

## **Observations on Pace Investment's draft proposals for redeveloping 104-112 Hills Road, Cambridge, exhibited on 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> March 2020.**

### **Observations on the public consultation**

The exhibition was well staffed, and the promoters and their design team were available to answer questions and discuss some of the key issues. However, the exhibition panels were quite selective – there were no elevations or plans other than the ground floor plan. It was therefore difficult to judge the scale of the proposals in relation to Botanic House and the Botanic Garden, and important aspects of the design such as the 250 basement commuter parking spaces were not displayed. The public realm plans gave a misleading impression of the quality of the spaces between the buildings (particularly the service yard between the two office blocks).

### **Observations on the proposals**

This is a site of critical importance for Cambridge in a very prominent location. The Local Plan rightly identifies it as a major opportunity site. The current proposals, however, fall well short of the standard that should be expected here, for the following reasons:

- The scale of the development is too great and would severely harm the setting of the Grade II\* listed Botanic Garden. The height of any development on this site should be kept well below the tree line of the Botanic Garden, which suggests a maximum height along the western and southern boundaries of the site of three commercial storeys at the southern end rising perhaps to four storeys at the north of the western edge. The current scale of six commercial storeys across the southern part of the site would have a particularly overbearing impact on the Winter Garden. This garden is obviously best enjoyed when there are no leaves on the trees, making an illuminated six storey wall of glass an oppressive backdrop.
- The scale of the development on the Hills Road frontage also needs to be carefully judged. The established scale for offices on the west side of Hills Road is four storeys, and this sits comfortably with its mixed residential/commercial character. The seven storey Botanic House is the one exception to this rule, but a case can be made for this because of its landmark role at the crucial pivot between Hills Road and Station Road. Botanic House also has an impressive elegance in its proportions and detail. The proposed development appears to be eight storeys at its northern end, higher than Botanic House, and so would present a wall of glass (albeit undulating) along the Hills Road frontage and would compromise Botanic House's role as an elegant landmark. I would suggest that four storeys should be set as the appropriate scale for the Hills Road frontage. Moreover, if eight storeys is seen as the 'going rate' for redeveloped offices on Hills Road this will lead to endless planning battles with residents on roads such as Bateman Street and Norwich Street in the future when the office buildings to the north of this site come forward for redevelopment. A clear line needs to be drawn now.
- The retention of The Flying Pig is welcome, but it looks ridiculous with an eight storey wall of offices looming over it. A more sensitive brief that restricts the height

of the new development to four storeys would give a much greater opportunity to integrate The Flying Pig into the development in a more sensitive manner.

- The architecture of the proposed development looks strangely dated. Rather than develop a varied and more finely crafted response to the sensitive context of the site, the proposal presents a monotonous and overbearing wall of undulating glass that is quite out of character. There are two recently-completed buildings within a hundred yards of the site that set the standard that one would expect here: the Sainsbury Plant Science Laboratory in the Botanic Garden by Stanton Williams (winner of the Stirling Prize) and the beautifully-crafted office building for Jesus College by Gort Scott adjacent to Highsett on the opposite side of Hills Road. There is no excuse for poor design here.
- The recently-adopted Cambridge Local Plan allocates the site for mixed uses: commercial, residential and retail. A mixed-use brief for the development would certainly provide a much more interesting and varied scheme, but an argument can be made for a purely commercial scheme here because of the demand for high quality offices, so long as the scale and quality of the design are acceptable.
- The quality of the proposed public realm is very poor. The undulating spaces along the Hills Road frontage are meaningless and of little public value (although tree planting along Hills Road is welcome). The two routes across the site are of little value because they would be overshadowed for much of the day and would also be unpleasantly windy. The space between the two office blocks is really just a service yard, placing an unattractive and utilitarian space at the very heart of the development.
- The environmental ambitions for the development are welcome but are severely compromised by the 250 spaces for commuter parking in the basement. This should be a car free development, apart from disabled parking.

## Conclusion

This is a site of critical importance for Cambridge, and the current proposals fall well short of the standard that should be expected. The brief for the development needs to be radically revised to allow a scale and density of development more appropriate to this location.

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*14<sup>th</sup> March 2020*