Greater Cambridge Share Planning Service

By Online Planning Register

Cambridge Past, Present & Future
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Response to 25/04384/FUL: Installation of roof plant and screen, refurbishment and enhancement of internal and external fabric including installation of PV panels, alterations to internal fabric, rooms and wall positions, and fourth floor and basement extensions of the Guildhall at The Guildhall And Large Hall Market Hill Cambridge

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 Hinxton Watermill.

Cambridge Past, Present and Future support the revitalisation of the Civic Quarter but have concerns over some of the design and functional elements of the proposal for the Guildhall. Finding appropriate balances between commendable aspirations and heritage harms is crucial. . However, the information in the planning application falls far short of what is needed. It is inadequate in its assessment of both significance, and of how the requirements of, and interactions between, the proposed activities will impact that significance.

Regarding significance, it is particularly disappointing (as noted by Historic England) that the application neither includes nor directly references the room-by-room assessments in the 2003 Conservation Plan prepared for the Council by Freeland Rees Roberts. This document remains an essential resource for any sensitive redevelopment, as it offers a granular assessment of the architectural and historic significance of every internal space. The omission of this framework suggests a disregard for the building's established heritage hierarchy and risks a design approach that does not fully respect the varying levels of significance within the internal fabric. We urge that this conservation plan be fully integrated into the assessment to ensure the building's heritage is protected through a more informed hierarchy of change. We note that this document is no longer available on the Council's website and ask that it is made available immediately.

We are particularly concerned about the visual impact of the roof top screen, the use of the halls and the design of the entrance lobby and 'Heart' space.

Roof top screen:

We are concerned about the visual impact of the 2.4m roof top plant screen. While we understand the operational necessity of screening equipment, we consider the current design to be a detrimental addition that undermines the architectural integrity and historic character of this 1939 building. This addition will have a greater impact than the Heritage Statement suggests, not least because (unlike in the misleading visualisation) it will always be seen in shadow in views from the Market Square.

The Guildhall is a significant five-storey structure defined by a disciplined, rhythmic pattern of fenestration across its elevations. The proposed screen acts as a heavy, discordant volume that disrupts the building's original silhouette and balanced geometry. The drawings describe the screen as a louvered screen, but it is unclear how this looks from a distance. The illustrative views in the Design and Access Statement show the screen as a solid element, lacking refined detailing creating a harsh contrast with the sophisticated structural rhythm of the main facade. By failing to provide a sympathetic "crown" or terminating element to the upward verticality of the building, the proposal results in a visual "top-heaviness" that harms the character of the local streetscape.

A more sympathetic approach would involve increasing the set-back of the screen from the building's parapet edge. Furthermore, we suggest that a vertically louvered system be considered, as the vertical orientation would better reflect the rhythmic fenestration of the elevations. On the principle north elevation, such a system would allow ambient light to pass through the structure, providing a level of transparency and textural depth that mitigates the visual weight of the addition.

For the shorter stretches of the screen on the east and west-facing elevations, vertical louvers would offer a dynamic play of light and shadow as the sun moves throughout the day. This would allow the screen to gain a sense of depth that echoes the vertical rhythm of the windows below, rather than appearing as a static block. By aligning the verticality of the screening with the building's existing lines, the addition can be made to read as a secondary, lightweight component.

Civic Space:

CPPF are concerned that the application fails to adequately revitalise the building's historic civic role, notably through not realising the full potential of the Large and Small Halls and the omission of a welcoming, accessible public entrance.

CPPF welcome the ambition for the project where page 30/72 of the DAS states- '*The Guildhall will be transformed into an accessible and inclusive public building and opened up to welcome the community in'.* And- '*Proposals for the Council Chamber will future proof the Guildhall, allowing it to remain as a seat of democracy, as it has for the last 800 years',* but do not consider that the plans fulfil this ambition.'

Large and Small Halls:

In terms of proposed activities and their requirements, there is a worrying failure to consider how the Large and Small Halls might (or might not – but if not, why not?) accommodate "multi-use" activities proposed for the Council Chamber. This potential opportunity for minimising contentious heritage harms should have been considered.

It is concerning that that while the Small Hall is mentioned in the "Civic Function" section of the D & A Statement, the Large Hall is not. What, if any, consideration (apart from the proposed platform lift) has been given to improving facilities for the Large Hall, as a public space and concert hall? What consideration has been given to catering and servicing if these two major public halls are to be used more for conferences and events.

Public Entrance:

The D&A statements refer to the entrance leading to the welcoming heart of the building. However, the reality of the proposed plans suggests an uninviting and formal sequence of spaces divided by fire-doors internal corridors and duplicate flights of stairs.

The funding for this project should enable a much more radical transformation of our dated, formal, staid and institutional Guildhall, so that it provides space for citizens and tourists to meet and mingle, within the impressive building frame, that is at the very heart of our city. The listing should not be seen as a barrier to the reimagining of the building's interior. How good might it be if the City Council was to has the courage that Norwich have shown in transforming their Castle?

CPPF suggest the following aspects where the design should be improved-

1. The existing circulation within the building should be evaluated to see how it might be simplified. The long corridors and multiple staircases need rationalising. For example, the ground floor appears to have 8 staircases between floors, and the proposal is to add two more, within the two atriums. Circulation would appear to take up about half the usable floor space, this seems excessive. If the stairs to the left of the Peas Hill entrance were removed, then that level access way into the building could be made much more inviting, leading through to the second atrium and open plan areas. The other stairway to the right of it would provide access to the upper floors and fire exit routes.

2. The existing entrance is flanked by two mirror image grand staircases that turn their backs on each other leaving a void between them. Much better use could be made of this prominent space. For example, the platform lift, that is proposed beside the steps at the entrance, could be extended to provide wheelchair access to the first floor, and the stair to the right of the entrance could be removed to provide useful floor space at GF and FF level. Consideration should be given to how the use of the balcony over the entrance might be used for national and local celebrations.

3. Consideration needs to be given to signage that should announce the transformation of our forbidding and austere administration building into the welcoming and inclusive public building that it is intended to become. New external signage should be an integral part of the planning application.

4. We fully endorse the outrage at the removal of the tourist centre from the Guildhall. Tourism in Cambridge is a massive economic force, attracting millions of visitors (around 8-8.2 million annually) who inject significant money (over £800 million) into the local economy, supporting 20% of the jobs in the city. Cambridge needs a large and inviting tourist information centre to welcome its many visitors and the Guildhall is an ideal building. There should also be space for exhibitions. Such an open plan space should be positioned prominently within the Guildhall, with visibility from outside. We suggest it might occupy the areas between the main entrance and the level access entrance from Peas Hill. Consider relocating the Customer Service Centre and Contact Centre. With all the lifts and stairs, do these need to be on the ground floor?

5. The 'heart space' layout appears formal and inflexible. The reuse of the seating from the Council Chamber may be appropriate, however the ranks of fixed tables and desks, separated by, presumably, plastic vegetation, could surely be improved upon.

6. We also endorse the active travel team's objection due to '*the difficult access to the cycle parking which appears to require negotiating steps and multiple doors*'. This appears to be so unsatisfactory that it is unlikely that much use would be made of the space allocated for cycle storage. Have Cam Cycle been consulted regarding the proposal?

7. We support the proposal to cover the two dismal light wells with glass roofs; however much better use should be made of the two resulting atriums. Why is the second atrium only accessed from an internal corridor on the GF? Why are the unattractive windows and brickwork facing the lightwells

on the upper floors to be retained? Would it not be appropriate to enlarge the window openings and to line the walls? The atriums are small and enclosed and, as currently designed, they bear little relevance to the examples of office atria that are cited on page 41/72 of the DAS.

8. The existing floor plans and sections should be included within the supporting documents, as should the proposed section C-C which cuts through the main entrance and Council Chamber.

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I trust that you will take our comments into consideration.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Nicholas

Principal Planning Officer