

**Cambridge City Council
Design & Conservation Panel**

**Notes of the meeting Wednesday 10th June 2020
(via MS Team)**

Participants

Di Haigh	RIBA (Chair)
David Grech	formerly Historic England, co-opted member
Tony Nix	RICS
Zoe Skelding	RIBA
Jo Morrison	Landscape Institute
Michael Goodhart	Cambridge PPF
Chris Davis	IHBC

Officers:

Christian Brady	Greater Cambridge Planning
Phil McIntosh	Greater Cambridge Planning
Joanne Preston	Greater Cambridge Planning
Bana Elzein	Greater Cambridge Planning

Presenters:

Simon Allford	Allford Hall Monaghan Morris Architects
Tom Gardner	Allford Hall Monaghan Morris Architects
Robert Myers	RM Associates
Jonathan Bainbridge	Bidwells
Chris Surfleet	Bidwells (Historic environment)
Stephen Ball	Couch Perry Wilkins (sustainability)
Mark Taylor	Mott MacDonald (transport/highways)
Johnny Vincent	Pace Investments Ltd
Simon Stone	Stone Real Estate

Observers:

Cllr Katie Thornburrow	Cambridge City Council
Bonnie Kwok	Greater Cambridge Planning
Tom Davies	Greater Cambridge Planning
Katie Roberts	Greater Cambridge Planning
Mike Derbyshire	Bidwells

Apologies - Ian Steen, Russell Davies and Cllr Martin Smart

1. Presentation - The Flying Pig PH, 104-112 Hills Road Cambridge.

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

This is a revised proposal following the presentation in March 2020 (verdict RED - unanimous).

As at the March meeting, Jo Morrison identified a potential conflict of interest due to Mott MacDonald providing transport and highway advice to the design team. Therefore while she continued to provide specialist landscape advice to the Panel, she abstained from voting.

The Panel's comments were as follows:

- **Scale and massing**

The drop in the bulk and massing is appreciated, with Building B now reduced from 9 floors total above ground height to 7, and Building C reduced from 7 stories total to 5. In addition the floor to floor height has been reduced.

The area of floor plates for each block are still significant, as the comparison shown with other comparable AHMM designed professional and tech office floor plates demonstrates. Slight adjustments to the perimeter had been made to create more sitting spaces around both blocks.

The Panel welcomed the inclusion of verified views for the winter months as well as summer. They explored the impact of the new buildings both in distant views as well as from closer angles. The thorough scope of the information issued for this review was appreciated.

- **Impact on historic environment**

The Panel expressed concern over how visible these buildings would still be from the Grade II* Botanic Gardens, particularly in winter. This is not only in terms of the skyline but the impact of the extent of highly glazed elevations overlooking the Gardens. The Panel expressed little confidence in the proposition that during winter, blinds would be drawn throughout and that this would alleviate any light pollution. In the view taken from Cory Lodge, the large new buildings loomed above. The visibility of the new development would result in a degree of harm to the environment of the Botanic Gardens, although this is felt to be much reduced by the lower blocks proposed in the revised scheme.

The part of the designated Conservation Area along Hills Road is composed primarily of 2-3 storey terraced houses and has a linear, largely Victorian feel. These large buildings will permanently change the character of the Conservation Area. The increase in scale of the new development will also tend to confuse and detract from the simple form of Botanic House.

Whether this level of harm to both the Listed Botanic Gardens and the character and appearance of the Conservation Area can be offset by other benefits, could be the subject of further debate.

- **The Flying Pig PH**

The Flying Pig PH still appears to be a fish out of water. This revised proposal provides greater generosity for the pub at ground level but does not yet create a setting that makes sense of this left-over fragment of the historic street. The Panel remains concerned about the dominating enclosure caused by these large office buildings in views looking both north, up Hills Road, and south, from the junction with Station Road. They did not support the suggestion that a three-fold stepping up of the proposed scale of the buildings from the PH would achieve a coherent context for it.

The Panel were unsure as to the nature of the proposed 'D' shaped extension to the rear of the pub. Would it try to replicate the existing building or bring or would there be a contemporary approach to its treatment? The adjacent outdoor seating areas seem to be defined by planters relating to the new development, rather than by the walls and yards that

might help to embed the building in the street. Overall, it was felt that The Flying Pig needs to be much more carefully embedded in the design if it is not to appear as an absurd left-over fragment. This feeling of an isolated remnant of a historic streetscape is compounded by the two vehicle drop-offs being located either side of the Flying Pig and its garden, along with the new pedestrian through route created between the west side of the public house and Building B.

- **Definition of the street**

The reconfiguration of the west edge of Hills Road will be considerable. In many ways this will be a great improvement to the very blank elevations of the present office buildings. The Panel feels that the new street frontage needs to be considered as a whole from Brooklands Avenue to Station Road. The experience of walking along the highly articulated frontage proposed needs to be very clear as to where the public realm begins and ends, where there will be vehicles crossing and where there might be glimpses through to the Botanic Garden. There needs to be therefore, a specific design exercise to establish a coherent new street edge, given the complexities of the proposed development.

- **Urban context**

The Panel feels that the traffic impact of the scheme still needs to be proven. They note that the proposed cycle parking access is now located alongside the vehicular access point at Building C. With the predicted high volume of bicycle traffic as well as the number of pedestrians walking along Hills Road and using the crossing, the Panel expressed some concern whether conflict between cars, pedestrians and cyclists was likely at this point.

The Panel also note that the designers are working with the County Highways team to widen cycleways and footways. This will be welcomed, as particularly with the volume of pedestrian and cycle movement coming from the Station Road crossing, this rather hostile environment will need to be managed. The new crossing is likely to have a considerable impact on vehicular traffic along Hills Road at a particularly busy point before the turn off for access to the station.

The entrances to both buildings need to be spacious and well defined. In particular, the forecourt to Building C seems tight for any scale of pedestrian gathering. Within this context, the Panel questioned whether the taxi drop-off points adjacent to each entrance were effectively planned.

- **Landscape proposals.**

To have an office development with views out onto the Botanic Gardens should feel like an extraordinary opportunity, yet it was felt the proposals failed to reflect this. Much of the landscaping is on a podium and in planters. This suggests that any substantial planting will be reliant on watering; undermining the scheme's sustainable credentials. Large trees would not flourish in planters, though the perspectives give a verdant impression, indicating large trees. While drought tolerant trees may be another option, it is felt that they would contribute little to the street scene.

The frontage and public forecourt area to the north of Building B is likely to remain heavily shaded even in high summer, which might reduce its appeal as a space for socialising. There is a similar concern regarding the degree of sunlight that will penetrate to ground level in the public realm between Buildings B and C.

Roof gardens may well become increasingly important amenity and working environments in an era of social distancing. The roof terraces as proposed are likely to create very hot,

exposed and windy places. The designers are strongly encouraged to explore shading options to create spaces that can be used as embedded elements of the working environment.

- **Environment and sustainability**

The sustainability ambitions for the scheme have never been in question and are welcomed. However, the Panel would stress that although these are important drivers, they will not in themselves deliver a good scheme against all factors such as urban form, access, parking, workspace quality etc. The window shading, specification of the glazing etc. will be part of the package that determines the performance of the building. Any scheme that promises great environmental performance must be supported by good judgment in terms of form, orientation and the embodied carbon of the building fabric.

The Panel was reassured by the specific commitment both from the developers and the Planning officers that the environmental promises in terms of water consumption, BREEAM excellence and WEL platinum would be embedded requirements of any planning permission.

- **Architectural design.**

While the Panel applauds the significant steps forward since the previous discussion in March, it was felt that further design resolution is required to achieve a scheme worthy of this prominent site on one of the principal approaches into Cambridge.

The Panel felt that the form of the buildings, whilst accepting their curved plan, still feels quite sprawling and could be more clearly ordered. The curved sections of the undulating elevations might be more consistently defined and further consideration given to the definition of the contrasting flat and angled sections of the facades.

The two buildings need to relate to each other architecturally, so that despite their differing brick detailing, they have a shared language. This consideration could then extend to relating the new offices to Botanic House, so that the three buildings might form a considered whole. One might even ask if the elevational treatment to Hills Road needs necessarily to be the same as that to the Botanic Gardens, or whether these significantly different contexts demand a differing architectural response.

There has been little explicit discussion of the aspirations for achieving high quality internal office environments in the scheme.

Conclusion.

The Panel appreciates the design team's careful response to the previous review in March. By reducing the proposed height of both buildings by two stories, the scheme appears less dominant which is a significant step forward. Its appearance from the Botanic Gardens remains a concern, as would be the case for any scheme of this scale.

The bar for success with this new development has been set high. The opportunity to create a new development in such a prominent location in close proximity to CB1 and on one of the major approach roads into the city is rare. The Panel would urge the design team to go further in resolving the remaining design challenges to reach a proposal of the highest architectural quality.

For the Flying Pig, the Panel feel more could be done to enhance its setting. Strengthening its presence on the street would be preferable to it becoming just a

fragment left over from the previous street frontage. A clearer identity for the pub would also improve its engagement with the community that did so much to secure its retention.

VERDICT - RED (2), AMBER (4) with 1 abstention.

2. Date of next meeting - Wednesday 8th July 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.