

Greater Cambridge Share Planning Service

By Online Planning Register

13/06/2024

Dear Dean

**Response to 24/01588/FUL: Demolition of existing buildings except for 16 and 17, 18 - 19 Sidney Street facades, 16 and 17 street facing roof aspect and chimneys, provision of retail, office and community space.**

Cambridge Past, Present & Future is Cambridge's largest civic society. We are a charity run by local people who are passionate about where they live. We operate in the greater Cambridge area and working with our members, supporters and volunteers we:

- Are dedicated to protecting and enhancing the green setting of Cambridge for people and nature.
- Care about Cambridge and are an independent voice for quality of life in the strategic planning of Greater Cambridge.
- Are working to protect, celebrate and improve the important built heritage of the Cambridge area.
- Own and care for green spaces and historic buildings in and around the city for people and nature, including Wandlebury Country Park, Coton Countryside Reserve, Cambridge Leper Chapel & Barnwell Meadows, Bourn Windmill and Hinxtton Watermill.

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Cambridge Past Present & Future objection to the impact of this proposed development on heritage assets contrary to policy 61 (Historic Environment) and Policy 62 (Local Heritage Assets) and sustainability contrary to policy 28 (Carbon Reduction).

We support the principle of developing this site to bring underused buildings back into economic use. We are also in support of the improvement to Hobson Street and Hobson's Passage to create an attractive street frontage and make it more inviting to users. We understand that there may be pressure to do something to improve the street scene and public realm and doing 'something is better than nothing.' However, we consider that significant weight should be given to the impact of the development on the Conservation Area and Buildings of local Interest (BLI).

Our objections relate to

- the demolition of the façade to 21 Hobson Street, and that its proposed replacement is not of distinctive design worthy of its replacement,
- that the demolition and rebuild is unsustainable from an embodied carbon perspective,
- the design and bulk of fifth floor and roof top fronting Sidney Street has a detrimental impact on the Conservation Area, and
- that the amount of community space provided is too small.

**The loss of the cinema façade at 21 Hobson Street and the design of the new facade.**

We appreciate the difficulties arising from retaining the façade whilst providing modern and useable space. But we do question whether it must be lost to develop the site. We note that the Greater Cambridge Design



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Review Panel suggested that the cinema façade should be retained, and any replacement building can only be justified if it is of the highest design quality.

The justification to demolish the façade appears to be purely commercial. The Façade Retention Appraisal Report states that the current external appearance is considered “less fitting” for high quality modern development, and “less fitting” and “less legible” as an entrance to future uses. We note that the 21 Hobson Street Façade Retention Options Appraisal Report appraised four alternative approaches involving the retention of the façade. The conclusion appears to be that a standard façade retention results in a poor performing building, and as none of the alternative façade retention schemes perform any better, demolition is justified. Commercial criteria such as loss of floorspace, construction costs and rental/sales values appear to be the key justification for not retaining the façade, with no consideration of the heritage significance of the facade. Surely an office building with an art deco frontage would be a selling point for letting the space.

Paragraph 195 of the NPPF describes ‘heritage assets’ as “an irreplaceable resource [...] [which] should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations”. Paragraph 209 of the NPPF and Adopted Local Plan Policy 62 require a balanced judgment between the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.

The significance of the building is the detailing of the Egyptian Art Deco Façade. The Conservation Area Appraisal identifies the former cinema as one of the few buildings fronting Hobson Street and makes an important contribution to the range of C20 design styles which have a monumental scale and dominate the street scene. Once the façade is demolished it will be lost for ever. Its loss would have a significant impact on the character of the Conservation Area. The building’s value is a reminder to residents and visitors to Cambridge of its past use as a public community building.

If officers consider that the development is required to improve the street scene and public realm, this needs to be weighed up against the loss of a Building of Local Interest and what it is replaced with. The Design Review Panel said that any replacement building can only be justified if it is of the highest design quality. We do not consider that this is the case with the proposed façade.

The existing façade is of a 1930’s art deco design, the importance of which has been recognised by its designation as a Building of local Interest. The Conservation Area Appraisal describes the building as “Egyptienne.” It identifies the building as a focal feature and is included in a key positive view along Hobson Street. The architecture of the façade is highly detailed and has strong vertical lines emphasised by the windows and the articulation.

We do not consider that the proposed façade is as characterful as the existing. We consider that the proposed grid structure is more brutalist in form. A form which is becoming common place in new buildings across Cambridge. We consider it boring and uninspiring and failing to replace any theatricality of the original. The glazed tiles and the articulation of the current façade gives areas of light and shade, whilst the proposed façade appears flat when viewed at an angle.

We ask that officers and councillors carefully consider the documents justifying the demolition of the façade and give significant weight to the heritage significance of the façade. If you consider that demolition is justified, then we do not consider that the replacement façade is of exceptional design to replace the 1930’s art deco design. It is replacing a very distinctive design style with an anywhere office design.

### **Sustainability**

Policy 28 seeks sustainable design and construction through a hierarchical approach to carbon reduction. This development which is proposing demolition and rebuild over refurbishment is contrary to this approach. Demolition will use energy to deconstruct the buildings, and remove, process and dispose of the waste. CO2 may also be released through associated chemical processes. Building a new replacement building requires

more materials and energy, creating more embodied carbon. Even with the new building achieving BREEAM excellent, the resources used in its construction will be high compared with renovating the existing building.

### **Roof Top Design**

We welcome that the height of the proposal has been reduced from the designs consulted on at pre-application stage. However, we still have concerns about the impact of fifth floor and roof top design.

Although the fifth floor sits back from the Sidney Street elevation it appears very top heavy above the gable end to 17 Sidney Street which has finer detailing. The impact of the roof top is very intrusive when viewed from Market Street. The Conservation Area Appraisal identifies the view eastwards towards the application site as a key positive view. The view is framed by Holy Trinity Church, Henry Martyn Hall (both listed) and the shops opposite (listed or of Local Interest). We consider that the bulk of the proposal should be reduced by one storey.

### **Community Space.**

We welcome the provision of the community space. However, only 349m<sup>2</sup> or 6.5% of the space (excluding circularity space) is being given over to community use. We understand that the Bingo Hall (cinema) is about 1600m<sup>2</sup> of which 500m<sup>2</sup> is usable. We consider that there is an opportunity of more public benefit from this scheme and more community space could be provided to reflect the loss of the area of the Bingo Hall/cinema.

### **Conclusion**

The application relates to buildings, which although not listed are identified as having a local interest or having a positive impact on the street scene. Along with adjacent buildings they make an important contribution to the character of the Conservation Area. This development harms the Conservation Area in Hobson Street with the loss of the façade to No 21 and in Sidney Street and Market Street with the overbearing upper floor. We consider the proposal is contrary to Policy 61 and Policy 62 by not preserving or enhancing views and buildings and the inappropriate height and massing of the upper floor and roof design within the Conservation Area. For reasons of impact on heritage assets, poor sustainability and insufficient public benefit we consider that the design and uses of the development should be reconsidered.

I trust that you will take our comments into consideration.

Yours sincerely

*Sarah Nicholas*

Principal Planning Officer