



Bath Heritage Watchdog

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APPLICATION NUMBER: 20/00552/FUL

ADDRESS: Scala, Shaftesbury Road, Oldfield Park

PROPOSAL: Redevelopment of The Scala site including the demolition of existing extensions and new extensions to improve retail store at ground floor level, provide a new community space at first floor levels and 20no apartments across first and second floor. Erection of student accommodation including 96no. student bedrooms and associated ancillary space. Erection of a residential block (C3) including 12no one bedroom apartments (a mix of affordable and market with accessible accommodation). Parking for cars and cycles and associated landscaping.

CASE OFFICER: Tessa Hampden

DATE: 23/02/2020

COMMENT: STRONG OBJECTION

Bath Heritage Watchdog strongly objects to this application.

It is disappointing that despite the consultation event, the developers have chosen to ignore everything that was said to them both by our members as well as the local residents who attended.

The development forms 3 distinct parts – development of the Scala building, the proposed student accommodation block and the housing block. We will address each of these aspects as well as the general issues/justification surrounding the development.

SCALA BUILDING

Whilst appreciating that this cherished building is not listed, it is a non-designated heritage asset, originally opened just after the First World War as the Victory cinema, and therefore should be afforded respect. Whilst recognising the claimed retention of the façade and the side elevations, there is more to the original building than that: we have strong concerns regarding the loss of original historic fabric externally and internally.

It is recognised that the building has undergone some unsympathetic change over the years. However there are some elements of the original interior that visibly remain and the shape and position of more recent panelling indicates that possibly some of the original features remain invisibly. Not least of these is the original ornate arched ceiling. This is clearly shown in the application documentation. We therefore strongly oppose the proposed ‘bite’ out of the original historic building. It would entail the loss of a large section of this original interior unnecessarily (or at best separate one part from the other). The documentation is conflicting and we wonder if this is intended to mislead. Drawing AP(1)30 Rev F (Proposed Sections) shows offices within this rear extension, however Drawing AP(1)10 Rev F (Proposed Plans Ground & First Floors) shows all to be habitable space. Which is it supposed to be? As a minimum this ambiguity must be resolved.

It would also severely reduce the size of the dance studios (therefore a significant reduction of the current community use) to just one, and would give rise to concern as to whether that which remains would be sufficient to allow financial viability to what is a well-used community asset. Potentially the number of classes would halve. This aspect of the application should be removed. An extension to the rear, abutting rather than attaching would be possible and less harmful.

We do, however, support the reopening of the original circular windows which are a nicely detailed facet of the side elevations, and the reinstallation of the Scala sign.

There are also areas such as the original entrance where the original ironwork decorative banisters of the staircases remain in situ. These should also be retained and we also query whether there are other aspects of the original cinema that remain concealed behind more recent additions. This should be investigated prior to any decisions.

The extension into the heritage building, from the side elevations, does not work aesthetically. However the removal of this section would make the end result more acceptable and we would request that this is followed through. Having said that the materials currently proposed are unacceptable; the use of dark grey metal cladding is strongly opposed and a rubble stone approach is required. This would also help blend any structure into the locality rather than make it stand out.

Once again the layout and size of the proposed residential aspect of the rear extension (including that intruding into the historic building) gives rise to the belief that this will also end up becoming student rooms.

The proposed front elevation shows just how detrimental the height of the extension would be. This is predominantly due to the 90 degree orientation of the extension roof to the original cinema roof. Orientating this to match the original cinema, even if higher, would be far less visually damaging. Third Avenue goes uphill from the front of the cinema affording a clear view of the roofs, making this the most distinctive view that most people recognise and that proposed would be harmful.

MEWS HOUSES

This 'block' does not sit comfortably in its location and does not relate successfully with the locality. Whilst the use of Bath stone ashlar and clay pantiles is supported, the insertion of standing seam zinc to the front elevation is strongly opposed, as is the use of perforated metal. There are no examples of this architecture locally and, being in a prominent corner location, jars. Buff brick is also not a material used in this area (there are pockets of use but elsewhere in the city). The only brick used in this locality is red.

Although claiming to reflect the local terraced housing, it clearly reads as a block of flats. A small terrace of houses similar to those opposite the site would be far more successful. The interior could still be flats but at least the exterior would visually fit. The proposals have no delineation and the fenestration is awkward and unbalanced whereas terraced housing has rhythm with fenestration being or resembling sash windows and a more aesthetic stone to void ratio. The roofs need to have breaks such as chimney stacks which could also be used for ventilation or solar pipes.

The height creates a sense of being hemmed in. The advantage of the use of the land as a car park is that it creates a breathing space in what is a very densely populated area. We consider that copying the local vernacular is the approach called for here.

There has to be concern at the blocking in of sight-lines for drivers exiting the site into Arlington Road. Traffic has a tendency to appear suddenly around the corner from Livingstone Road and building right into the corner is likely to make this more dangerous, both for pedestrians crossing the access road, who would no longer have the benefit of being seen through the railings currently in place, and for motorists emerging into Arlington Road.

Although there are lots of references to 'affordable' housing, when pressed at the consultation we were informed that this would be at 30% under the market value. Whilst it is recognised that the definition of 'affordable housing' is set by the Government, it has to be said that even 30% below market price would not be affordable to local people. It should be an opportunity to provide housing solely for local people (as with schemes in areas such as the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales). What Oldfield Park is desperately short of owing to the high proportion of HMOs is social housing.

Looking at the internal layout we have to say that it resembles student accommodation, certainly not family accommodation as stated in the Design & Access Statement. There are precedents for this subterfuge, most recently the development of the former Hygienic Laundry in Lymore Gardens which was stated to be for housing and was then marketed as student flats. There is also a strong likelihood, given the market price, that they will be purchased by landlords for the same purpose. There needs to be a planning condition placed on any of the 'family'/affordable housing that it cannot be exempted from Council Tax which should prevent it from being used for additional student places.

STUDENT BLOCK

This structure is your ubiquitous, 'off the shelf', monolithic accommodation block that already blights the city. However in this case it is dropped into the centre of pleasantly scaled, rhythmic terraced housing, rather than standing alone, further emphasising its inappropriateness.

Aside the use of Bath stone ashlar none of the materials are from the local palette, thus leading to a visual jarring in the locality.

The main issue relating to this structure is the height. The locality is almost universally two storeys plus roof. Yet this structure is four storeys – effectively double everywhere else. It looms up brutally from the centre of the area and is a depressing edifice worshipping at the altar of architectural monotony. It could be said to make the existing nondescript 1960's shop extension attractive. The height needs to come down to two storeys plus roof level and designed to be more fitting for the location in both style and materials.

OVERALL

Our main concern is the protection of the Scala Cinema and under these current proposals we do not believe this is happening. Plans could be easily tweaked to avoid the loss of historic fabric and this we would say is the absolute minimum to be expected. We also consider shrinking the well-used Dance Studio to be an unacceptable loss of a community asset, for which no compensation is proposed in the plans submitted.

The style of architecture all round is poor. The materials chosen are not part of the local palette but are a signature of this particular architects' practice, an unacceptable vanity in this location. The proposed buildings will be visible from a long way around and more so from some places that have not been included. The whole of the city has World Heritage status not just the centre. The site is also adjacent to the conservation area and therefore consideration has to be given to the impact on the views from there. This is not in the documentation.

The introduction of yet more student accommodation to an area already saturated is untenable. Of course the documentation contains the standard lie that it will take the pressure of HMOs. Nearly all the HMOs in this area were brought into existence before the Use Class 4 was added to the legislation, and as such they have a right to two residents permits each; and while a car is a cheaper option than public transport and with a bigger luggage carrying capacity, HMOs will continue to be the option preferred over PBSAs for most students arriving by car. An examination of the planning portal some years after the lie was first given shows that HMOs are still being approved with more houses still being converted on the fringes of the Article 4 areas, and existing HMOs constantly being enlarged to cram more students in. There comes a time when enough is enough, and for Oldfield Park that was some years ago.

The no car policy is an absolute fallacy. It is totally unenforceable and to suggest otherwise is misleading. Twerton Mill on the Lower Bristol Road is an excellent, but not unique, example of how it doesn't work. Universities might restrict their on-site car student parking but student cars are freely used during evenings and weekends when the checks claimed to be made during the working day (though this claim is suspect) no longer apply. No-one is going to know whose cars are parked in the surrounding streets.

At the consultation an aerial photo of the area was on show with HMOs plotted on it. It was abundantly clear that this was grossly inaccurate as the surrounding roads are virtually all HMOs. If this was used as any basis for any part of the application then it has been done under false pretences.

The Statement of Community Engagement is skewed and misrepresented. Information provided at the exhibitions was inaccurate and the answers to questions loaded. We had members at each of the sessions and thus we know that this document does not give an accurate impression of what was being said.

Policy CP12 is there to protect our District Centres. Moorland Road is one of those District Centres. The Scala Co-op has always been the anchor supermarket which has helped Moorland Road thrive. We therefore have concerns that the downsizing of the store will encourage people to shop elsewhere to the detriment of the area. Recently announced is the closure of Lloyds Bank and that McColls is on the market giving the potential loss of it and the Post Office which is within. In conjunction with the rise in takeaways primarily to serve students (and therefore they struggle for trade outside term time) and the loss of parking implicit in this planning application, Moorland Road is at the very tipping point and implementing these proposals could be the final straw.

SUMMARY

The works as proposed are considered to be detrimental to the special architectural and historic character and interest of the Undesignated Listed Asset, adjacent and the conservation area contrary to S16 and S72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Section 12 'Conserving & Enhancing the Historic Environment of the NPPF and Policies LCR1, DW1, CP6, D1, D2, D3, D5, D7, HE1, NE2, RA, and CR3 of the Core Strategy and Placemaking Plan and should be considerably revised or refused in its current format.