



**Limerick
Chamber**
Advancing business together

***Limerick Chamber Submission with respect to
the Design Brief for the development
of the Opera Site in Limerick city***

April 2018

1. Introduction

At the outset, Limerick Chamber wishes to state its support for the Opera Site development, which is considered a top priority for Limerick 2030.

Limerick Chamber welcomes the fact that Limerick City and County Council is completing this public consultation on the design brief for the development of the Opera Site. The Chamber wishes to take this opportunity to stress the need to deliver on this project, as soon as possible.

2. Site Design

Limerick Chamber is positive about the considerable enhancement the development of this highly visible Site will bring to a previously under-utilised and under-developed part of the city centre that proffers huge potential, from an economic, cultural and citizen perspective.

The Chamber notes the need for inclusion of best-in-class design features, as part of this Project Design. The design features of this project need to be distinct and to a high standard, which stand the test of time.

In terms of specific design features, based on the points outlined in the Brief, the Council recognises the importance of the following key variables:

- *“The design of the public realm should be responsive to the nature, scale and function of each area of the site, and respect the heritage value of the site and its context.*
- *At a detail design level, materials and elements selected should be responsibly sourced, robustly implemented and easily maintainable.*

The Chamber believes that focal point features (e.g. water, bandstand, seating areas, etc.) should be included to enhance this site and incentivise footfall within this space. Materials and features to be included should also be tested for durability and maintenance.

3. Holistic Planning and Development

The development of the Opera Site, coupled with the completion of the LUCROC (Limerick Urban Centre Revitalisation – O’ Connell Street) Project to redevelop O’ Connell Street, will considerably enhance our city centre. These projects need to complement each other, and therefore a holistic approach to city centre redevelopment is necessary. Both physical connectivity (e.g. inclusive pathways) and joined-up thinking concerning strategic planning for these complementary projects are needed. The Chamber welcomes the reference to the O’ Connell Street redevelopment project within the Opera Site Design Brief and connectivity between these two projects, *“facilitating natural desire lines, to create a safe and attractive environment where pedestrians are prioritised”*.

4. Preservation meeting Progress

The Chamber welcomes the Council's commitment within the Brief to *“protect and retain important heritage buildings within the City and to preserve architectural character”*.

As per the Limerick 2030 [Website](#), it is anticipated that the project will retain building facades along Patrick Street and Ellen Street, with progressive redevelopment and/or restoration of the structures behind where required, combined with demolition and replacement of later warehouse and other ancillary structures within the central part of the site and adjoining the southern end of Michael Street.

The Chamber welcomes the Council's recognition of the *“architectural significance of a number of structures on site, including those listed on the Record of Protected Structures and others of potential conservation merit, which must be carefully considered in any development proposal for the lands”*, as outlined in the Brief.

5. Creation of a new Public Realm

The public realm space within the Opera Site needs to be animated and not sterile and suitable for both day-time and evening uses, to meet the Limerick 2030 objectives of *“bringing footfall to surrounding streets, public spaces and shops”* and *“providing stronger pedestrian links to the Hunt Museum and King's Island to the north”*.

This project needs to ensure a new welcoming and inclusive public space within the city centre. The Council has a vital role to play in actively incentivising evening footfall within this new space.

Based on the points outlined in the Design Brief, the Council appears cognisant of the importance of the design features of the new public realm, indicating that:

- *The design approach to the public realm at the Opera Site should be cognisant of a number of existing and proposed urban spaces and future public realm plans in the city.*
- *It should aim to connect with and complement these while maintaining its own distinct character.”*

The Chamber welcomes the Council's indication in the Design Brief that the site will seek to *“provide active use at ground floor level to animate public streets and, in particular, public spaces”*. We also endorse the Council's indication that the plan is to create *“a new managed public space within the redeveloped Opera Site with strong connections to the network of squares/ plazas across the City (O'Connell Street, Potato Market, King's Island, enhancement of Bank Place, Colbert Station)”* in addition to *“high quality pedestrian-oriented streets”*.

That said, greater specification on how such animation will be assured is required. The Chamber believes that the Council should determine the explicit uses which would enhance activity and footfall in this public realm. To this end, Limerick Chamber suggests that the Council should consider, for instance, whether a cinema should be located in this development site, and if so, what supports the Council can implement to facilitate this happening.

6. Multi-purpose Development

The Opera site is proposed as a business-led, mixed-use development, with an emphasis on public/private sector uses and some small-scale retail. As per the *Limerick 2030: An Economic and Spatial Plan for Limerick* (Limerick 2030 Plan), while most of the Site is not in the prime shopping location “*supplementary shopping and leisure can be included at the southern end of the Site as a component of a business-led mixed-use solution for this Site*”. The Chamber welcomes the signal, as per the Design Brief, that supplementary shopping and leisure can be included at the southern end of the Site.

The 2030 Plan envisages that 25,000-30,000 sq m will comprise office floor space, which equates to approximately 55%-66% of the total, which will be broken down as follows:

- 10,000 sq m: Innovation Hub providing flexible small business space for businesses ‘graduating’ from incubation facilities at UL and LIT.
 - That said, based on discussions between the relevant parties to date, this Design Brief does not envisage that educational use will be provided as part of the redevelopment of the Opera Site. On this note, the Chamber is supportive of there being a greater higher education presence in Limerick City Centre.
- 10,000 sq m: Public Sector Office (including the relocation of the Revenue Commissioners).
- 5,000-10,000 sq m: Available for letting by the IDA to potential FDI businesses.

Limerick Chamber is supportive of the intention as outlined in the Brief “*to develop the Opera Site both as an attraction in its own right and a stimulus to the continued development of the commercial core*”. The Chamber also supports the Council stating that the Opera Site should seek to include a Civic/ Cultural component as part of any redevelopment of the site.

7. Economic and Employment Impacts and Consequences

The development of the Opera Site is a key driver for increased economic activity in the city centre, as outlined in Limerick 2030 Plan, with the potential to deliver significant employment opportunities and to act as a catalyst for new business development.

When completed, the €200 million project will deliver commercial and cultural space in the heart of the city, and will be capable of employing up to 3,000 people. Bringing this key site back into full and

productive use is hoped to kick-start a new era of economic development within Limerick, with this project having knock-on economic benefits to the wider city region.

This influx of additional workers into the city centre may exacerbate the housing shortage and traffic congestion issues in the city centre, unless strategic forward planning and joined-up thinking is deployed by the relevant departments within the Council. On this note, the Chamber welcomes the Council's indication that the Opera Site should support the 'Smarter Travel' principles formulated for Limerick city centre to reduce car usage in the city centre. From a parking perspective, it is noted that the development seeks to minimise the number of parking spaces to be included, to avoid car park overprovision in that area of the city given present underutilisation.

8. Housing

The original plan for the Opera Site had provision for housing. On this point, Limerick Chamber notes that it is somewhat disappointing that housing is not included in the current plans for the Site.

In tandem with delivering on the Opera Site, the Living Cities Initiative and LUCROC project need to be progressed, to ensure an ultimate win-win for the city in terms of housing supply and regeneration.

Other initiatives that could be deployed to increase housing supply include reintroduction of the 'Living Over The Shop' (LOTS) scheme, to incentivise retailers to renovate currently disused spaces on upper floors as housing, thereby increasing the availability of apartments to rent in the city centre.

9. Naming of Site

The Opera Site is named in honour of the famous soprano, Catherine Hayes, born at No. 4 Patrick Street in 1825. While recognising that the site should celebrate its specific heritage, Limerick Chamber believes that the different aspects of the Opera project should be named in honour of several famous and influential Limerick people.

Limerick Chamber proposes that instead of being called the Opera Site, it should be renamed the 'Ambassador Centre', and its streets and buildings be named after some of the city's famous sons and daughters who put Limerick on an international scale.

Names that could be considered include Paul O'Connell, JP McManus, Terry Wogan, Richard Harris and Dolores O' Riordan; these are names that are synonymous with Limerick internationally. There is potential scope to honour several key Limerick ambassadors, in terms of naming the four towering blocks and the new public realm, in addition to several side streets on the four-acre site.

10. Conclusion

Limerick Chamber wishes to reiterate its support for the Opera Site development, and stress the need to expedite delivery on this priority project to future-proof economic growth and prosperity for Limerick city and the region.



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