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### **Hawthorns Hotel Woodland Road - 18/06215/PREAPP**

The Society's response to a planning enquiry relating to the proposed demolition of the hotel to construct a new University Library, cafe, archive space, study and exhibition spaces.

#### **1. The proposal**

The proposed new library (the Library) will be located on the site of the current Hawthorns building. The Library will incorporate student 2,000 study seats, collaborative study spaces, accommodation for 420,000 books + 70,000 journals, researcher areas, cultural collections centre, café, event and exhibition spaces with public access.

#### **2. Summary**

2.1 The Society is grateful to the University for an invitation to a public presentation of its new Library. Public consultation is effective but only when it occurs early enough in the planning process to affect the final form of development. In this development, consultation occurred following the presentation of the planning enquiry to the Council. The Society supported the University's Masterplan which the Council adopted in 2006 (SPD11). The Society continues to support a library development on the former Hawthorns Hotel site but regrets that it cannot support the current proposal. At this planning enquiry stage there are two planning issues upon which the Council must advise.

2.2 The first issue is the Library's mass. The Library would be 55% larger than the library in the 2006 Masterplan. The site is too small for the building that the University proposes; it would overdevelop the site. The size of the building should determine the number of student study spaces; it should not be the other way about. We question the point of asking the Council to adopt a masterplan if subsequent proposals depart from it as radically as the Library.

- 2.3 The second issue is the Library's design which we assume to be work in progress. The Society broadly supports the architectural approach, but the reality of the proposed design does not meet the aspirations of the Design and Access Statement (the Statement). We suggest refinements and alterations to aspects of the design will be necessary.
- 2.4 This planning application engages with many planning policies both National and local. It would lengthen this response unnecessarily to quote planning policies with which Council officers are familiar.

### 3. Demolition

The Hawthorns has been unsympathetically altered so that it has become a negative feature in the conservation area. The Society supports the replacement of the current building.

### 4. Planning background

4.1 A planning constraint is that the site lies on the boundary of the Whiteladies Road and the Tyndall's Park Conservation Areas.

4.2 The Design Principles set out in Strategic Move 9 SPD11 said, "*The Hawthorns site is a key site on Woodland Road which will provide new purpose-built flexible accommodation for University use. The site is prominently located at the convergence of routes and addresses, the new Tyndall Place. The design of a new development for the site will need to address a range of site conditions including the following:*

*Building Massing and Scale: A range of design options have been explored. It is believed that the site could accommodate a development of between 3 and 7 storeys to allow building heights to step up to reach the height of Senate House opposite. Bearing in mind the scale of the new development should relate sympathetically to the scale of neighbouring properties.*

*Landscape: The design of external spaces is extremely important for the site and must be integral to proposals for Tyndall Place."*

**And**

*"There are a range of issues which influence the potential development of the site:*

*The existing urban 'grain' of the conservation area  
The essential character of the conservation area is one of detached Victorian villas, which creates a regular rhythm to the development along the streetscape of Elton Road and Woodland Avenue. It is important that the composition of a new building on the site responds to the nature of development on these streets and therefore avoids becoming too monolithic.*

4.3 SPD11 does not determine this application but it is a material planning consideration. The Masterplan is the strongest evidence that in 2006, the University and the Council,

following the exploration of a range of design options, concluded that a new library building of appropriate size could be raised on the footprint of the Hawthorns without harming the conservation area's character.

**5. Key planning question 1 – Would the Library's larger mass of harm the conservation area?**

- 5.1 The Library would far exceed the footprint of the Hawthorns, it would occupy practically all the site. The height of the Library surpasses the Senate House even though it starts from a lower base. Whilst notionally 7 storeys we note that floor to floor heights are significant and that the top floor is effectively two storeys.
- 5.2 The University's Heritage Statement makes two assessments.
  - (i) The value of the quality of Woodland Road character area of the conservation area as 'moderate'. The Society agrees.
  - (ii) Secondly, it assesses the degree of harm that the Library would cause to the conservation area. That too it assesses as 'moderate'. The Society does not agree.
- 5.3 The harm to the conservation areas would be in the 'substantial' category. The site forms an important corner of a regular estate of large, architecturally ambitious detached and semi-detached villas. This grand estate laid out in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the essence of the character of this sub-area of the conservation area. Architectural Guides – Bristol – Andrew Foyle (2004) describes the area; *"It retains the character of a prosperous Victorian suburb"*. This character is a massive asset which the University appears to undervalue. Students and their parents particularly appreciate that the University is imbedded into the city. The Library's scale would be a substantial step-change in both mass and height. The massive elevations even where stepped would overbear and dominate the upper parts of Elton and Woodland Roads.

**6. Key planning question 2 – Would the public benefit of a Library's with the larger mass outweigh the harm that it would cause to the conservation area?**

- 6.1 The Council must assess, for the purposes of Paragraph 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework. *"Whether the Library would make a significant contribution to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development?"*
- 6.2 The Library is intended for Arts and Social Sciences. A library for these subjects is not location specific. Some subjects can be location specific where, for example, there is a need to group several related scientific or engineering departments into a critical mass for research. This is not an attempt at an egregious comparison between academic disciplines.
- 6.3 The Design and Access Statement (the Statement) says that *"The Library is a space that connects people to ideas and each other. It is a place where people meet, think, research, share and create as a community of scholars..... It is also a social space and a place of learning and research."* This Library will not be a traditional pre-

digital age library. Primarily, the Library will be a learning space to which the library stock will be an ancillary resource.

- 6.4 The Society is aware that the University as a result of its rapid/steady expansion has for some time attempted to meet an unsatisfied student demand for more student study space. It is possible to draw an inference from the Statement that the Library will satisfy the current demand for additional study space. Whether this inference is correct, the University's continued expansion creates an escalator for ever more study space. To meet this demand the University has acquired and converted Beacon House and is in the process of converting Senate House to student study space. A reasonable inference is that the University is already considering the acquisition/conversion of more property to provide more student study space. We note that the University has yet to decide the reuse of the space to be vacated in the Tyndall Avenue Arts and Social Sciences Library.
- 6.5 The Society accepts that there has been a reaction against exclusive digital based learning and that teaching /learning requires access to a book stock and periodicals. How much of the book stock needs to be on-site or off-site and recoverable through a databased inventory is a matter of choice for the University. The library will have a record of frequently and infrequently accessed paper-based material.
- 6.6 The Society asks the Council to conclude that the Library does not engage paragraph 80 of the NPPF. The University does not show that there is a public gain that outweighs the damage that the Library would cause to the conservation area. For staff and students one of the joys of Bristol University is that it is in a city and not remote on a campus. A balance must be struck between the needs of the city and the University. This huge building would respond only to the University's demands. The University has complete flexibility in the allocation of Library space. The size of the building should determine the number of student study spaces; it should not be the other way about. What proportion of the book stock should remain on site is also flexible.

## **7. Design and materials – matter for Council's advice**

- 7.1 The Society supports contemporary architecture that enhances the relationship between the new and the surrounding historic building styles.
- 7.2 The University has several landmark buildings; another signature/statement building or a building with attitude requires careful validation. There is no justification for over-large buildings by saying that they are landmarks. The Library will not be a flagship building of the university. It will not be at the geographical centre of the university estate. It will not be in the same street block as other modern buildings or surrounded by a large area of public realm to set it off.
- 7.3 The Library will not be a gateway building. It is separated from the rest of the university buildings and is off-set from Tyndall Avenue. The Library will not close the view along either Woodland Road, Elton Road or Tyndall Avenue and does not form

an entry point to any part of the University estate. The public realm at the junction should be the 'gateway' to the heart of the 'precinct'. The Tyndall Avenue/ Woodland Road/ Elton Road cross-roads should create a multi-purpose public space surrounded by a group of important buildings and accommodate the many transport and pedestrian desire lines.

- 7.4 The site will be visible from many viewpoints; it is at the end of the ridge which includes Tyndall Avenue. The bulk of this building will be read as a wide slab of masonry, highly visible in the context of the other university tall 'landmark' building; Wills Tower. The Library cannot 'read' with the Wills Memorial Tower and the Wills Memorial Physics Building to form a '*trio of buildings*' that the Design Drivers: Site Objectives, A describes, even if this was a desirable objective.
- 7.5 The strengths of the proposed design are the potentially interesting outlines created by the staggered building layers. However, the splayed blocks need to be subdivided or articulated into a more human scale. Although the lower elements have a carefully proportioned and ordered fenestration grid, they open in a flat surface. More modelling around the windows that would cast shadows would add interest to these large elevations. The Society notes the windows designed to face down Elton Road which 'add to the street'. These could be successful but are currently over scaled to this context. Subject to approval of the specific material, the Society supports the proposal for natural stone cladding. The Society suggests that it would improve the street facades to add discrete detail to the cladding in a similar palette. For example, the detail could demarcate the basement, and any features that define the top or ends of the building and horizontal strings or vertical divisions.
- 7.6 A weaknesses of the proposed design is the height of the masonry mass that faces the pedestrian in Elton Road and Woodland Road which would produce an awkward and overbearing step in height from the adjoining buildings which a reduction in mass would mitigate. A major weakness is the upper block that faces Royal Fort Gardens. This block appears as an awkward, aggressive element with an inelegant wall to void ratio and window proportion. The very large window will be over dominant and potentially lit at all hours-indeed it is described as a beacon. In plan form with the adjacent Elton Road villas the window area is wider than one of the school houses. There is a striking contrast between this element and the refinement of the lower structure. The Society does not support this feature of the design in its present form and scale.

## 8. The public realm

- 8.1 The junction of the pedestrianised Tyndall Avenue with Woodland Road requires further consideration if the University wishes to create an impressive 'welcome area'.
- 8.2 The Library, Bristol Grammar School, the Fry Building, the Physics Building and the Senate House will create an informal group of buildings. Each building has an informal planting area that separates it from the highway. The junction is modified by pavement build-outs that reflect highway standards. Similarly, the proposals to

modify the carriageway reflect highway specifications. The Society suggests that the University should consider an overall scheme to define the junction as a place of significance. The scheme could be formal, which would require a revision of the hard landscape. Alternatively, the scheme could be an informal area defined by an integrated planting scheme; an extension of the Tyndall Avenue improvements. Apart from the Grammar School, the University owns all the frontages.

The Statement makes much of public access from the street but in the plans supplied this appears very limited.

## 9. Conclusion

9.1 The Society supports redevelopment of the Hawthorns and the construction of the Library. Unfortunately, we cannot support the current scheme whose size is determined by the maximum that can be built on the site. It is not sufficiently outstanding to warrant a departure from normal planning considerations of the setting and local character. This massive block would neither protect or enhance either of the conservation areas or contribute to the setting of the Grade 2 listed Bristol Grammar School building. The design must have a better relationship with the older buildings whose varied styles include the ornate Grammar School villas the listed hall and former Baptist College and the dispirited design (cf Pevsner) of Senate House.

9.2 A Library, of the size proposed in the Strategic Masterplan would double the size of the library that this scheme would replace. The University has flexibility and a wide discretion to allocate student study places and library stock. The University continues to expand. It is probable that the University will need to increase student study space and library storage before the completion of the new Library. Whether the Library can supply 2,000 more student study spaces or a lesser number the University will require more accommodation to meet the ever-increasing demand for student study spaces.