



an independent force for a better Bristol

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**New Arts and Social Sciences Library, Hawthorns Hotel Site, Woodland Road –
19/04808/PREAPP**

The Society's response to a planning enquiry leading to a full Planning Application (including demolition within a Conservation Area) for the redevelopment of the site to accommodate a new University Library, to include cafe, archive space and various study and exhibition spaces.

1. The proposal

The proposed new library (the Library) will be located on the site of the current Hawthorns building.

2,000 study seats for students ranging from quiet individual to collaborative study spaces;

Accommodation for 420,000 books + 70,000 journals;

Researcher areas and creative lab providing opportunities to use collaborative work space for making, learning, exploring and sharing

Cultural Collections Centre;

Public access café, event and exhibition spaces –

Summary

2.1 The Society supported the University's Masterplan which the Council adopted in 2006 (SPD11). The Society continues to support a development of a world class library on the former Hawthorns Hotel site but regrets that it cannot support the current proposal. There are two planning issues.

2.2 The first issue is the Library's mass and design. 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 relates to the remodelling of Woodland Road and the junction with Elton Road and Tyndall Avenue.

3 **Planning background**

- 3.1 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.”

And

“There are a range of issues which influence the potential development of the site. 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.”

- 3.2 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 could be raised on the footprint of the Hawthorns without harming the conservation area’s character.

4 **Key planning question 1 – Would the Library’s larger mass of harm the conservation area?**

- 4.1 The Library would far exceed the footprint of the Hawthorns and would occupy practically all the site. The height of the Library at 36m, is taller than the Senate House even though it starts from a lower base. The distance views show that the Library will alter the skyline from all directions. The Library will stand out as a white, unarticulated block on the end of the ridge which includes Tyndall Avenue. The Senate house, the Wills Tower and the Wills Physics Laboratory create architecturally sophisticated outlines on the skyline. The Library would be an extremely large white masonry slab whose outline contrasts to its disadvantage with the outlines of the other skyline buildings.

- 4.2 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.

- 4.3 The Society has not seen any contextual drawings which are essential to assess the impact on the conservation area, but it is clear that the Library would dwarf its neighbours which include the setting of the Grade II listed Bristol Grammar School. The proposed design does not, 'Mediate the scale between the 'domestic' villas and the 'civic' University building'. The Library would conflict with its the immediate context and the surrounding urban grain.
- 4.4 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, many of which the University has sensitively converted and reused. This grand estate laid out in the second half of the 19th 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 would overbear and dominate the upper parts of Elton and Woodland Roads. The footprint and height of the proposed building in the Woodland Road/Elton Road area, however designed, would seriously damage the Conservation Area.
- 5 **Key planning question 2 – Would the public benefit of a Library with the larger mass outweigh the harm that it would cause to the conservation area?**
- 5.1 The Council must assess, *"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?"*
- 5.2 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.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 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.

- 5.5 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.
- 5.6 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.

6 Design and materials

- 6.1 The Society supports modern design that enhances the relationship between the new and the surrounding historic building styles.
- 6.2 There is no justification for an over-large building to say that it is a landmark. The Library will not be a flagship university building. It will not be at the centre of the university estate. It will not be surrounded by a large area of public realm to set it off.
- 6.3 The Library will not be a gateway building. It is offset from Tyndall Avenue. The public realm at the junction should be the 'gateway' to the heart of the University's estate. The Tyndall Avenue/ Woodland Road/ Elton Road cross-roads should create a multi-purpose public space surrounded by a group of important buildings.
- 6.4 The highest block of 3-floors is a wide rectangle that would overbear and diminish all the surviving original fabric of the conservation area. The quirky 'fanning and twisting' of the upper block, while architecturally interesting and appropriate for a grand civic location, is inappropriate for this constricted site that is enclosed by residential and listed buildings. The design does not attempt to fulfil the promise in the Masterplan to fit the grain of the conservation area.
- 6.5 The use of light-coloured masonry throughout would underline the clash with retained existing buildings, which almost all feature extensive use of grey limestone.
- 6.6 The Library will be a landmark building for the city and the University, and a source of inspiration for students and residents. As such, the building should be at the forefront of innovation in low-energy design. The current proposals of sustainability are neither innovative or inspiring, and do not demonstrate the urgency of change that was publicised within the University's declaration of a climate emergency. The building's size and long opening hours mean that it is imperative that strict targets of low operational energy use are set and achieved. The floor to ceiling heights proposed are up to 5m. Heights that exceed 3m lead to rapidly decreasing thermal efficiency.

7 The public realm

- 7.1 We welcome the public access without barriers into ground floor cafe / exhibition spaces.

- 7.2 A building on a broader footprint could provide more enclosure for the public space being created to make it more intimate and less windswept. This would require a concave, L-shaped or similar frontage and could reduce the need for such a tall building.
- 7.3 In our earlier response we said, “The junction of the pedestrianised Tyndall Avenue with Woodland Road requires further consideration if the University wishes to create an impressive ‘welcome area’. The Library, Bristol Grammar School, the Fry Building, the former Baptist College, the Wills Physics Building, and the Senate House create an informal group of buildings. Each building has an informal planting area that separates it from the highway. 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.
- 7.4 The Society supports the pedestrianisation of areas where there is heavy pedestrian use, but we were surprised to see the road ‘improvements’ move down Woodland Road. The rationale for the pedestrianisation of Woodland Road appears flimsy. Tyndall Avenue is not dominated by bus or vehicle movements. The justification for switching pedestrianisation from Tyndall Avenue to Woodland Road seems to derive solely from a comment from Bristol Urban Design Forum that the new library building needs more of a setting because it is so big. Pedestrianisation does not serve that purpose or much purpose at all.
- 7.5 The pedestrian desire lines in the area are linear, not diverse. There is a single pedestrian desire line across the road at the current zebra crossing. The Library entrances do not face Woodland Road. Only the catering area of the Senate House will face Woodland Road, access to the student study areas will be in Tyndall Avenue. Activity would not spill on to the road from either the Library or from the Senate House. The Council had no pre-existing plan to pedestrianise the area.
- 7.6 The natural area for activation is at the junction with Tyndall Avenue. We support the University's tentative plan to make more of this, possibly by removing the wall on the boundary of the security services site on the edge of Royal Fort Gardens.
- 7.7 The treatment of the cycle route through the pedestrianised area is critical. Bristol Walking Alliance and Bristol Cycling Campaign will make specific suggestions about cycle lanes and shared space.
- 7.8 If Bristol Grammar School parents are to be encouraged to use the north end of the Woodland Road pedestrianised area, this ‘drop off’ zone will need to be included in the plans of this application to avoid the conflicts with cyclists and pedestrians.
- 7.9 We support the proposal to remove some car parking on Tyndall Avenue to enable the relocation of bus stops. We wish to see the public realm plans at a later stage when more detail has been added.

- 7.10 The council's Traffic Management officers should take this opportunity to encourage BGS to help the University to find a solution to resolve the congestion at the top of Elton Road at school dropping off / collecting times and the conflict at other times caused by coaches waiting for BGS pupils or University students. The road realignment would deliver advantages to BGS.
- 7.11 The Society does not support the introduction of a food market in Senate House. Another convenience outlet would reduce student use of existing local facilities. The economic health of the St. Michael's Hill local shopping area is critical. There are several long-term vacant shops.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 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. Its design 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 listed Grammar School, the neighbouring villas, the listed former Baptist College, and Senate House.
- 8.2 The University has flexibility and a wide discretion to allocate study places and library stock. The University continues to expand. It is probable that the University will need to increase study space and library storage before the completion of the new Library. Whether the Library can supply 2,000 study spaces or a lesser number the provision it will only contribute to the ever-rising demand for study spaces. Whatever the situation, the University will need to find new sites for study spaces.