The Tall Buildings Debate Cambridge; November 2011

1 Background

Cambridge is a thriving City of learning, technology, and culture. Its population is expanding and tourist numbers increase yearly. The City Centre is very well developed with shops and other facilities but, at a reasonable walking distance beyond it, to the South of Parkers Piece, little investment has taken place.

The ongoing redevelopment of commercial offices in Hills Road is an exception. But Mill Road, the other main road leading south from the Centre, which passes through a very densely populated area of the City, has been gradually drained of new investment and the shopping street of Mill Road, although loved, is possibly moribund. It has of course a strong character of small restaurants, food shops, and non chain operations, but these I believe are withering on the vine. Beyond the railway bridge south the small scale shopping street needs an urgent flush of activity.

2 Cambridge’s Growing Population

With Cambridge’s Population anticipated in the Local Plan to increase by 30% in the next 15 years, substantial new housing is now permitted on what was recently zoned as Green Belt surrounding the City fringes. Some clusters are already built and are, in layout and architectural form, inevitably suburban in character. Each will have its little satellite of Tesco’s or Sainsbury’s, and the existing outer core of the City Centre, the prime example being Mill Road will, under the present regime, unfortunately be left to fade.

3 The City Plan proposes that 12,500 new homes will be built between 2009-2016, and requires, for reasons of sustainability, that 65% be built on previously developed land, a goal very difficult to achieve without the City excising compulsory purchase powers. The large house builders don’t seek tiny parcels in multiple ownership on difficult sites, but big tracts of land in one ownership. The City has recently made these available on Green Belt Land and by releasing them obligates each developer to fulfil its requirement to provide 40% of the whole for Social Housing and land for schools and other social facilities. These new
garden city adjuncts, however comfortable, are not in the character of the City's
dense borders surrounding it's innermost shell. This Policy is akin to Quantitive
Easing and not stainable in the fullest sense as it consumes Green Belt Land and
not the redevelopment of Brown Land. But where a small parcel becomes
available, the obvious temptation is to build ‘tall’

4 In the 2010 debate ‘Mr. McCormack started by saying tall buildings are
bad for Cambridge. He said that building high was not the same as building
at high density and gave vanity and showing off as more significant drivers for
building tall than an aim to provide as many homes as possible on limited space.
He backed up what he was saying with statistics, he said traditional terraces were
as dense as typical 12 story buildings. He showed slides of various arrangements
of homes along with the number of “dwellings per hectare” achieved. The highest
density being achieved by blocks of flats around a square (as seen in parts of
London) which achieves 187 dwellings per hectare.

Mr McCormack called for a national database of housing densities for various
ways of arranging homes to be created; councillors in the audience indicated they
too thought this was needed.

Having shown various options for high density housing Mr. McCormack
concluded: “There is no reason to invade the green belt”. Talking about
commercial buildings he cited extension to BBC Broadcasting House as an
example of a ground-scraper and described how light wells enabled skyscrapers to
be essentially built next to each other and achieve very high densities.

Commenting on the new, world's tallest tower in Dubai, Mr. McCormack put up a
slide and said “That's just silly really”.

Mr. McCormack said that ideally a developer would build on a site where they are
able to maximize profits by making use of existing infrastructure around them. He
said there was a need to “densify not build tall”, though he noted that some people
were attracted to high rise living - as some people want anonymity - though he
questioned if it was good for society.

With respect to planning Mr. McCormack warned against doing something along
the lines of allocating an area of a new development site for tall buildings. He said
that would artificially affect land prices and he said he thought it would be hard
for planners to stick to their policy and avoid “developers creep” - someone with
adjacent land seeking to build tall there top. He proposed imposing a minimum of rules.

5 Haussmann’s Paris: The Street

In 1852 Napoléon III asked Baron Haussmann to take charge of the renovation of Paris. At that time many parts of the city were like a rat warren of festering alleyways. Contrary to what springs to mind, Haussmann’s Paris was largely built up by private entrepreneurs. The design of the new Paris was a great example of urbanisation, this very current term used to describe an enabling architecture. Each building was to the six storeys high, plus the rounded roof of 45°.

Haussmann’s Paris

Cambridge Trinity Street

Both these examples show high density development containing and forming streets. Little emphasis in modern architectural theory has been given to the street. The modern movement conceived the tower. After Haussmann, Le Corbusier proclaimed the radial city, and in poor times after the war the Tower Block and Slab for mass housing were invented. Sociologists recommended the multi-storey slab as a cradle for streets in the sky and the City Street was abandoned at ground level and the village street mimicked in the suburbs.
But the Street in Cambridge is king and since the car has been pruned from the centre, one of the greatest pleasures is to walk them. See King Street

6   Tall buildings: do we fear them or love them?

Ronan Point London

The tower at Pisa

What we dread is Ronan Point but I suggest we would welcome the leaning tower just about anywhere: Perne Road, The Backs, Market Square, in the centre of the Botanic Gardens etc. It must be because of the architecture: what it looks like.

Since the concept of building tall in Cambridge arose, emphasis has been given to the proviso that only the very best in design terms might do. And we are left to imagine, each of us, what then might do. Some will agree that the Economist Building in St James Street London is an example of good design. It is much more beautiful than Ronan Point. Is it ok then for the Backs? Emphatically No! we would all agree. But are there any who still condemn Queens College? But would it be OK for Perne Road? Possibly not. But Why? It is clearly not an outrage.
Nevertheless under this regime of allowing only the best of design who agrees that the Belvedere is lovely enough to qualify. Why is the tower so radically different in style from the rest of the blocks in this recent development? It would certainly NOT have been so in times past: see Trumpington Street, below

Economist Building London

The Belvedere Cambridge

Trumpington Street
Mill Road and Portobello Road

Mill Road is an extraordinary street on which it is possible to drink Arabic coffee or fine wines; where you can worship in a Mosque, a Hindu shrine or a Baptist church; where you can eat pâté or fish and chips, tom yum or chicken tikka lababda; where you can stock up on herbs and spices from aam to zedoary, shop for free range eggs or lamb chops, fresh ciabatta or coconut milk; where you can buy the most up-to-date computer or widget, cookware or musical instrument; purchase an antique chair or a vintage hat; have your hair or your nails styled; do your banking or get personal counselling; select a good book and get your eyes tested so you can read it. Until the 1970's you could even have a bath there! There is a florist, a printer, a specialist in beers, a fine wine shop, a butcher, Chinese,
Korean, Indian and Italian supermarkets and a diversity of eateries to feed every
taste in Cambridge. What is more, with few exceptions along its entire length, all
of these services and goods are provided by independent traders. Quotation from
local trader’s web site

Portobello Road London.

The difference between Mill Road and Portobello is the containment of the street,
in the latter by tallish buildings of simple post classical style and, on market days,
by the exclusion of the car. Originally both streets were built as shop houses and
today the upper floors provide the meanest living accommodation as the
profitability of the primary shop use precludes, at street level, any but minimum
standards of access to the upper floors. Bicycles, post boxes, bin stores, etc. cannot
be properly accommodated. Hence acres of existing and potentially useful upper floor space in Cambridge and every City are very poorly provided for and ill used.

But Mill Road is not like Portobello Road which is a world famous site in a vast City. It may be dear to Cambridge but, although it retains a host of interesting independent traders it is losing vibrancy and investment.

Following on from Haussmann’s Street and McCormack’s increased densities and taller buildings, and using Mill Road as the example, a huge step could be made in providing hundreds of dwellings in the City Centre. But how?

a In zoning the whole street for primarily residential redevelopment from Parkers Piece to Brooks Road at five stories high plus a mansard/penthouse floor.

b By relinquishing the section 106 requirement for subsidised housing and replacing it with a requirement to provide small shop, workshop, start up space, at ground level on the street frontage or where residential space is unviable.

c To commission or put forward an illustrated outline design guide showing how it could be done; its appearance, density, service provision and feasibility.

d The City to act as a Commission gathering together the interests of the affected building owners into parcels of development cooperatives, and liaising between them and a willing developer. They may wish to act themselves as developer. It is likely that local professionals, architects, lawyers and agents, would be pleased to act in a non fee consultative capacity, to the Commission, in anticipation of future commissions should the work proceed. I know that the RIBA encourages its members to act on behalf of community interests.

8 Who is to say what good design is? We may know it when we see it built, but we will certainly quarrel afterwards. There is no Haussmann, no Le Corbusier to command a view. But on the whole the University has been able to find the right Architects over many, many years. The grand decisions
cannot be left to the Building Industry. It will have to be The Planning Department guided by the University?

9 Example of redevelopment on Brown Land

I have no doubt that, in order to absorb the values of the existing building stock into viable redevelopment schemes, very high densities are required which in turn will deliver the highest rewards: the revitalisation of the outer core all on Brown Land.

Illustrated below is a recent study showing the redevelopment of 90-112 Mill Road, 1-3 Devonshire Road and 74-80 Barnabas Road. The site area is 4368 M Sq. and currently consists of approximately the following accommodation. (gross areas M. Sq.) taken from OS Map and informal observation.

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Giving an existing plot ratio of

0.9

The proposals, which follow a taller buildings guideline, provide the following: totals of all floors: a massive increase in density and usefulness as well as providing a diminutive Square, similar to those of the Cambridge Colleges

67 Flats

Hotel 92 rooms

Shops

Bank

Plus basement car park 73 spaces

Totals

Giving a proposed plot ratio of

3.34

Mill Road is fairly narrow as are the pavements and it is tempting to set back the ground floor street frontage to form a colonnade.
GROUND FLOOR OF
STUDY