

By Email

David Jenkins
Chair; Histon & Impington Parish Council
Parish Office New Road
Impington CB24 9LU

Monday, 2 June 2014

Dear David

FORMER BISHOPS SITE, CAMBRIDGE ROAD, IMPINGTON

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the Mire scheme. I hope the following comments are helpful. Please let me know if any of what follows requires clarification. I have added a brief biographical note in case this helps set the context.

Headline:

The proposed design for the Bishops site is in my view of poor quality, inappropriate to its context, and too big, at least in its present form.

Detail:

My comments are as follows:

- The massing is urban, not suburban / village. It is a simplistic building, rather than an elegantly simple one. I'm afraid to say that it looks like an undergraduate student project.
- It is a top heavy building - the roof is too dominant an element in my view. The cut away balconies are awkward and do nothing to add to the public realm.
- The architectural language is thoroughly commercial, inappropriate for what is a predominantly residential area.
- The design is an exercise in extruding a section along two edges of the site. It looks misplaced - arguably it would belong on a science or business park, but this is emphatically not the nature of this site, even with the Vision Park so close by.
- Its undifferentiated form is wholly out of place. It would be interesting to see the station building represented at the same scale adjacent to the north elevation - this could be done by means of a photograph reduced to the correct scale. The station is an aggregation of individual elements brought together in a pleasing whole; by contrast the proposed Mitre building has nothing of the same modelling and articulation into distinct parts. The proposed building would swamp those around it.
- The bent form of the corner is weak in design terms - it would have been better to articulate the corner, rather than to smooth it round. The glazing on the corner is particularly unfortunate. The glazing and location suggests this is the entrance for a commercial office or car showroom - it is completely out of keeping with the area, and also inappropriate for the building itself, which is simply a collection of flats.
- The form of the building does nothing to differentiate between the north facade facing the guided bus, and the east facade facing Cambridge Road. This form - particularly the way it is bent around the corner - might be suitable for a 'drive-by' building at a major highways intersection. In a village location such as this it is wholly inappropriate.
- The abutment with the adjacent flats on Cambridge Road is abrupt and badly through through.
- The building has no sense of rootedness in its place - it does nothing to respond to the history of this particular place. This is not necessarily an argument for Victorian brickwork - there are other ways to belong to this place - but this design is poor in its own terms (as an alien 'object building') and as a response to its context.

- The most plausible view of the building is of the courtyard - I could imagine this being a nice place to be. But this is the private face of the building, and comes at the cost of an outer public face that is brash rather than bold and wholly unresponsive to its location. The building puts two fingers up to its context and to the community, and is frankly offensive.
- The Design and Access Statement is illuminating. The earlier design shown on page 10 of the scheme from 2010 speaks volumes about the mismatch between the architect and/or developer's ambition and what would be appropriate in this setting.

Note, this is not an objection to a building that is at least part 3 storey, but it would be much better building if the height was varied. I think the scheme is probably an overdevelopment of the site, but I don't have a problem with a predominantly 3 storey building in this location. But it could be done so much better. There are also other ways of placing buildings on the site that give a less monolithic appearance.

In summary:

The argument has been made that the objections of local councillors and community arise from lay people's failure to appreciate the quality of what is an innovative design. As a professional, I beg to differ. I am all in favour of bold design, but to succeed on a brownfield site in an area with an established urban grain, that boldness needs not only to understand its context but be seen to respond to it. That 'response' may legitimately include a good measure of contrast, but it needs to be demonstrably intelligent contrast. My view is that this design shows none of that, and this view is strongly supported by the discussion of the design development in the Design and Access Statement.

In the design world, there is a fine line between elegant simplicity on the one hand, and 'the Emperor's new clothes' on the other. With some regret, my view is that this design falls firmly within the latter, not the former.

Yours sincerely



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for and on behalf of Archangel Ltd

Biographical Note:

Nigel Walter is the director and founder of Archangel, a chartered architects' practice based in Impington with a specialism in church and community buildings. Within Histon and Impington Archangel has carried out substantial alterations to Histon Baptist Church, and the just completed St Andrew's Centre, as well as numerous domestic projects. Nigel studied Architecture at Cambridge University where he received a first class degree. In 2012 he completed (with distinction) an MA in Conservation Studies (Historic Buildings) at the University of York, and is about to start a PhD looking at why change to historic buildings is so fraught with difficulty. He has a particular interest in the way in which buildings contribute to the public realm, and how the built environment is an expression of community narrative.