

Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Design & Conservation Panel

Notes of the meeting 9th December 2020 (via MS Teams)

Participants:

Di Haigh	RIBA (Chair)
David Grech	formerly Historic England, co-opted member
Zoe Skelding	RIBA
Robert Myers	Landscape Institute
Chris Davis	IHBC
Russell Davies	RTPI (retired)

Officers:

Dean Scrivener	Greater Cambridge Planning
Leonie Walker	Greater Cambridge Planning
Toby Williams	Greater Cambridge Planning
Christian Brady	Greater Cambridge Planning

Presenting team:

Marcos Rosello	aLL Design
Ned Drury	aLL Design
Chris Surfleet	Bidwells
Matthew Wilson	Bidwells

Observers:

Cllr Katie Thornburrow	City Council
Cllr Tumi Hawkins	SCDC
Kate Hannelly-Brown	Bidwells
Ralph Gifford	Bidwells
Nick Vose	Marengo Communications Ltd
Sebastian Hayes	Hermes Investments
Trovine Monteiro	Greater Cambridge Planning
Bana Elzein	Greater Cambridge Planning
Joanne Preston	Greater Cambridge Planning
Simon Carne	Simon Carne Consultants

Apologies: Ian Steen, Anthony Nix

As CPPF have already submitted comments on this scheme, it was decided that it would not be appropriate for Michael Goodhart to attend.

1.Presentation: St Matthews Centre, Sturton Street (20/04514/FUL)

Erection of a building comprising student accommodation (C2)(113 rooms in 14no flats), including an ancillary reception building, part change of use of existing building from non-residential institution (D1) to cafe (A3), including outdoor terrace with associated landscaping, open space, car and cycle parking and infrastructure. The student accommodation is intended to be used by 16-18 year old students attending the adjacent Cambridge School of Visual and Performing Arts.

This scheme was last seen by the Panel in April 2015 and then again in November 2015.

The Panel's comments were as follows:

Concept of the raised student accommodation block

Previous reviews had been supportive of this concept. It seemed to promise several benefits including offering great views out into the surrounding canopy of mature plane trees from the student rooms. A building that is raised up above ground level would create the possibility of longer views into and through the park at street level. Two previous examples of similarly raised buildings designed by the architects, Peckham Library and Sharp Centre, Toronto, were shown as examples.

The Panel questions whether the transparency originally aspired to will now be achieved, as the underside of the building is substantially built over the existing building and has several additional enclosures beneath. These all tend to block the views beneath the building through to St Matthew's Piece. In addition, the new building has an awkward relationship with the earlier building, in that it makes no attempt to respond to the original in the choice of materials or in its configuration.

Impact on the character and appearance of the Conservation Area

There was no real analysis of the relationship with existing buildings on New Street and the adjacent streets in the Conservation Area, which are predominantly two storey houses with pitched roofs. The one building shown as an example on sections is a three storey with roof extension student accommodation block. This is outside the Conservation Area and is not typical as a benchmark scheme for this area.

This version of the scheme proposes a block that is three stories high + 1 attic level, starting at more than 2 stories above ground. The Panel feels that this new, 6+ storey block, would be prominent for much of the year and it would tower over the surrounding area.

Reception building

The new single story reception block proposed for the New Street frontage seems to be architecturally incongruous. This building in buff brick has no relationship with the architecture of either of the main buildings. Its purpose is mainly as a bin store. It would give no security surveillance along the main access route and does not offer facilities needed for a porter's lodge. It would block the views beneath the new building and impact on the drama of its siting.

Security and night time surveillance

The panel are concerned at the lack of security surveillance along the route that leads to the student rooms. As this is an open public path leading to the café, there would be no control over its use and this could lead to incidents of forced access into the blocks. An outline external lighting strategy would be useful for assessing its night-time use.

Landscaping

Building amongst the trees is felt to be an exciting idea, but the management of the landscaping will make a considerable difference to achieving this. The scheme is dependent on the trees remaining their full shape and size. However, the plane trees have previously been pollarded and this regime will need to be maintained, which thins the tree canopy.

- There is to be little open space available specifically for the students' use. The green roof terrace will be a sedum roof and not accessible to the residents for safety reasons.
- The route leading to the public café and terrace is only available from the north and is not easily reached from the public park on St Matthews Piece or the playground to the south.
- It was questioned whether the meadow planting would work in close proximity to the building. It might thrive better in the garden area to the south of the building.
- A visual assessment with distant views should be undertaken to establish the impact of the new building on the public space and the surrounding streets.

Practicalities central to the maintenance of the scheme

As this proposal is for an unusual form of building that does not sit directly on the ground, there are several practical issues that need to be resolved at the design stage. The Panel is concerned that robust solutions did not seem to be yet in place for some key aspects including:

- The servicing strategy collects vertical riser ducts in the stair cores. It was not clear how the many soil pipes from the en suite bathrooms would be connected to this point and still achieve viable falls within the underbelly services zone currently shown.
- The access depth allowed above the plant installed on the roof of the existing studio seemed inadequate for maintenance of these units or to give access to the soffit of the new building.
- Window cleaning would have to be undertaken from within the student rooms as there is no external maintenance access route. The placing of the applied terracotta baguettes would need to allow the windows to be able to open fully to achieve internal cleaning.
- Façade maintenance would similarly require an access strategy to be built in from the start. Bird proofing on the terracotta battens could alter the aesthetic impact of the cladding.

Quality of the proposed common room spaces.

- The common room spaces are long, narrow rooms lit from one end via an internal light well. This is also their only source of ventilation, so the windows will be opening lights. However, this 3 storey light well is sealed at the base so cannot generate air movement to ventilate the rooms. The Panel feels that this would be likely to provide a poor environment for these shared spaces. There might also be an issue with rubbish being thrown into the courtyard.

Amenities and cycle parking at ground level

- Cycle parking has been located around the site, but with very little under cover. As shown, some of the visitor cycle parking, would be on a steep gradient. It was felt that the cycle parking spaces provided at roof level involves a tortuous access route via the lifts and was not practically viable. It could result in students tending to lock their bikes to the surrounding site railings as an easier option.
- The feasibility of locating an electricity sub-station beneath the building was questioned.
- Night-time views had been requested at a previous review as the design and provision of lighting would be important for both local residents and student population.
- No shading studies have been shown to explore the degree of overshadowing caused by the elevated block at different times of the year.
- A SuDs and rainwater harvesting strategy has not yet been put in place.

Conclusion

A proposed four storey block of student accommodation, raised two stories above the surrounding site and the existing building, is proposed for this site. At 32m, this is higher than the surrounding development and would have a considerable impact on the Conservation Area. Although the Panel recognises the attractions in raising the rooms into the height of the surrounding tree canopy, it is not convinced that the suggested transparency at street level will still be achieved. The proposal for a brick reception and bin store on New Street seems to be an incongruous addition that would block this view.

The unorthodox arrangement of this scheme brings a number of non-standard practical challenges. The Panel is not yet convinced that these issues are sufficiently well resolved to ensure that this would be a robust building, which can be easily maintained in the future. They are concerned that the strength of the original vision would be compromised over time.

VERDICT - RED (4), AMBER (2)

2. Date of next meeting - Wednesday 13th January 2021 (items to be confirmed)

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.