



Design review helped a challenging scheme win consent. Thomas Homes sought a residential development on part of the historic Railway Works involving the rescue of the Chain Test House (listed II). The collaboration of housebuilder, local planning authority and South West Design Review Panel led to a successful regeneration scheme.*



The Site and Scheme Outline - The site of 1.96 hectares was the last major land parcel of the Railway Works Conservation Area to be regenerated. The site included the former Chain Test House buildings (grade II*) that were then on the Heritage at Risk Register that noted 'poor' condition and that future reuse would be 'problematic'.

This scheme involved conversion of the Chain Test House buildings for new homes and the restoration, for public display, of the testing pit and machinery where chains used to be tested for strength. The scheme also included new build development, landscaped open space and car parking.



The Review Process - The Old Railway Quarter was brought to the Panel by Thomas Homes who were anxious about achieving planning permission on a challenging conservation site where four developers had failed to get schemes off the ground. The review process had two stages. The first by a multi-disciplinary panel of five (three from SWDRP; two from CABE) was preceded by a site visit. The second, two months later, reviewed the changes made consequent on the first review.

The Panel's Recommendations - The Panel was supportive of the scheme in principle and keen to see it go ahead. They asked for a gap to give the main listed building breathing space and for the architecture of the new not to defer to the listed buildings but to have a strength and quality sparked by the old. They also made suggestions to increase the value of the proposed public square and to improve the parking areas.

*"Design Review made significant improvements to our proposals." Chris Brotherton
DIRECTOR - THOMAS HOMES*

Design Development - The design team engaged thoughtfully in the process and took up all the Panel's points. The main listed building was given greater clarity while the courtyard gained a more legible public route across it and greater containment provided by the merging of three buildings into a single horseshoe building. The raw parking became a pedestrian-friendly boulevard with two distinct areas.



Giving Confidence to the Main Stakeholders - Thomas Homes were keen to bring this scheme to Design Review. Previous experience had taught them that members of the Panel bring a clear minded and informed approach to assessing any scheme.

Swindon Borough Council had been co-ordinating the regeneration of the Railway Works area for over twenty years. They had facilitated many successful regeneration schemes but on this site it was particularly challenging to combine preserving and enhancing the historic character with a viable development.

Forward Swindon's vision was to redefine the Railway Heritage Quarter as a destination for culture, learning, working and living. They wished to see a quality scheme with heritage benefits but were well aware that viability was tougher in Swindon where property values are markedly lower than say Bristol or Reading. They did not want a fifth scheme to perish.

English Heritage (now Historic England) had expressed concern regarding 'the nature, form and design of the development' and needed to have assurances about the future of the Chain Test House buildings.

Easing the Path to a Consent - Following the two design reviews, Swindon Borough Council, Forward Swindon and English Heritage were all backing the scheme.

Swindon Borough Council granted consent for the final scheme. They commended Thomas Homes for being 'brave' in view of the wide range of challenges at the site and the failure of previous attempts. Not only were the listed buildings safeguarded but the layout of the new buildings and the landscaping scheme, they felt, helped to reinforce the setting of other listed buildings across the Railway Works Conservation Area. The landscaping created 'a sense of cohesion and distinctiveness with the remainder of the former works'.

Forward Swindon aided a scheme that met the challenges of the site and yet was viable and could therefore go ahead to ensure the successful long-term use of the site.

English Heritage could see that the Chain Test House Buildings would be fully restored and accessible to the wider community. The site could then be removed from the Heritage at Risk Register. And their concerns about the design of the new build were allayed.





*“The South West Design Review Panel has been instrumental in shaping the final scheme.”
Swindon Borough Council*

Improving the Scheme - The final scheme more fully exploited the opportunities of the site to celebrate the listed buildings and to offer pleasing and useful open space.

There was also a bonus. The scheme put to the first review had 181 flats. At the second, after the reconfiguration suggested by the Panel, the number was 201. Good design, all too often characterised as ‘costly’, here added twenty units and so helped ensure the viability of a challenging scheme.

The Old Railway Quarter is substantially complete. The redevelopment is an exemplar of heritage-led regeneration. It has won a Best High Volume New Housing Development (2015), Best Renovation award (2016) and is shortlisted for an RTPI award (2017).

The value of design review - The way design review improves schemes is widely acknowledged. Less well known is that it can also – as here – help overcome challenges and exploit opportunities. In addition, its independence and expertise can bring parties together in an open and trusting environment to reach agreement.

CLIENT: Thomas Homes
DESIGN TEAM: Woodfield Brady Architects;
Adams Habermehl Landscape Consultants

PLANNING

AUTHORITY: Swindon Borough Council
NO OF UNITS: 201
MIX: 1 bed to 2 bed
SITE AREA: 1.96 Ha

