

Cambridge City Council Design & Conservation Panel

Notes of the meeting Wednesday 11th March 2020

Attendees:

Di Haigh	RIBA (Chair, item 1)
David Grech	formerly Historic England, co-opted member (Chair, item 2)
Russell Davies	RTPI
Tony Nix	RICS
Ian Steen	Retired architect, co-opted member
Jo Morrison	Landscape Institute
Michael Goodhart	Cambridge PPF

Officers:

Phil Mcintosh	Greater Cambridge Planning
Joanne Preston	Greater Cambridge Planning
Aaron Coe	Greater Cambridge Planning

Presenters - item 1:

Tom Gardner	Allford Hall Monaghan Morris
Robert Myers	RM Associates
Jonathan Bainbridge	Bidwells
Chris Surfleet	Bidwells
Johnny Vincent	Pace Investments Ltd
Simon Stone	Stone Real Estate

Presenters – item 2:

John McHale	Wrenbridge Land Ltd
Chris Collins	Wrenbridge Land Ltd
Paul Newton	Barton Willmore
Emma McCready	Barton Willmore
Oliver Unwin	Allies & Morrison
Peter Howle	Allies & Morrison
Paul Eaton	Allies & Morrison
Max Kettenacker	Allies & Morrison
Alex Pridige	Mott Macdonald

Apologies:

Zoe Skelding	RIBA
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Observers:

Katie Thornburrow	City Councillor
Michael Sargeant	City Councillor

1. Presentation – 104-112 Hills Road Cambridge.

The pre-application proposal for a mixed-use development comprising office use, food and beverage as well as new public realm at ground floor.

The Panel's comments were as follows:

- **Context - relative to the NPPF and the Cambridge Local Plan**

The development is designated as an opportunity area for mixed development in the Cambridge Local Plan. In the NPPF, para. 193 states that there should be no impact on the significance of listed heritage assets. The adjacent Botanic Gardens are Listed Grade II*. Thus the impact of buildings of this scale on the visual environment of the Botanic Gardens is a material consideration.

- **Clarity of information at Review**

The scheme drawings lacked straightforward sections that clearly describe the heights of the buildings or the width and height of the passages between the building blocks. There was also little information on the size of the proposed development relative to adjacent buildings, such as the terraces on the other side of Hills Road.

It took the Panel some time to establish in the review that Botanic House has 6 stories of office accommodation of 3.75m height + ground floor + plant space on the roof. The proposed Block B is 7 stories of accommodation each 4m f/f height + ground floor + Plant room on roof = 9 stories in total. The proposed Block C has 5 stories of accommodation each 4m f/f height + ground floor + plant room on roof = 7 stories in total. Both of the new blocks would be taller than Botanic House. In addition the extensive basement car parking with 250 spaces was not shown.

- **Scale and massing**

The combined site area now under single ownership is considerable. That factor, combined with the existing scale of Botanic House, understandably has tempted maximisation of the built floor space and height. However, despite the emphasis in the presentation on the landscape area as a proportion of site area, the footplates are too large. There is insufficient space set aside to for a coherent and successful landscaping component to this proposal. The scheme is divided into two distinct blocks, but the resulting buildings are monolithic, their scale far greater than the immediate context except for Botanic House, the imposing form of which is slightly softened by its lens shape. The Panel advised that significant revisions should be made to reduce the scale of the blocks and increase the public realm between them, thus opening up views through the development.

- **Urban context**

The Panel were interested in the 'nodes of density' identified at points along Hill's Road. They agreed that Botanic House currently serves as a pivot point on the street for those heading to the station. However, the current scheme does not acknowledge the impact these proposals would have at this 'node' and the knock-on requirement to reshape it to accommodate the number of people accessing it from the station. Adding the footfall of 3,000 extra employees with 1,500 bicycle parking racks would substantially increase pedestrian and cycle traffic. The extensive basement car parking is all entered from a single point on Hills Road. The consequent impact on the crucial Hills Road / Station Road junction would be considerable.

The Panel believes that a scheme of this scale, in such a prominent location, needs convincing modelling of its impact on the wider urban context, as well as on the immediate surrounding city. The current plans fall far short of what is required to establish this.

- **Impact on the historic environment**

The proposal has significant implications for the historic environment, both in the immediate vicinity of the site and also in longer views of the city. The greatest impact will be to the adjoining Botanic Garden, which is a Registered Park and Garden listed at Grade II*, and also on the Conservation Area.

As NPPF 193 states regarding heritage assets, “great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation... This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.” The Panel feels that the consideration currently given to this is far from adequate.

Whilst the buildings would not be visible from much of the west section of the Botanic Garden, there would be significant overlooking for buildings of this height for the east section, including the Winter Garden. The views presented, which included only full, verdant summertime tree canopies, give no indication of the scheme’s impact on these views in winter. At all seasons, the Panel felt that a scheme of this height will have significant impact on the Garden’s feeling of *rus in urbe*, which is key to visitor enjoyment and integral to the Garden’s significance.

With respect to the conservation area, Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires the Planning Authority, in exercising their planning functions, to give special regard to ‘the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area’. Very little attention seemed to have been given to identify the key contributors to the conservation area’s character, or the impact of the height of the scheme on the existing terraces on the other side of Hills Road. The scale of the new buildings will be much greater than the current scale of Francis House at four stories and threatens to overwhelm the adjacent streetscape.

- **The Flying Pig**

The Panel welcomes the proposals to keep the existing Flying Pig pub, both in terms of the retention of the existing building and saving this community use. However, the design fails to convincingly integrate the building with the new-build elements, so that it appears out of scale and entirely coincidental to the tall new office blocks that would surround it.

Some revision to the treatment of blocks B and C, to reduce both their scale and massing, would mean that the pub would not stand out quite so starkly. Further changes to the scheme layout, perhaps by realigning the space between blocks to focus more on the pub, could also help with this.

Furthermore, the building’s historic character needs to be reflected in the definition of the adjacent outdoor spaces and treatment of the street frontage. It appears uncomfortably out of place surrounded by low level office planters. The definition of the whole frontage to that side of Hills Road should be rethought so that it forms an integral part of the continuing urban context, including the boundary railings to the Botanic Garden and the streetscape of the Almshouses

- **Landscape proposals**

For all its promised interactive public realm, the scheme seems to lack realistic consideration of how it will actually be experienced. The intention is to activate the ground floor frontages, and to interweave planting between internal and external spaces. There are, however, areas where this is lacking, most notably in the narrow corridor between blocks B and C, where all frontages are for utilities, bin stores and substations, and natural light will be lacking.

The CGI images give a misleading impression of what will actually be achieved. At the moment, as proposed, the combination of shading around the buildings and limited soil depth in the planting pits, will limit the growth potential and result in less than verdant trees of limited size. The planting will be completely reliant on artificial irrigation and vulnerable to any failures in this system.

The Panel questioned how pleasant the office environment would be to work in. Due to the size of the floorplates, the green spaces would not usually be visible to the average worker from their work station. The views from offices not facing the Botanic Garden, especially those facing across the tight linear gaps between the blocks, will be limited. Office views

onto terraced gardens change the atmosphere of the space and can create a much more pleasant working environment. These are concentrated at roof level.

- **Sustainability**

The Panel supported the aspirations to achieve a high standard of sustainability, including carbon capture, but queried some of the specific proposals for achieving this. The Panel suggested that, for office blocks primarily in need of cooling, a system that captures excess heat for reuse would be useful. They suggested the use of ground source heat pumps, which would remove the need for the roof-mounted air source heat pumps, and which failed to match up to their aspirational title as “towers of wind and light”.

- **Architectural design**

The opportunity to create such a prominent scheme at a key entrance point to Cambridge city centre should provoke an aspiration to produce the highest quality of architectural design. The Panel felt that the scheme falls far short of the level of design integrity that could be achieved. There seemed to be little guiding rationale to the scheme.

The form of the buildings focus on maximising the floor space on the site, rather than defining appropriate built form. The elevations present overbearing walls of undulating glass with a simplistic solar shading system. From a distance, the plant chimneys stand tall on the skyline. The internal partitions at ground floor level block views though to the Botanic Garden, both from inside and out.

- **Conclusion:**

This is a site of critical importance for Cambridge. The current proposals fall well short of the coherent and aspirational design that should be expected here. The scale of the scheme as currently proposed, both in terms of height and massing, is overbearing and this impacts on both the Botanic Garden and Hills Road. It creates a highly constrained public realm. This proposal needs a fundamental rethink of both the brief and the design before being considered for approval.

VERDICT – RED (unanimous)

2. Presentation – Abbeygate House, East Road, Cambridge.

Abbeygate House fronts onto East Road and is bounded to the rear by Crispin Place and Burleigh Place. The existing building is occupied by the British Heart Foundation (Use Class A1) with first and second floors in office use occupied by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU).

The site is identified as part of a wider redevelopment opportunity area in both the adopted Cambridge Local Plan (2018) and the Grafton Area Masterplan SPD (2018) for a mix of uses including retail and office floorspace. The brief is to deliver a high-quality design led scheme that is consistent with the planning policy aspirations and that reflects the changing context of the immediate local area

Di Haigh declared a conflict of interest as a former director at Allies and Morrison. She therefore stepped aside from chairing the review of this project, but, having retired in 2016, it was agreed that she need not withdraw from the discussion. She abstained from voting on the proposal. Jo Morrison also declared a conflict of interest due to Mott Macdonald’s involvement with the project. As the only landscape specialist available to advise the panel all agreed that she should stay for the discussion, but she again abstained from voting.

The proposals are still work in progress and the comments of the panel reflect the current state of development. The Panel’s comments were as follows:

- **Scale, form and massing; responding to context**

The Panel broadly accepted the premise that building is divided into two parts, a 'harder' frontage that defines the edge of East Road, with a more sculptured element to the rear. In addition, the design acts as a transition between the traditional buildings on East Road to the south of the site and the new hotel that has recently been approved to the north, on the far side of a stretch of public realm that is to be upgraded to form an enhanced access to the Grafton Centre.

However, the Panel had some concerns over the way the new building turned the corner between East Road and Crispin Place. The principal entrance to the new offices is on this corner and would benefit from being given greater emphasis. Raising the level of the soffit to the arcade on this corner could deliver this. The rhythm of this arcade also appeared somewhat unresolved; generally on East Road the arcade corresponds to two bays of office windows, but the bay is then stretched at the corner, where it corresponds to three bays of office windows.

The storey height at the plant level (Level 5) was also felt to be too overpowering, and this is given added prominence on the corner of East Road and Crispin Place where the plant room steps forward to the building line. Further work was required to justify the height needed for the plant at Level 5. Furthermore, the current set-back to the plant room on the Crispin Place elevation appears somewhat ambiguous. If the intention of the set-back at the west end of this elevation is to give added emphasis to the corner with East Road, then that would be better achieved through the plant room being set back after two bays, i.e. in line with the arcade to the office entrance at ground floor level. However, the elevation might appear equally resolved if the plant room extended the full length of Crispin Place without a setback.

On East Road, where the building steps down in response to the scale of the existing traditional buildings, the appearance of the building also changes from a framed structure to a more solid, masonry structure with 'punched' openings. The rhythm of these 'punched' windows is somewhat uncomfortable, in that they are not centred on the shopfront arcade below, and a revised rhythm might deliver a more resolved appearance to the building.

It was a matter of regret that the building could not completely close the gap to No 168 East Road, due to a requirement to keep a clear access way to an existing sub-station. A pair of gates are proposed and these will need to be given careful consideration so that they have sufficient presence in the streetscape. It may be appropriate to consider these gates as an opportunity to work with an artist.

- **The 'sculptured element' to the rear**

A cross passage divides the building into two parts, and to the west of this passage is the more sculptured element. This is to be enclosed behind a screen of regularly spaced, vertical elements. At the time of the review the detailed design and material selection for this screen had not been determined. While the Panel supported the design intention, significant more work is needed to bring this to a successful resolution. The Panel questioned whether the regular spacing might be too imposing, and there was scope for a degree of flexibility in the spacing so as to provide a sense of movement across the elevation. The role of this screen in providing solar shading to the offices also requires more thought, and access to the bin store, material selection, colour and protection of the screen from vandalism at ground level all need to be addressed. In addition, keeping an active frontage at ground level will be important to successfully integrating the building into the locality.

The roof of this element incorporates a garden opening off the fourth floor of offices, but it is a matter of deep regret that the offices have no view out onto this roof garden. The central office core (lift, stair and toilets) obscures most of the garden, but even where there is a potential for views out, the wall is currently solid. The opportunity for both this garden and the third floor roof terrace to enhance the adjacent office environment needs to be explored and developed.

- **Sustainability – Responding to climate change**

The Panel was advised that the building is being designed to achieve a BREEAM excellent rating and this was agreed to be an appropriate starting point. The use of reflective light-shelves to the windows will help natural light to penetrate deeper into the core of the building, but these will need to be carefully detailed so as to avoid them becoming homes to pigeons. The Panel had further concerns that the requirement for solar shading had not been fully thought through in designing the elevations.

However the overall servicing of the building requires further consideration, including whether a more sustainable heating/cooling system might be incorporated. For a lot of the year the building will only require cooling, and the surplus energy might be captured and used for domestic heating hot water.

While the existing building is of no architectural or historic significance, it does incorporate a high level of embodied energy and consideration might be given to reusing the existing frame as part of the new structure, were that to be possible.

- **Landscape**

It is understood that, under a separate proposal, East Road is to be remodelled and the carriageway reduced to one lane in each direction, thereby allowing the pavements to be widened and cycle lanes added. The Panel was keen to understand how this remodelling might also allow for the introduction of new landscaping to help 'green' this stretch of East Road, even if existing underground services might prevent the introduction of significant street trees in front of this development.

The retention of existing trees to Crispin Place was broadly welcomed.

- **Other issues**

Future proofing – the building will represent a significant investment in embodied energy and, in the event that the demand for office accommodation declines over the life of the building, it will be important that the building can be readily adapted for different uses (eg residential).

Shop front and signage – there is a need to develop a long term policy for ensuring replacement shop frontages and signage is controlled and not allowed to conflict with the architectural intent that underlies the redevelopment proposals.

Visibility in long views across the city - while the site is not within a conservation area, it nevertheless has the potential to impact on the setting of important heritage assets that lie within the city centre, and the proposals will need to comply with the Council's Tall Buildings policy. This will include the preparation of verified views from agreed locations to fully understand its impact.

- **Conclusion:**

The Panel accepted that the presentation was for a project that was still work in progress and, overall, the feeling was that the design was going in the right direction. However significant further development is required and the panel would welcome the opportunity to review the design again, before it is submitted for planning permission.

VERDICT – AMBER (5), abstentions (2)

3. Notes of the last meeting – Wednesday 15th January 2020

Notes agreed.

4. Any Other Business

5. Date of next meeting – Wednesday 8th April 2020

Reminder

CABE 'traffic light' definitions:

GREEN: a good scheme, or one that is acceptable subject to minor improvements

AMBER: in need of *significant* improvements to make it acceptable, but not a matter of starting from scratch

RED: the scheme is fundamentally flawed and a fresh start is needed.