05 February 2017.

RE: Proposed apartment complex, Mein and Owen Streets, Newtown.

Hi Vince,

I’ve read the application drawings and AEE thank you. I am familiar with this scheme through the pre-application process the applicant has undertaken, where a couple of initial layout options were presented along with discussion of their relative merits.

Other design modifications have since occurred following consultation with the community. This has reduced the bulk, dominance and shadow effects from the scheme as originally lodged, and has an appearance of 4 stepped blocks following the natural landform facing Owen Street. The layout arising from those discussions is that shown in the application.

Overall, this application is supported in terms of urban design, subject to recommended conditions of consent.

Disclaimer: The author has left Council’s employ for a new role, and has prepared this assessment prior to final application documents being lodged. Should the final design be substantially different from earlier variants a new assessment should be prepared.

The Proposal
The site and context is described within the AEE. In summary, the application seeks to construct a new apartment complex on vacant land at the back of an existing hospice complex. The scope of work includes the refurbishment of three existing dwellings accessed from Mein Street. All three houses are pre-1930s in age, with two contributing to the original character of Newtown and the third, located at the interface with properties fronting Owen Street, having been significantly modified.

The new apartment block will contain a cafeteria space and associated garden area for on-site hospice workers (i.e. will not be open to the public) but otherwise is a residential development. My understanding of future tenure is that all units will be held within a single ownership and used as rental accommodation to provide supplementary income for the hospice operations.

Character, context, and fit
The site is zoned as a special housing area, allowing for a maximum of 6 floors of residential accommodation on the site. The resulting bulk complies with all recession planes in terms of dominance, but is markedly different from the surrounding housing stock. Having said that, the hospice site is something of an anomaly in that it occupies a localised ridgetop, is large in scale (albeit uses a domestic language), and is located opposite a large power plant for Wellington hospital.

In my opinion the character of the wider area/context can be fairly described as mixed, in terms of existing uses, bulk, scale, materials and building age. The area is comprised of predominantly free standing houses, some converted into flats, but with residential activity the dominant use. This will
be repeated by the proposal although the inclusion of small apartments will increase the diversity of housing stock in the immediate area.

The site contains an existing tree on the upper slopes that is large, in good health, and provides amenity within the site and for adjoining properties. Although not afforded any formal protection, the proposed building is set back behind the tree leaving a sloping lawn area as a spatial buffer between the proposed buildings and adjoining houses. The open space is grassed and able to be accessed by all apartments via common lobbies.

The apartments are located hard against the rear of the existing hospice complex, partially concealing an unattractive (to my eye) elevation held aloft by piers. Given its tight proximity to the hospice, and a markedly different use, the proposed layout wisely locates communal circulation areas to the rear and orients most units in an easterly direction out over Newtown. A smaller number of units face west, with sightlines out over the hospice below. No units facing due north as this would look directly into the back of the existing houses, to be refurbished and also used as rental accommodation. With all units oriented east or west, compliance with guidance for minimum solar access mid-winter will be achieved.

The main entrance and lobby for the complex is located at ground level and is accessed from a driveway from Owen Street. This is a logical location as it allows for a sense of address, and sightlines to/from a public road rather than relying on signage and side yards spaces accessed from Mein Street. It also allows taxis to pick up and drop off people within the site, with the lobby sized to accommodate some seating while waiting. The entrance is next to an on-site parking area screened from view by a fence and retractable gate.

The apartments terminate against the sky with a simple horizontal parapet. Although there is little in the way of detail that makes this particularly memorable, the overall building mass has instead been broken into blocks with each stepping down the slope such that the skyline has a varied expression where visible from surrounding streets.

Difference is further accentuated by each block being clad in different materials from its immediate neighbour, and a third scale of detail introduced through variations in balcony design. In my opinion this successfully distributes overall massing into smaller scaled forms, some taller than they are wide and vice versa. Coupled with changes in materials and colours, variety has been created that reflects organic growth found elsewhere in the neighbourhood, and is significantly more successful than if the building were expressed as one singular form with one singular expression.

The colours I find somewhat strident, and further emphasize the difference between the proposed building and surrounding houses. I note the District Plan places no restrictions on colour (as far as I am aware), and to my mind the colour and tone of the building has the potential to be altered if this were considered desirable. My s.92 request has posed the question of colour to the applicant, and may be amenable to this change if this were seen as beneficial to adjoining properties that will look directly at the building. On colour however, I think it important that each form is readily differentiated from its neighbour for the massing strategy to be successful.

In terms of privacy on adjoining sites, council typically uses the distance of 2.0m to provide a setback for residential balconies if located at first floor level as an acceptable distance between buildings and adjoining boundaries. In this case a significantly larger buffer is provided. As Council does not restrict where living rooms are located within buildings, these could be provided in elevated positions relative to all properties located on Owen Street, with overlooking occurring.
In this case, with the site being designated a Special Housing Area that permits 6 stories in terms of height, and with the building complying with recession planes, there is little that would prevent a greater degree of overlooking from occurring. Having said that, the applicant has gone to some effort to minimise this where possible through setback, tree retention, and balcony design. It would not be uncommon for apartment blocks to contain a similar total number of residents living in fewer (but larger) apartments, or a similar number of eyes overlooking adjacent properties, so I do not believe a larger number of smaller sized units creates any kind of additional negative effect than if the units were in a different configuration.

Proposed balconies are modest in size but scaled to the apartments they serve. Their size is offset by communal decks and open spaces available for use elsewhere within the site, and the relatively unobstructed long distance vistas available from their elevated position that enhances the sense of spaciousness. Their small size acts as an extension of the living room rather than as a standalone space. It precludes large gatherings from occurring, and are more likely to accommodate a single chair to read a paper or drink coffee, being relatively passive uses. Balconies vary in design and expression, with railing design differing according to location that discourages direct overlooking of Owen Street properties. In particular, railing designs at lower levels preclude direct sightlines when residents are sitting.

For further analysis:
At the time of writing the author has not sighted final building details with these to be checked off once submitted:

i. Materials. These are expected to be those typically used in similar scaled developments elsewhere. I recommend that individual masses be clad in differently to one another, with alternating blocks clad in materials that do not require differentiation via paint to ensure variety is maintained at all times. This forms a recommended condition of consent.

ii. Refuse storage and collection areas. I assume these will be located at ground level, externally accessed within the carpark area, and conveniently accessible from within the building.

iii. Bike storage areas. I would assume these will be co-located with the vehicle parking area and will be convenient to access internally, secure, and with a roof/ all weather protection to enhance their use.

iv. Letterboxes. I have assumed these can/will be accommodated in or around the lobby area and meet the requirements of NZ Post’s delivery criteria.

v. Landscaping plan, with final details forming a recommended condition of consent.

Summary
Many of these aspects lie outside the requirements of the District Plan, and make a tangible contribution to the broader life of Wellington City as a place where one can live, work, and play. In short this is a good scheme and has urban design support, subject to the following recommended conditions of consent:

1. The applicant shall submit final details of all building materials including maintenance schedule, finish, and colour for approval (monitoring officer in conjunction with urban design) prior to lodging building consent.
2. The applicant shall submit final details of all balcony railing designs for approval (monitoring officer in conjunction with urban design) prior to lodging building consent.
3. The applicant shall submit final details of all landscaping and siteworks proposed for approval (monitoring officer in conjunction with urban design) prior to lodging building consent. This shall include details of all communal recreational areas on the site, as well as all hardstanding surfaces, finished levels, walls, screens, gates, materials, plants and external lighting.

Regards

Chad McMan
Urban Design RMA | City Planning: District Plan | Wellington City Council
P 04 803 8761 | M 021 227 8761 | F
E Chad.McMan@wcc.govt.nz | W Wellington.govt.nz