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OBJEK was approached by the current owners of 150 Buitengracht Street, after its recent purchase. The purchase was made with an approved building design by Heritage Western Cape (HWC) as a condition of a demolition application.

The two elements that we felt were fundamental to HWC's final approval of the building – and one from which we felt we could not deviate – was maintaining a visual link for the public to view the highly significant curvilinear parapet building (which we have subsequently found out is the last remaining example of its kind in the Cape) and a building height of no more than 9 storeys (or 27.2m).

Our client, although satisfied that the currently approved building was acceptable to build in financial feasibility terms, felt that the design could be improved upon. We were tasked with designing and amendment to an approved building within the abovementioned parameters.

We started by interrogating the building as currently approved. While there were some sound architectural principles that the previous architect had incorporated into the design (the tiered setting back of bulk from street, the articulation of various parts of the building, amongst others) we felt it to be lacking on a few levels.

In summary, we felt these to be:

1 – Building Grain / Width

Current Design:

We looked at the predominant/general width of buildings in the Bo-Kaap.

We felt that the current design created what appeared to not put in place

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design measures to mitigate the feeling of ‘one big building’ on the street surrounded by buildings of a smaller grain.

Our Response:

While there is only so much one can do to incorporate what will be one of the larger buildings in the Bo-Kaap context, we felt that the street was one place where a smaller grain could be incorporated. We have split the street facing edge of the site into 3 more or less equal portions and created what appear to be 3 separate, smaller buildings, more in keeping with the general width of the buildings in its immediate and more general context.

2 – Active Street Edge

Current Design:

The response to the street of the currently approved design is characterised predominantly by a blank, one storey high wall – the only openings through which is a parking level garage door and a council service room door. Our aim was to find a way of – as much as possible – creating an active street edge. Again, while active street edges are a predominant pattern in the Bo-Kaap, this approach to the street is also widely regarded as a sound Urban Design principle, one that addresses and enhances the experience of city by the pedestrian. As we hopefully move away from a car dominated city, this aspect of design, we feel, will become even more important.

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Our Response:

Again, the gallery space is used as a device to activate the street edge. The idea being that, during an exhibition, and possibly throughout the day, a very direct relationship is maintained between the street and the building. Along with the gallery space, we are proposing a restaurant, also with direct street access. There is limited electrical supply to the site which means that a sub-station would need to be accommodated. A sub-station comes with a spatially very onerous requirement. Another requirement is that the sub-station is directly accessible from the street. This would have meant the addition of more inactive/dead street frontage. To address this, the electrical engineers on the project have secured alternative power in the form of an upgrade to a nearby sub-station.

3 – Varied Building Heights on Buitengracht Street Foreground

Current Design:

The heights of the buildings on the Bo-Kaap side of upper Buitengracht Street are varied. They range in height mainly between 2 and 4 storeys. The foreground component of the building is made up of one 4-storey mass.

Our Response:

While the bulk of the building is 9-storeys, in keeping with the previous proposal, we have broken up the front of the building into 3 parts. The 3 parts present themselves as 3 separate buildings. To reinforce the perception of smaller, different buildings, we have varied the heights between 3 and 5 storeys.

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4 – Visual Link

Current Design:

Although a visual link to the ‘historical curvilinear house’ had been established, this was done by means of moving the basement entrance to the side of the site. This meant that the existing house would have been viewed over the roller shutter doors and unattractive statutory signage.

Our Response:

We felt that the historic building needed not just ‘to be seen’ but to be celebrated in some way or another. To do this, we are proposing a transparent, habitable, external pergola glazed ‘gallery space’. The intention being that – along with exhibitions (ideas for which are addressed in greater detail in Delve’s ideas for the space) the house could form one of the pieces ‘on display’. This space gives the opportunity for the public to not just see the building, but a platform for which to explain its significance.

5 – Unbroken / Continuous Street Edges

Current Design:

We feel that a defining feature of the Bo-Kaap street is one of continuation, i.e. maintaining a visual link to the house in the way it is done in the current design, means that the street edge would have been broken. While uninterrupted street edges are a pattern within the Bo-Kaap, including Buitengracht Street, generally this attitude to the street in an urban context is seen to be a sound Urban Design principle.

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Our Response:

The covered gallery space, is means to fill the gap in the street edge created by the current design, and by HWC's requirement to maintain a visual link to the historic house in the background.

6 – Colour

Current Design:

While it is not clear from the 3-D images of the previously approved design what the intent was for the use of colour, the images seem to depict a monochromatic, possibly off-white building.

Our Response:

Given that Bo-Kaap is known for its colourful buildings, we felt that colour had, in some way, to be incorporated into the design. We felt that simply plastering and painting various parts of the building different colours was too obvious a response. Our intention is to reference Bo-Kaap's use of colour in a subtler way. We are proposing that one window pane of one of the windows to each balcony be tinted / stained a different colour. The idea being that – when lights in each apartment are switched on - a subtle colourful glow will be cast on the white walls that are proposed for the balconies.