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To: Planning
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PLANNING
DEPARTMENT
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Application Number: N6/2013/1938/MA
Name: Welwyn Garden City Society
Address: c/o 125 Daniells
Welwyn Garden City AL7 1QT
Comment Type: Object
Comment: APPLICATION REFERENCE N6/2013/1938/MA PROPOSED COUNCIL OFFICE EXTENSION (AMENDED PLANS) AN OBJECTION ON BEHALF OF THE WELWYN GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

The Conservation Area

This proposal is within the Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area and raise serious questions about the Council's own set of values. The Council's Planning Department requires any extension to respect the materials and setting and to be subservient to the existing building; This revised proposal remains, inappropriate, bold and assertive.

Significant pressure is placed on both residents; large and small businesses alike to accord with the ethos of the town in their own buildings and extensions. It is, therefore, inappropriate for the Council to ignore these standards when it comes to its own buildings. Its position in seeking to enforce the rules within the Conservation Area will be severely compromised in the future and we do not think this is in the town's best interests.

The exterior

The proposed design is typical of the currently fashionable, bland, commercial and corporate style produced by certain multi-national architectural practices.

The exterior design of the proposed extension is inappropriate both in the context of the site and shows little consideration of, or for, the context, materials, proportions, or scale of the original building. The adoption of a new style, forcing it onto a traditional building form, lacks imagination and flair. It shows little respect or understanding of a singular, award winning and much admired building. The entire concept is out of context and sympathy with the original and the setting. The Society would welcome a sympathetic design that moves the architecture of the town forward. The Society does not consider that this proposal does that.

The Society is not advocating that the existing building design should be copied as a bland pastiche of the original, far from it. There is plenty of opportunity for a modern approach but the design should blend in with the existing building.

The original Council Offices were an award winning design by Cecil Elsom, a little known architect at the time (1936). He won the competition for the new town hall in Welwyn Garden City while still studying architecture at night school at the age of twenty. He went on to found his own practice and became one of the country's leading architects. The proposed slab of glass picks up none of the key features evident on the original building and its subsequent extension, so it sits as an alien insertion without any merit, and fails to complement or enhance any of the existing building or its surroundings.

The revision to make the glass facade vertical and to alter the plan profile of the frame; to create the illusion that it is slimmer is unsuccessful, while the new portico is both larger and a more dominant element than the original scheme, copying the detail of the main entrance is without merit.

The Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall extension (built 1978) to the side of the original building remains, by comparison, a masterpiece of understatement. The result was a building that is worthy of the town and to which the ill-conceived additions will appear all the more incongruous.

Whether intended or not, this latest addition, even with the caption over the door of 'Council Chamber Entrance', has all the pretensions of being the principal facade and thus the entrance to the council offices. However, it is in fact a Staff Entrance / Exit at the rear of the building, and a public entrance only for the Council Chamber space. Therefore, the proposal creates two, likely to be confused, front entrances. The proposed landscaping only reinforces this with its tree and shrub-lined, paved, processional route up to doors that are completed with, an again currently fashionable, cantilevered glass canopy.

The proposed glazed facade to the rear, faces approximately south east and will be exposed to the low sun penetration for a six month period from Autumn through to Spring, the steps being taken to counter this could be difficult to control. Reliance on controlling it with solar control glass, will require more reliance on air conditioning and lighting.

The rear of the current building faces on to the council staff car park. In the context of any future council plans, it is unclear what use this car park space might be given and, therefore, it is unclear how any new facade would fit into its surroundings.

The interior

The internal planning that justifies this exercise this is of poor quality.

The major part of the proposal involves infilling the large courtyard between the present north and south wings of the council offices for a three storey height. This creates very deep internal floors and, despite a light well inside the building to the first and second floors, the light levels at certain times will be far too bright for those close to the window and at other times too dark for those far away. Little consideration has been given to the working conditions and environment and thus productivity of the staff. There is insufficient accommodation for the current staff numbers to be relocated from other buildings.

Comfort levels in the building will depend entirely on artificial light and ventilation, with the resulting high energy consumption and running costs. This runs counter to the requirement for sustainability into the future.

The space created shows a very high density solution without any flair or imagination in the layout. The occupancy levels seem to suggest a density of 4.2m² to 4.7m² per person. The British Council for Offices (BCO) categorises 4-6m² as trading or call centre densities. The space afforded to the 67 people on first and second floors will be so dense that no provision has been made for filing cabinets.

The rows of desks are oriented to the windows contrary to HSE recommendations. Overall, the layout shows no awareness or consideration for current research into effective office interiors and the working environments. The designer appears to rely on the development of a totally paperless office (there are only four low filing cabinets shown and these would be used for printing supplies for the printers placed on top).

The ground floor of the single storey extension shows 'Building Control' buried 8m to 9m behind small windows looking into a space without access to direct daylight. Again, the BCO recommends the maximum distance to a window from a workstation to be 5m to 7.5m.

The council chamber is itself split between a higher area for Councillors and officials. There are currently 48 councillors, whereas there is seating for only 27 on the stage area. Splitting elected councillors up to further enforce a hierarchy is old fashioned and unnecessary in this egalitarian age.

In these days of the need for greater transparency and public engagement, it is unfortunate that the interior council chamber will look more like a court room, with the councillors emerging at a higher level from the rear of the chamber, thus limiting the opportunity for any contact with the electorate. If the councillors are sitting on a raised area in the council chamber at any time, there would be an appearance of lordship over residents below. This concept may restrict the use of this public area for wider meetings.