St Mary's Church Hall Appeal

ADC/0023/09

The Planning Inspector's decision to dismiss the appeal against Adur District Council's refusal of planning permission for redevelopment of St Mary's Church Hall sounds, on the face of it, to be good news for the people of Shoreham. However, after you have finished reading the seven-pages of the Inspector's report, you may be surprised.

The Inspector's decision, it seems, was based on factors unconnected with the design or size of the intended building in the Conservation Area. The reasons given were: failure by the developer to meet two deadlines in supplying a signature to a formal Section 106 document (to ensure his contribution towards the pressure on the infrastructure); the *"unattractive living conditions for future occupiers of the end-of-terrace dwelling immediately to the north of the site"* (overlooking them). The lack of secondary school places in our area and the strain on infrastructure provisions, such as fire, library service and so on, were perceived to be too great to exempt the developer from making a financial contribution towards alleviating those pressures.

Neither the new building's design nor its impact upon the Conservation Area and proximity to St Mary's Church were considered to be factors that would have caused the inspector to dismiss the appeal. In referring to the developer's proposed design, the inspector's report said *"This coherent and unashamedly modern design would add to the variety of buildings within the Conservation Area and would be an interesting and thoughtful addition to the street scene of New Road. The proposed mix of uses would also give greater vibrancy to this part of the Conservation Area and enhance its character."*

This sounds like carte blanche for developers to ignore the Conservation Area context in which their designs are placed. It also points to the core problem with this development and the entirely different ways in which it is viewed by Shoreham residents compared with the developer.

From the point of view of the developer, his architect and the other specialists he engaged, only a building of the type proposed would fit the bill. Among the six people sitting on the developer's side of the table at the Appeal hearing was Dr Chris Miele, an architectural historian and specialist in town planning from North America. He has published many academic papers and books on conservation and reportedly has worked for English Heritage. However, at one point in the hearing, he said that only a modern building would enable the developer to accommodate the number of units needed to make the project viable. In other words, it was financially necessary to have a modern building of this kind in order to make a sufficient profit from the investment.

The views of English Heritage obviously have significance in planning decisions such as this and we had noted that the regional representative of English Heritage had changed his views over the course of three or four months, between the application being deferred in April 2009 and the eventual Council Development Control Committee meeting in July.

Initially, the English Heritage representative had said *"The application should be refused because the proposed replacement building falls significantly short of the design needed both to enhance the Conservation Area and avoid harm to its overall strength and prevailing character." "The proposed East Street elevation . . . viewed from the church ... strikes a cumbersome, alien note" "It appears to add a substantial unbroken horizontal block, a mass element that would not add positively to the townscape view. Although it could be dealt with in a contemporary manner, it should take a more contextual cue and articulation from the site's surroundings."*

The developer's architect consulted with English Heritage and responded by removing the columns, creating stepped facets to the New Road frontage and pushing back the top apartment so it was less visible from the church and from New Road street level.

When the deferred application eventually reappeared in July last year, English Heritage now said that *'a contemporary design solution could be the most appropriate way forward for this site, although realising that it might not always find the most favour locally'*. The architect's amended plans were, he considered, *"a step in the right direction"*.

The reference to finding favour locally is the key to the conflicting views of the proposal. There is almost always a conflict between traditional and contemporary aesthetic views, with proponents of unfamiliar art, music, literature, drama and architecture claiming that failure to like their work derives from narrow minds and lack of vision.

There is a long history of innovative artistic work being rejected on first exposure: Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring' caused outrage, Vincent Van Gogh's work was derided, 'kitchen sink' drama was despised, James Joyce and other 'stream of consciousness' authors mocked. In architecture the outcry against unfamiliar forms has been more widespread, probably because you can choose not to sample unfamiliar works of art, but architecture is publicly unavoidable.

" This unashamedly modern design would be an interesting and thoughtful addition to the street scene of New Road "

The problem is that some contemporary artists point at the reaction against innovations that become classic and claim that they are in the same mould. Opponents can be made to feel that they must be hidebound and without vision, that the architect has a monopoly of aesthetic understanding, and the public ought not to have an opinion.

The architect of the St Mary's Hall redevelopment scheme has an excellent track record. He has worked for prestigous architectural companies such as Foster Associates and the Richard Rogers Partnership, contributing work to Heathrow and Stansted Airports, He has carried out conservation work at the famous Grade I listed De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill. But opposition has never been about the ***quality*** of the architecture, but the ***appropriateness*** of the design in that location. Adur Council's Renaissance Masterplan had warned that the Conservation Area *"could easily be overwhelmed by insensitive contemporary developments"* and this design was widely regarded as insensitive.

The fact that the residents of Shoreham and their elected representatives overwhelmingly wished for something they regarded as more fitting for the Conservation Area is really the issue. When residents make their wishes clear and are supported overwhelmingly by their elected representatives, it seems a hollow form of democracy if their wishes are denied.

The new coalition government says it intends to give local people more say in local decisions and that it is dispensing with housing targets for local authorities. These two measures, together with the imminent spending cuts, probably signal a very different climate for developers and local authorities.

Perhaps it will then be possible to correct a visiting inspector who says that removal of a community hall has not affected communal activity space, when local people know that to be untrue, or who assumes that retail space is in demand in Shoreham, when it is obvious that local shops remain empty, most of them killed by the retail development at Holmbush. But that is another (and deeper) story.

T&BV

From Shoreham Society Journal - Summer 2010