

Design Critique of proposed development of the Bishops site, Histon.

For Histon and Impington Parish Council

June 2014

Context

The development chooses to take the commercial buildings on Vision Park as its elevational design precedent. This is a residential building facing streets, not a commercial development facing car parks. We therefore feel the aesthetic is inappropriate for its use and micro context.

Cambridge Road has a rich, fine textured grain of mainly Victorian domestic buildings with layers of human scale detailing (bay windows, dormers, porches, stonework etc). The public façade of the proposals fails to engage with these historical contextual cues and as a result the North and East elevations are monolithic and imposing.

Massing

The three storey proposal is appropriate in creating an opportunity for a landmark building on an important corner, and has the possibility for creating a sense of place. The corner treatment, however, is a missed opportunity to create a significant architectural response to context. It is an appropriate opportunity to create verticality, drama and reinforce a sense of place. Instead it presents a faceted office style entrance, with the self-referential roof form carried through denying the opportunity for height and animation on this important corner. The second floor of this 'entrance' space also, oddly, appears to be in total darkness with no natural daylight. The central stair is largely enclosed and the floor plates carry to the edge of the plan – this could have, at least, been a dramatic three storey atrium but it has even missed this simple architectural device.

Layout

The ground floor of the building presents bedrooms to the street, this is a poor response resulting with the building effectively turning its back to the street, disengaging with the East elevation and preventing significant engagement with any future development of the station site across the guided bus. Buildings need active facades and visual surveillance of the street to be engaging and safe, the proposal do this effectively on the upper floors but miss an opportunity on the ground floor.

The residents circulation spaces are mean and in places poorly executed, particularly the access ways from the car park to the circulation space – this are narrow single storey corridors, not generous open hallways as one might expect in a high quality development.

In detail, and as an example, the upper floor circulation to flats 11,12,13 and 22,23,24 is an enclosed lobby fronting the station and bus way and making these flats single aspect with

no natural light or ventilation to the north end of the units. Turning these access corridors in to access balconies (ie opening up the façade) would animate the elevation, create the opportunity for modelling and relief, and bring natural light and ventilation into these otherwise dark flats.

Detail and Material

The materials are of a high quality and have the potential to reinterpret the Victorian vernacular in a modern and relevant way. We have a concern that once planning permission is granted, as is often typical in developer lead schemes, the project will be subject to a 'value engineering' process prior to construction, resulting in much of the quality in the façade being lost. The county needs to ensure this does not happen through a careful materials, sample and workmanship conditions approval process.

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