RIPON CIVIC SOCIETY

A CRITIQUE ON THE DESIGN OF THE PROPOSED CATHEDRAL ANNEX

April 2024



This document offers a brief critique of the proposed annexe to Ripon Cathedral. Ripon Civic Society has not in the past commented on the design of the proposed annexe, instead preferring to comment on the inappropriate siting of the building in a protected location that is extremely sensitive to change. The society believe that there are more appropriate locations for a building that will still be able to meet the needs of the Cathedral to provide necessary services and amenities for the congregation, visitors, and staff. The building is designed by Connolly Wellingham Architects for the Dean and Chapter of Ripon Cathedral. This is not an easy site upon which to design a building and any criticism contained herein is intended to be constructive.

This report will not comment on the overall size or content of the building except where it impacts upon the design or experience of the building other than to say that the proposed annexe exceeds the floorspace stated as being necessary in the Options Appraisal. This document highlighted a need for an additional 981m² / 10,559ft², whereas the proposed building has a gross internal area of some 1,125m² / 12,110ft². This increases if the covered cloister walkway is included in the total.

No comment is made in this document on the impact of this building upon neighbouring buildings or structures except where this concerns design, and the society has produced a separate Heritage Impact Assessment to provide an objective counterpoint to the contention in the application documentation that the proposed new building will result in a moderate positive impact to the immediate and wider site.

Location

The proposed annexe is located on the eastern half of Kirkgate Park and partially extends into the former Cathedral stonemason's yard to the north. The Cathedral sits on a high point in the landscape with land falling away towards the river Skell to the south and more gently to the north towards the river Ure. Kirkgate Park consequently has a fall from south to north away from Minster Road and there is a level difference across the site of approximately 1m. The site is heavily treed and surrounded by historic listed walls and buildings on all sides.

General Description

The proposed annexe provides accommodation over two floor levels within a substantial masonry building and there is a single storey extension to the east against the boundary wall to the Old Deanery. The building is arranged in three parallel blocks running north to south with the bulk of the publicly accessible accommodation being provided in the two westernmost blocks whilst the third is the single storey section to the east. The building is constructed of loadbearing masonry although

the indicative construction sections in the sketchbook by Connolly Wellingham Architects suggests a framed internal structure with timber glulam arches supporting a timber cassette floor. Walls are constructed (or clad?) with stone and an arcade of stone columns to the west elevation forms a recessed cloister at ground floor level with the columns continuing upwards to the eaves. A hipped roof sits inboard of a precast concrete eaves and gutter detail which is covered in natural slate except for the eastern block with has a flat roof.

Externally, a new landscaping scheme is proposed around the remaining trees in Kirkgate Park that links to the north with Minster Gardens North. This wraps around the north of the Georgian Courthouse and extends south back to the new annexe. Several trees including a veteran beech tree are proposed to be removed to accommodate the new building along with a section of historic wall adjacent to the Courthouse Museum and it is highly likely that the western boundary wall of the Old Deanery will require rebuilding due to the proximity of the new building. The loss of the stone wall to the east of the Georgian courthouse is regrettable and that to the Old Deanery should be avoided.

Site Layout

The public entrance is provided from the covered cloister to the west of the building via a ramped approach from both north and south due to the slope of the site. This cloister is on the axis of the Consistory door of the Cathedral adjacent to the north tower and the route from this door leads directly north through the new cloister towards the car park. It was the original intention to create a new link to the car park although this has not proved possible and the strong axial link from the Cathedral seems to lead nowhere. As such this axis seems forced and there are other possible links and foci that could inform a more satisfactory location. Whilst open space is important especially due to the loss of public space adjacent to Minster Road, this garden to the north of the building, without the link to the car park, seems cut off from the rest of the wider site so that there could be safeguarding issues associated with this area. The are also likely to be issues associated with an open cloister as antisocial behaviour is already a problem in this area.

The ground floor level of the annexe is set by the point at which the doors are placed on the sloping site and as the ground floor is level throughout, this results in it being slightly dug in at the south of the site and elevated at the north. Whilst this approach deals with the site topography, it creates a barrier between the building and landscaped gardens to the west that seems a shame although sketches indicate a planting scheme that could help to mitigate this separation by directing visitors to the main entrance.

On the whole the building feels much too close to the boundary wall of the Old Deanery which has a degree of charm in its own right, and relocating the store whilst moving the building to the west could create a sheltered and secure external seating area with dramatic views of the north aisle.

Ground Floor

Moving inside, the entrance leads into a lobby area that provides access to a new Cathedral shop to the south that sits against Minster Road and to the refectory café to the north that runs alongside the cloister. Whilst the shop provides interest on a prominent corner of the building, the café sits to the rear and has no direct access to the gardens which seems a lost opportunity given the landscaping proposals for the site and any activity in the café will not draw people into the building in the same way tucked away as it is to the rear. There is a large rooflight and lightwell over the servery that will provide dramatic lighting, but this seems in compensation for the deep plan form that could have made better use of external views through windows as in the new café at Lincoln Cathedral where the café seating areas are relatively narrow and have views in two directions. The servery and kitchen are located sensibly to the rear (east) of the building and have a very large associated store against the Old Deanery wall.

A further store as well as a staff office are located in the northern projection of the central block with views over the newly landscaped stonemason's yard. On a minor note, the large store has external access onto a raised plinth with no access to ground level which makes little sense.

Moving back to the lobby area, this also provide access to the new WCs and whilst it is important to the Cathedral that these are as close to the main church as possible, their location on the prime Minster Road frontage seems a wasted opportunity and they could easily have been placed in a less prominent position. A strong north-south axis between the central and western block that partially exists at first floor level is completely blocked at ground level by the position of the toilets. A staircase and lift from the lobby provide access to the first floor.

First Floor

At first floor level, the staircase and lift arrive in a large landing area and unlike at ground floor, the lift does not feel tucked away. This landing could be a dramatic space but as at ground floor there is no external view of the Cathedral or other buildings due to rooms on all sides. Opening up the southern end of the building (as has been done at the north) is a missed opportunity and would only slightly reduce the communal room in size.

The whole of the first floor to the western block is taken up by the song school including a robe store, music office and toilets. This area works well apart from the incongruous toilet projecting into it from the landing area. Perhaps the WCs and the robe store could be handed to allow some natural, if diffuse light into this area rather than into the toilets which do not have any and this would also make sense of the incongruous toilet noted above.

A community room is located in the southern section of the central block which will have dramatic views of the Cathedral although as mentioned earlier, this could be reduced to allow external views to the communal areas, whilst further staff and meeting rooms and a plant room are located to the north of this block. The northern staff room in particular does not make the most of its privileged location with no view over the newly landscaped stonemason's yard and this could be a better location for the meeting room which could have more windows. The plant room could then move south and have a better relationship with the rooftop plant and the staff rooms occupying the space between the two. The landing area would benefit by extending the rooflight the full length between the western and central block.

Overall, the first floor works better than the ground, although again there are missed opportunities in maximising natural light and dramatic views of the surroundings.

Interior

Concept sketches are provided by the architect to suggest an interior – at least to the main spaces on the ground floor – that is defined by large timber glulam arches which presumably have some structural function also. These could create a dramatic series of rooms although no views are provided of this and given the relatively low floor to floor height of 3.5m, this could feel oppressive. Section D-D illustrates an awkward relationship between these large arches and those on the external elevations and increasing the storey height would help this. It also recalls the cellarium at Fountains Abbey which is not known for its bright airy interior. Whilst the site clearly has connections to early Christianity being the location of a medieval monastery, perhaps this reference is too literal.

Whilst detail concept sketches are provided to show the relationship of the glulam arches to the stone columns in the cloister, for which basic 3d visuals are provided, there is no indication as to whether these are structural or purely decorative. There is also the question as to whether timber is the most appropriate material for these arches – masonry has been, and continues to be used, for arches whilst timber is generally used for beams.

Exterior

Externally, the structural grid of the stone columns defines the south, west and north elevations with the cloister recessed behind the west elevation at ground floor level. The first floor (or rather the ground floor ceiling zone) is expressed with a thin band of precast concrete, and this is replicated at eaves level with the concrete band forming the parapet capping with the gutter sitting behind. This results in the springing point of the roof being artificially low, and whilst this could be intentional to reduce the overall building height, it results in an uncharacteristic and jarring detail. It also means that in contrast to surrounding buildings such as the Georgian Courthouse and the Old Deanery, the roof is set back and less visually dominant – again possibly deliberate – however it will lend to the annexe the overall appearance of a flat roofed building from the ground which is unfortunate. The eaves detail, or lack of it, feels unsuccessful.

The eastern block that contains the store and mechanical plant on the roof does in fact have a flat roof and the application drawings and visuals do not satisfactorily describe how this will be constructed, of what, or what it will look like.

The homogenous treatment of the facades does little to distinguish or respond to differing prospects, sunlight, or site conditions and whilst the black and white line elevations are unconvincing in explaining the building, the rendered versions are more successful and atmospheric. However, these rendered elevations do seem to suggest breaks between the blocks and views out from the building that are just not there on plan. For example, the south elevation implies a section of vertical glazing between the western and central block whilst the male toilets completely block this at ground floor level. This elevation also highlights instances where there is less glazing than would seem appropriate given the opportunities for spectacular views such as the south elevation of the communal room which has a predominantly solid wall where it faces the Cathedral. It feels that the building is not making the most of its location.

The stone columns provide a confident motif around the building and are substantial. How they interact with other elevational elements is less successful. The fact that both the string course and parapet capping continue through the stone detracts from the impact of the stone and the profile of the moulding is simply cut off rather than terminating in a considered manner. The position of the string course also seems odd in that it is located at ceiling level. If it were higher, at floor level, it would provide more opportunity to successfully resolve the junction and visually increase the height of the ground floor which would be beneficial. The same goes for the parapet capping and raising

this to form a proper upstand could also help although the fact that the columns just end without any sort of capital appears unconsidered and not in keeping with any of the surrounding buildings.

The elevations illustrate an almost brutalist approach to the building design especially with the use of precast concrete which is not considered appropriate in this important setting. The treatment as a whole is unconvincing.

Materiality

The use of stone and slate is clearly appropriate in this location although precast concrete and glulam timber less so. The junctions between these materials are unresolved and how these different material weather over time is uncertain particularly with the ground floor external cloister arches being formed from timber almost as an afterthought.

Conclusions

The building does not work well in its location as designed other than as a functional need to provide toilets as close to the cathedral as possible, nor does it relate well to the setting or views of the surroundings. There has evidently been an attempt to minimise the extent of land which the building occupies in Kirkgate Park, and this has meant that the annexe feels squashed to the east. The architectural device of setting the springing point of the roof inboard of the external walls, whilst minimising height, also makes the building appear squat in relation to its neighbours.

Irrespective of location, greater consideration is needed as to the placement of uses within the building to maximise views and permeability through a publicly accessible building and a better relationship of internal spaces to important facades is required – toilets should not occupy the principal frontage. An increased level of glazing would help.

A higher building, pushed back into the stonemason's yard could work much better perhaps with a single storey enclosed cloistered link along the Old Deanery wall to provide sheltered access from the Cathedral. This would also allow for a meaningful landscaping scheme to Kirkgate Park.

Ripon Civic Society, April 2024