to provide deep narrow living spaces, exactly the same configuration as those provided for the single bed studios. It is suggested that the quality of these rooms could be improved by re-orientating the bed rooms to allow the living spaces to be located on the external corner of each unit, providing more natural light and an improved outlook from living rooms.

Environmental

It is not uncommon for student accommodation buildings to generate double loaded corridors, with some units receiving little or no direct solar access. It is acknowledged that given the typology of building and associated economic constrains that compliance with the RFDC rules of thumb for solar access and cross ventilation would be too arduous. However this makes it all the more important that alternative steps to improve the environmental credentials of the building are taken.

The applicant's description of measures taken regarding selection of materials, use of solar panels, water reuse and solar shading are commendable. The applicant is encouraged to get a formal assessment and recognition of the proposals environmental credentials by applying for a green star rating.

<u>Aesthetic</u>

Generally, the aesthetics of the building have been handled in a competent manner. However, the Panel question the height of the building in this location and suggest that it be more transitional in scale. The entry and steps up appear awkward as proposed and the courtyard appears somewhat detached from the functioning of the building and is at risk of detracting from the building's vibrancy.

Social dimension

The proposal is appropriately located to provide convenient residential accommodation for students.

When grouping together 261 young adults in a single residential building the potential social implication must be understood and addressed. Locating the main communal area on the north side of the building away from the adjacent residential properties is a sensible strategy. However the applicant is encouraged to develop more opportunities for smaller groups of students to socialise.

Summary

The organisation of built forms outlined in the master plan is questionable, it is major a concern that the area allocated for the proposed childcare centre receives little solar access in mid winter (refer to drawing N1110). Consideration must be given to how these two buildings relate to each other if a functional childcare centre with a good level of amenity is to be provided at a later date. The resolution of this issue may impact upon some fundamental design decisions that have been made, such as where the car park is located and how this relates to the entry process and vertical circulation cores

It is suggested that the built form on the southern side of the street should provide a transition in scale between the main university campus and the surrounding area. A scale between 4-5 residential storeys is considered to be a more appropriate response to this site.

To help foster a greater sense of community it is recommended that social spaces / living areas are provided on each floor of the building. Consideration should also be given to room layout to provide better amenity to living areas.