

Comments by Andrew Saint on Revised Application for Woodlands site, December 2021 (21/04356/FL)

This is the third time in the past year I have made comments about a planning application for this site. I am sure many people in the local community affected by the scheme will be in the same position.

After a study of this new application for this site, with the accompanying documentation, it's my view that it once again most regrettably falls far short of the standards of design which ought to be in evidence for this important site within a conservation area and adjacent to listed buildings. In many respects it constitutes only a minor revision to the last scheme, with a reduction in the height of the tall building by a mere two storeys, and in the overall number of units from 170 to 155.

As has been repeatedly pointed out to the developers in various ways, by the inspector at the original enquiry and by members of the local community, they are still trying to get too many housing units on to a tight site. A reduction in height and numbers may be an improvement, but it does not make the revised design good or acceptable. It is very important that the Local Authority should not be worn down by repeated applications of a similar nature, when what is called for is a radical revision of the applicants' approach to the site. If they cannot manage that, then they should sell the site or their option on the site to someone who can. My own view is that Woodlands is an excellent example of a site which could be beneficially redeveloped for housing on a high-density/low-rise model. I note that there have lately been an increasing number of calls for that sort of approach to London sites earmarked for housing, following the recent rash of developers' towers which almost inevitably will cause problems further down the line.

The fact that the approach Anthology is taking is felt by the local community to be wrong-headed comes out loud and clear from Kanda Consulting's consultancy of community involvement in this scheme, which includes at Question 3 the question: 'Do you feel that the proposed designs achieve an appropriate balance in delivering the maximum amount of new homes whilst responding to the site surroundings?' The resounding answer given by 90% of those who responded was no. Incidentally, I should like to point out that though

my address (14 Denny Crescent) falls within the boundaries shown in Appendix 4 of the Kanda Consulting document as that within which letters were delivered soliciting opinions about the revised development in September last, I was not to the best of my knowledge and memory the recipient of any such letter.

In respect of the balance between harm and public benefit, I found the Planning Statement by the consultants T P Bennett a laborious and unconvincing exercise. Any half-decent redevelopment scheme for the Woodlands site would bring some benefits in terms of such issues as public circulation and, if the proper investments are really made, the restoration of the Cinema Museum. The point to stress is that such benefits should not have to be offset against harm in this contrived manner, because a much more acceptable and environmentally friendly development scheme could and should be designed for this site.

I forbear to repeat some of the detailed comments I made about the lower blocks (B, C & D) in August 2021, many of which still apply, but I do note that these lower blocks are still as close to the site boundary as ever. A careful examination also reveals that Block A in the revised scheme is now actually closer to the listed Master's House and Water Tower than before, increasing its detrimental effect on the closest 'heritage assets'.

I was disturbed by one detail of the amended plans for these blocks. Block D includes some one-bedroom flats. As I read the plans, the ground-floor flats are accessed from the back, which is not particularly pleasant. For the intermediate floors, occupants would have to take the common stairs, then go out the back on to some kind of balcony and enter their flats from there. This is surely unsatisfactory, and I cannot help wondering if it is legal. The third-floor access is internal and therefore better but again not very nice.

As the architectural appearance of the high building, Block A, is little changed despite the reduction of storeys, I should like to repeat my earlier remarks about its language.

'Though the design is a definite improvement on the appeal scheme, that is no great compliment. As before, there is a reaching for a token contextual gesture. This time they have picked up the brick colours of the Master's House for some of the cladding of the tall block, reasonably in my view.

‘They have then gone further by adding in arches from the same source in order to add some interest to the top and relieve the banality of the tower design. As these arches have no structural reality or mouldings of the kind found on the Master’s House, they have an unfortunate pastiche or add-on look. That is compounded at the corners, where the arches are combined with recessed balconies. In architecture the usual view is that arches need to be (or at least to look to be) solidly supported, especially at the corners, where two arches abut in different planes, but in this design the corner piers seems to be no thicker than the others, which gives an appearance of weakness. The effect of the recessed balconies is to make these corners appear even weaker. These arbitrary arches also reappear at one corner of the base of the building, two in one direction and three in the other, so as to draw attention to the corner entrance which appears to have a surprisingly generous staircase visible behind glass. It would have been more logical if the arches were taken right round the base rather than confined to a single corner. But in fact all the arches, top and bottom, are just a decorative gesture, introduced to compensate for the underlying monotony of the design.

‘It remains the case that for social and architectural reasons alike, this site is not suitable for a tall building of any kind, as was several times emphasized at the appeal enquiry.’

Lastly, in view of the ever-greater concern and responsibility about sustainability which we are all obliged to assume, may I point out that the Sustainability Report submitted by the applicants is less than convincing and bears signs of a tokenism which is hardly good enough these days? I lost count of the number of times when this report used such vague phrases as ‘acceptable’ levels, ‘where feasible’ and ‘where possible’. In these times a far more precise and exacting strategy for sustainability should surely be demanded.

Andrew Saint

December 2021