

17 April 2019

Pre-Application Consultation request PRE/2019/0048 - CCOSS

Introduction: This response follows from the St Albans Civic Society's Design Advisory Group's meeting with Council representatives and BDP on Tuesday March 5, attendance as observers at Design South East's Design Review Thursday March 7 and our meeting with Council's representatives on Monday April 8 when BDP's March 29 drawings were presented showing their response to the Review Panel's Report.

The Society is pleased to have been engaged in the process of developing the CCOSS scheme and, although there have been concerns about the concept of the project, based upon the Angle permitted plan, the Design Advisory Group recognise the considerable amount of work that has gone into the development of the project. The comments that follow are intended to be positive and constructive, having the intention of enhancing the approved scheme.

While welcoming the opportunity to respond at this stage to the revised submission, and noting that there is one aerial view of the blocks from the south east, it is disappointing that there are no comprehensive drawings showing the south, east, north and west elevations, or the west elevation of the promenade, the east elevation of the Block C extension and the north elevation of Block B. Furthermore, despite earlier requests for long sections along Victoria Street, Bricket Road and the North Service Road to show the relationship of the scheme to the adjoining buildings, critical to proper understanding the context of the proposals and their impact on the surrounding environment, none have been received to date. Three sketch views from street level were also presented at our meeting and commented on at the time but, unfortunately, these were unable to be accessed later from the disc supplied to the Group. As a result, due to the limited information presented to us, our comments should be regarded only as a preliminary response to the current proposals.

The scheme: we have the following observations:

1. We welcome the changes at roof level to give a more broken sky line.
2. The simplification of the main facades to reduce the size of windows to the residential units and introduce brickwork up to cill level is an improvement; although there should be consistency of bringing brickwork on the upper storeys down to the ground in a convincing demonstration of the structure. We felt this to be an important point: large areas of brickwork at high level need to be clearly visually supported below, and the visibility of the structure is important .

3. Raising of the commercial elements facing the promenade to two storeys is also considered a positive measure.
4. It is agreed that the reduction in height of the Block C extension to 2-3 storeys, and elimination of the chamfered corner there, assists its relationship with the lower scale of the adjoining buildings.
5. While acknowledging that the rationalising of the metal cladding to the upper storeys is an improvement we consider there is still much work to be done there to bring the necessary "lightness of touch" to these important "penthouse" elements. More glazing, a brise-soleil roof edge, at above door head height perhaps?
6. We note that the chamfered corner of Block B, onto Bricket Road has been retained, ostensibly to keep the existing tree there. Worthy as this is we consider it a mistaken priority. If the chamfered corner is retained we suggest it would be sited more appropriately on the opposite, western flank of the block, where it would serve to emphasise the important link to the promenade rather than, at present, the lesser route to Bricket Road. This would not only have the advantage of improving the proportioning of the elevation to Bricket Road but could also provide the opportunity, due to the longer perimeter then provided, for the route to the promenade from the eastern end of the Quaker Garden to be ramped. Clearly the planted area there would need reconfiguring to suit.
7. We remain unconvinced on the elevational detail of the chamfered corner itself and have serious doubts that carrying the metal cladding down the façade is the best solution, or indeed, really necessary. Maintaining brickwork across the elevation would not only simplify the design vocabulary but also provide essential visual continuity between blocks.
8. Similarly we question the treatment of the main, lower levels of the building containing the commercial/office areas. These appear highly over-glazed and lacking in material quality at the very point where it is needed - to provide interest at street level. In the first instance, proposing clear glazing down to floor level seems injudicious, bearing in mind the untidiness of the average office. At the very least the cill height panels should be of obscured glass. Secondly the use of storey height, fritted glass panels, below the brick piers of the upper floors is visually too casual a response at this level, a more substantial sense of material is needed here. There was thought of carrying down the line of brickwork from the upper floors, but this was considered too cumbersome and inappropriate in scale. However a dark, strongly profiled, metal cladding, matching the window frame colour could provide the necessary emphasis to this element in the façade.
9. We also note the proposed provision to these office/commercial areas of thin, obscured glass, clerestory panels to the head of the glazing at floor levels 01 and 02. These complicate the glazing pattern unnecessarily and reduce the clarity of the elevation. By eliminating them and bringing the brickwork down to window head height the fenestration could be simplified and the proportioning of the elevation markedly improved. The thin, obscured glass panels are also proposed at floor level 00. Here again materiality is lacking and a coloured aluminium panel, flush with the face of the window framing and matching it

in colour, would introduce the necessary substance and articulation to the façade at this point.

10. The profiling of the brick coursing to provide “rustication” at these lower levels is welcomed, and we appreciate BDP’s wish for consistency by continuing this throughout levels 00 and 01. However the decision to resort to narrowing coursing at LG level undermines the visual intent. We suggest that a slight increase in course height possibly combined with a small projection to the face of the piers could provide the required differentiation from the upper levels.
11. Angle’s approved scheme had strong articulation between blocks. This was particularly pronounced and most important in the elevation to the Bricket Road which otherwise would appear too solid a mass. The current proposals, although modified from earlier drawings, still appear rather tenuous, particularly from 02 upwards where there appears to be no differentiation from the balcony fronts of adjoining flats. This needs to be modified to ensure that the vertical separation is maintained unambiguously throughout the height of the building. Possibly by a radical change to the design of the balconies at this important junction.
12. While we welcome the use of perforated metal to the balconies generally we find they currently lack finesse in detail. They should be light and elegantly articulated.
13. The improved scale of the Block C extension is noted but we consider repeating the elevational design of the promenade buildings, and with the use of a different colour brickwork, needs more work. We find the set-back of about six metres at level 02 too great for proportioning of the block in relation to the adjoining buildings. It seems to us that a three metre set-back would work better there. Our remarks on the cladding to the upper levels would also apply to this top floor.
14. In our earlier discussions of the scheme we argued that, with substantial areas of elevation facing almost due south, there needed to be sun-shading to the facades. Some form of brise-soleil would make not only environmental sense, particularly in view of climate change, but would also provide variety to the elevations and differentiate them appropriately from other parts of the complex. In this connection we think a canopy to the south end of the Block B promenade building could provide a welcoming entry point.
15. The elevations to the promenade are suitably different from those generally, but we find the use of dark brick unnecessary and the brick parapet too heavy, making the increase in height of these blocks loom too much visually over the promenade itself. Maybe here could be the place to use an obscured glass balustrade to lighten the whole impression of the space? We noted with interest that at the Design Review there was favourable reference to Angle’s use of flint facing to this area, which we considered unsuitable on the narrow piers between the shopfronts on that scheme. However here the piers are more substantial and by carrying down the precast surrounds from the upper windows to protect the lower corners, flint could be introduced here. Possibly as a carefully detailed facing to precast panels rather than hand laid.

16. In view of earlier criticism of the central division in the paving of the promenade, apparently creating two separate strips in an already linear space, which is visually unhelpful, it is disappointing it is still proposed in the current scheme. While it is clearly necessary for planting and seating to occupy some of the central area it does not need to be totally linear, and least of all demarcated by a central line of paving. The space, and the paving pattern, could read across the total width of the promenade, with the planting and seating in playful counterpoint to it.
17. The circular forms of the Quaker Garden are both pleasant and appropriate to Quaker belief. We appreciate the amount of discussion that has taken place to arrive at this solution. However, it seems to us that the levels and details of the landscape require further work, and this was reinforced when discussing the rather unconvincing eye level sketch presented with the current scheme at our April 8 meeting. We are also concerned at the relationship between the present Quaker site boundary and the current proposals, particularly bearing in mind the intention to mark the boundary in some permanent form. Is there no opportunity to juggle the layout to enable, at least, the northern and western edges to be readily identified, possibly by moving the larger circle slightly further north west? While welcoming the much more direct route afforded between the Maltings and the promenade by this scheme. In the planting we hope it will be possible to create a tree line that links to that on the opposite corner of Bricket Road, running westwards along the Victoria Street frontage to then embrace the western end of the Quaker Garden.
18. There appear to be discrepancies between the elevations and aerial view of Block C flats above the promenade and the plans in respect of the balconies. Equally there is no indication of planting on any of the lower roof levels. Clearly all visible roofs should have extensive planting and we look forward to seeing proposals for these.
19. In our earlier discussions we raised the question of solar panels to the top roof areas i.e. those roofs not visible from any flats. We understood from BDP that these would be installed wherever the roof area was wide enough for maintenance access. None are shown on the aerial view. We await further details with interest.
20. We also look forward to receiving details of other sustainability and environmentally friendly construction; for example, high levels of insulation, triple glazing, concrete mitigation, use of recycled materials, ground source heat pumps, rainwater storage, grey water recycling and sedum roofs.

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