

38/2003/627

W & H DEVELOPMENTS LTD

CHANGE OF USE AND CONVERSION OF BUILDING TO FORM 9 FLATS AND ONE MAISONETTE, HUNTS COURT, CORPORATION STREET, TAUNTON AS AMENDED BY AGENTS LETTER DATED 7TH JANUARY, 2004 AND DRAWINGS 0309/01B, 05A AND 06A ATTACHED

22583/24469

FULL PERMISSION

PROPOSAL

Hunts Court is a Grade II listed building. It was purpose built as the former Somerset College of Arts and is an imposing neo-classical building dated 1905. It was last used by the Social Services Department of Somerset County Council. A proposal to subdivide into twelve flats and one maisonette was refused in May 2003 on the grounds that the loss of some original internal walls and the introduction of numerous new partitions would seriously compromise the original layout of the building and that the proposal lacked detail with regard to the full extent of alterations required to facilitate the buildings use for residential purposes.

This revised proposal reduces the number of flats from twelve to nine and provides more detailed information on how the conversion may be achieved and an appraisal of the important features of the building. A marketing report has also been submitted indicating that despite the active marketing and publicity the building has received no financially backed commercially viable proposal whether for community or commercial use.

CONSULTATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

COUNTY HIGHWAY AUTHORITY no objection. COUNTY ARCHAEOLOGIST this site lies within the Area of high Archaeological Potential next to the schedule area of the Taunton Castle Moat. Applicant should therefore be required to provide archaeological monitoring of the development and report on any discoveries made. Suggest relevant condition. WESSEX WATER refer to sewer crossing the site and need for protection. POLICE ARCHITECTURAL LIAISON OFFICER the entrances on both the basement level and the ground floor level have limited opportunities for natural surveillance. This is particularly very relevant to the basement entrance. The situation could be slightly improved by the removal of the wall at the entrance next to the steps. If this was replaced with railings, similar to the gates, then some natural surveillance opportunities would be possible and the entrances would appear more 'open' and safer to use. Adequate external security lighting should also be installed to cover these areas. I would also recommend that a system of access control, using intercom possibly with CCTV facility, should be installed at both entrances.

TOWN CENTRE PARTNERSHIP We appreciate that this revision reduces the number of units proposed, thus the internal space is less 'carved -up' (as per our previous concerns). There is however no provision for public access to this listed building, and a

'mixed- use' for this building would be preferable in this town centre location. Given the Master plan proposals for this area of Taunton, suggested in the Terence O'Rourke study, the use of this building solely for residential use, would appear to run counter to those suggested therein, for Hunt's Court to play a significant role in the area designated the 'Cultural Quarter'. I know that strenuous efforts are being made for the building to fulfil an arts based role. Perhaps planning applications that would prevent the building from contributing to the Master plan, should be deferred until such time as a definitive decision has been made on the alternative use for Hunt's Court as an art centre, has been reached. The work that has been done to clean the external elevations of Hunts Court is very much appreciated and has done a great deal to enhance Corporation St. CIVIC SOCIETY maintain earlier objection on grounds that any plans for residential use here would be inappropriate.

CONSERVATION OFFICER 1. The amended plans and letter of clarification, received 8th January, 2004, produce a much improved scheme to that refused under 28/2003/165. This is in no small part due to the reduction in the number of proposed flats from 12 to 9, 2. Confirmation from Building Control re the acceptability of the proposed ventilation is required to negate reason for refusal attached to 38/2003/165. 3. PPG15 understandably advises that clearly the best use for a building, is that for which it was designed. As reuse of Hunts Courts as an Arts College is negated by the SCAT facilities, clearly this is not an option. 4. Finding a new use for an historic building, particularly one that is listed, is one of the most import and sensitive assessments that need to be made. In respect of this, the principle aim is to identify the optimum viable use that is compatible with the fabric, interior and setting of the building. The options available to Hunts Court, have however been limited by the covenant put on the sale by S.C.C. 5. In assessing the current proposal, the following is of direct relevance:- (a) the proposals seek to and achieve in the main, the rectification of inappropriate alterations carried out by the former owner. (b) the conversion entails the subdivision of main, original lofty spaces in the following areas:- (i) modelling - as part of proposed flat 7. (ii) woodwork - as part of proposed flat 3. (iii) lecture room - as part of proposed flat 4. (iv) elementary room - by subdivision to from flats 3 and 4. (v) light and shade - by subdivision to form flat 6, which includes the insertion of a mezzanine. (vi) subdivision of an unnamed space to rear at first floor. (vii) painting room - as part of subdivision to form flats 5 and 6. Conclusion:- whilst the current proposals are a significant improvement, in terms of spatial subdivision, to that refused under 38/2003/165, I am still of the opinion that certain designed spaces are compromised to the extent that I can only still raise an objection.

DRAINAGE OFFICER no observations. LEISURE DEVELOPMENT OFFICER S.106 please request 3 x 1 bed dwellings at £850.00 per dwelling for off-site playing pitch provision £2,550.00. 7 x 2+ bed dwellings (being 6 x 3 beds and 1 x 2 beds) at £2,050.00 per dwelling towards play and open space provision £14,350.00. Improvement to the gardens to the side of the property could be an option. Developers could be asked to draw up a specification for this and subject to our approval carry out the works as part/all of the S.106. COMMUNITY ARTS OFFICER (a) CHANGE OF USE As I understand it, the application would necessitate a change from the current office use to residential use. The Vision for Taunton flags up Hunts Court in the master plan as an integral part of the development of the Cultural Quarter. Several agencies and partners are keen to see the Old Art School remain in the public domain for a number of reasons. The Cultural Consortium see the Old Art School as a key driver in the

regeneration of the Cultural Quarter. They are currently consulting stakeholders about their needs and will be putting forward their response to the master plan, making recommendations for the whole of the Castle Green area including Hunts Court to Taunton Deane Borough Council. It would therefore be premature to change the use to residential use, since new planning guidelines coming out in October are likely to seek to retain Hunts Court for commercial activities. (b) ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL There is an alternative proposal currently being developed. As community arts officer for Taunton Deane Borough Council, I have been researching a proposal to develop a Creative Enterprise Centre at Hunts Court. This will include a county art gallery, a writers' cafe, an art bar, a community arts resource, artists' & makers' studios, shops and offices for other creative enterprises. This concept of supporting incubation units until they reach sustainability follows RDA policy of investing in creative industries, and is far more in line with the original purpose of the building. We are currently researching the feasibility of the proposal by testing it against the market. Arthur C. Clarke Foundation are interested in taking the whole of the basement. Somerset Art Gallery Trust are working with Somerset Art Week and The Brewhouse to develop a regional art gallery on the ground floor. Somerset College of Arts and Technology are interested in renting space on the top 2 floors in the longer term while other makers and artists are being informed about the opportunity. It would not be necessary to subdivide the building as it is proposed in the residential planning application. Instead, this listed building could be returned more to its former glory and usage, rather than the subdivisions it has currently undergone under SCC ownership, and the further divisions it would undergo as flats. Hunts Court is a valuable asset to Taunton. The RDA have indicated they will consider involvement in Hunts Court as part of the wider Taunton Vision, specifically as part of the Cultural Quarter. We are currently exploring sources of set up funds for the first initial year, to pilot the scheme. The owners and developers are aware of this proposal, and have indicated to me that they would prefer the Creative Enterprise Centre option to selling the building off as residential flats. They have been patient in understanding that it takes time to work up a feasible solution and draw in external funds to do this, and are prepared to lease Hunts Court on a pilot basis for a year. They have indicated to the press and myself that they see the planning application for residential use as necessary to secure a fall back option.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER (Housing Standards)

1. All building works should be carried out in accordance with the current Building Regulations.
2. An appropriate automatic fire detection system is to be fitted to the individual lettings and Common/circulation areas.
3. In relation to all habitable rooms in the lower ground floor Housing Standards have concerns regarding the provision of suitable and sufficient natural light and ventilation to these rooms, in view of the existing bars and obstructing walls.
4. In regard to the Maisonette it is strongly recommended that the window in the ground floor kitchen/lounge shall have a minimum opening area of 550 mm x 800 mm to allow rescue by the Fire Brigade, or for egress by the occupants.

8 LETTERS OF OBJECTION have been received on the following grounds:- should have a cultural use; an arts centre would be in keeping with proposed growth status; building is ideally suited for teaching and display of art; buildings structure, on a largely restricted ground floor, its large windows and high room heights, and top floor roof lighting all mitigate against residential use; a decision before the O'Rourke study would be premature; residential use would not fit comfortably with the other activities of Corporation Street.

POLICY CONTEXT

The site lies within the Taunton Central Area where in accordance with Policy H1 and H4 of the Taunton Deane Local Plan Revised Deposit there is a presumption in favour of the principle of new residential development. However, Policy EN18 states that the change of use, alteration, conversion or extension of a listed building will not be permitted unless:- (A) the internal and external fabric of the building including its architectural and historic features would be preserved, leaving them in situ where possible; (B) the buildings internal space would be retained where this is important to its character or historic integrity; (C) no subdivision of a garden or other green space would occur, where this would harm the buildings's character, setting and historic integrity; (D) the design, materials and building methods used are sympathetic to the age, character and appearance of the building. Natural materials reflecting those in the original building should be used, where possible; (E) any extension is sufficiently limited in scale so as not to dominate the original building or adversely affect this appearance. This accords with advice in PPG15 which indicates that "listed buildings do vary greatly in the extent to which they can accommodate change without loss of special interest, some may be sensitive even to slight alterations, this is especially true of buildings with interiors and fitting." What is particularly relevant in this case is the comment that better solutions are possible where an applicant is willing to exploit unorthodox spaces rather than then set a standardised requirement.

ASSESSMENT

The development plan clearly indicates that residential use would be appropriate in this type of location. Whilst the master plan being prepared by Terence O'Rourke sees this site as part of a new cultural quarter, this study is still in the process of preparation and does not yet constitute supplementary planning guidance. The master plan is a material consideration but can only carry limited weight when balanced against the policies of the Local Plan which have been rigorously tested through the Local Plan Inquiry process. Refusal on the grounds that the building must be used for cultural purposes would therefore be difficult to justify. However the master planning work does provide some confidence that should the building remain empty in the short term, in the longer term support and possible funding may be available to secure its reuse for cultural purposes.

The determining factor in the assessment of this proposal is whether the previous concerns in relation to the impact of subdivisions on the character of the building have been overcome. Overall, this is an improved scheme which appears to have resolved the issues relating to the ability to comply with building regulations. As indicated by the Council's Conservation Officer the proposals are generally successful in rectifying the inappropriate alterations carried out by the County Council. However, in order to accommodate the number of dwellings proposed some of the more important spaces are still compromised through subdivision. The proposal therefore fails to meet the necessary test of Policy EN18 and conflicts with the guidance in PPG15.

RECOMMENDATION

Permission be REFUSED for reason that the introduction of numerous partitions will seriously compromise the original layout of the building and hence be detrimental to the

character of this Grade II listed building, contrary to Policy 9 of the Somerset and Exmoor National Park Joint Structure Plan Review, Policies EN17 and EN18 of the Taunton Deane Local Plan Revised Deposit and guidance as such matters in PPG15.

In preparing this report the Planning Officer has considered fully the implications and requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998.

CONTACT OFFICER: 356464 MR T BURTON

NOTES: