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TAG PEER REVIEW- WOODFOLD VILLA, SHORROCK GREEN, MELLOR, 19 May 2022

Present:

Project Team:

Francis Shaw, RIBA, Managing Director, Francis and Jagger Architects- Client's Agent;
Nigel Rockliff, CMLI, DRaW Design and Assessment;
Ian Dieffenthaler RIBA, SCA- Heritage and Historic Landscape Consultant;
Kathryn Jukes, RTPI, Directions Planning Consultancy;

TAG Panel:

Scot Masker, RIBA, Masker Architects- TAG Peer Review Panel Facilitator;
Jan Maciag, RIBA- Folium Architects;
Guy Horsley, RIBA- Horsley Townsend Architects;
Eamonn Byrne, CMLI- Eamonn Byrne Landscape Architects

Introduction-

The TAG Peer Review Group was invited by Francis Shaw of Shaw Jagger, the applicant's agent, to review the developing scheme subsequent to a pre-application submission with the local authority.

The application is to be made as an NPPF clause 80e application.

NPPF Paragraph 80(e) clause which states:

80. Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

(e) the design is of exceptional quality, in that it:

- is truly outstanding, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas; and*
- would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.*

The Panel visited the site on 19th May 2022 at 11:00am together with the design team. The Panel and consultant team walked the site, stopping at strategic points to discuss the landscape design and proposed siting along with an explanation regarding choice of location of the new dwelling. The panel and team moved to the venue arranged by the applicant and discussed the scheme further until approximately 2:30pm.

The resultant scheme, deceptively simple, is a product of many iterations and a well-developed rational. It emerged from the gathered information and upon reflection on the local authority's thoughts about the site, and an initial design proposal, through a pre-application consultation.

The panel were very pleased to have available in the Design Statement and through the other consultants' reports a detailed and thorough analysis of the site and the process of an evolving design. The proposals are well supported by both analytical information and precedent for the design concept.

The architect has shown great skill in being versatile and able to conceive of an *object* building that sits well in the defined landscape setting and creates a unique living environment from the classical model; one that is fit for modern life and the specific demands of the clients.

This is a design that reflects the highest standards of architecture and likely will fulfil the goals stated in NPPF Paragraph 80e for a project of exceptional quality.

Landscape Strategy, siting and Biodiversity-

The proposed scheme is closely generated by the location; its geography, history and character. The design team introduced the scheme in a well-researched analysis and site history and the path taken in the production of a proposed new house in the proximity of Woodford Hall is both logical and clear.

Woodfold Hall, as built in 1798 was approached from the south. The Hall stands on the south facing slope of a wide valley behind which is a wooded ridge. The northern edge of this wood was the site of a local lane and, during the works of 1798, Henry Sudell had another road constructed *further* to the north – Further Lane.

The entrance from Further Lane was the 'service' entrance to the estate and already contained several buildings associated with the new Woodfold Hall in a manner that would not intrude on the picturesque landscaping to the south of the Hall.

The site of the proposed new house/annex is therefore in the original Estate but most definitely not part of the Park. It's peripheral location and character has put what is now the northern edge of the old Estate in danger of piecemeal infilling. This is illustrated in recent developments.

It was a concern of the design review team that the proposed new house should have a garden setting of a size to match its quality.

In its original form and conception the proposed new house was restricted to a limited site. However, the Panel understood that there is more land available to the applicant towards the west and inclusion of this would make much better sense of the placement of the new dwelling. As a bonus, this will allow a suitable quantum of gain in terms of biodiversity and landscape improvement particularly along the site boundaries.

Furthermore, extending the site west to include Cook's Farm will enable the creation of a suitable sized landscape setting for the proposed house and allow a seamless flow between the surrounding context and the new house. Extending its terrain would also have the added effect of completing and securing the estate's historic northern edge onto Further Lane in an appropriate manner.

The Panel felt, therefore, that the acquisition of Cook's Farm is key to the success of the project. The access point to the site should also be relocated westwards on the assumption that Cook's Farm becomes part of the application site.

The siting of the house, using existing mature woodland as a backdrop, is a masterstroke on many levels, not least giving the illusion that the site continues far into and beyond the woodland situated behind the proposed house.

The enhancement of planting along the southern boundary of the site and west into Cook's Farm will improve the southern boundary and screen views to Woodfold Park Farm. The inclusion of clumps and individual trees will frame views to and from the house from Further Lane.

The house itself will be of very high quality and include finishes appropriate to the surrounding context. Therefore would complement any near or distant views towards the house and complement the setting of the adjacent Woodfold Park.

The landscape design for the site has been well considered within the Repton tradition and includes a sidelong driveway approach (which also continues past the house). This traditional device allows views of the house to burst open as one emerges through clumps of planting. As a finale, a series of floral displays in the Gardenesque style will be provided on terrace spaces next to the house with shrubbery walks continuing towards the lake.

The lake is an attractive feature that would be improved by increasing its size.

The proposed natural informality of the landscape design suits the site well and will act as a fine backdrop for this accomplished house design.

The client should be encouraged at the detailed design stage to demonstrate a commitment to executing and maintaining high-quality planting throughout the site as an exemplar of the Gardenesque style. This, along with planting and management techniques will also contribute to biodiversity. Country houses, over many centuries, have greatly supported the art of garden design and horticulture and this tradition should be encouraged into the future.

Boundary treatment along Further Lane-

Justification will be required for any removal of the boundary hedge from an ecological point of view. Care will need to be taken to ensure that there is an overall ecological benefit to the general replacement landscape along and within this boundary.

The proposals bring the estate to the boundary with Further Lane, and consequently into the public realm. This is a strong planning benefit because it will allow the public to appreciate the park; something that is currently not possible. Also, from a planning gain point of view, perhaps one (or maybe two) break out points could be created along the boundary located as far west as possible and as far away from the house as possible.

These could be very small indents into the site with composed long views towards the new house. The indents might include some very basic amenities such as benches, coordination with local footpaths, history boards etc.

The Building-

In the emerging mercantile order of the late 18th and 19th centuries the creation of a new landed estate represented the epitome of success. Fortunes that had been realised in just a couple of generations were expended on the purchase of great acres of land and the construction of grand classical houses and their attendant landscaping.

Such was the early history of Woodford Hall and its initial creator, Henry Sudell of Blackburn. Plans for the new house on the Woodfold Estate were already in place when Henry married in 1796. The impressive new house was ‘complete’ in 1798.

Of perhaps even more note, were the extensive works of landscaping exemplified in the southern approach to the house; over bridges, by lodges and carefully composed distant views.

Henry Sudell was a man of the elite; of business, civic duties and entertainment. He and his family lived at Woodford Hall until his untimely bankruptcy in 1827. The house and all its goods were disposed by 1831. This is a mere 35 years after construction started and, although Henry Sudell had carried out additions and other works on his estate it can hardly be treated as a complete composition.

Henry Sudell left Blackburn to live in Wiltshire where he died in 1856.

The house passed through several owners until 1949 when it was abandoned and described as being “valueless”. In 1950 it was becoming derelict and it was the opinion of the County Planning Officer that it was “of insufficient architectural interest to take any action to preserve it”. Thus, in 1956, permission was granted for the strip-out of the interior and soon after the building was a roofless (to save taxes) hulk.

The design team, given the Park’s incomplete beginning and very sad history, propose that a better narrative was possible had historical events turned out differently. It is, therefore entirely plausible that Henry Sudell’s Estate would have grown and established secondary houses – Dower House, Entertainment Villa or indeed a so called “secret house” that would function as a family retreat away from guests, entertainment and servants.

Precedents are well established and used effectively to set the new house in a narrative of what might have been if the initial land owners and their descendants had been more fortunate. Given Henry Sudell’s enthusiasm for entertainment it is likely that this activity might have decamped the out of the main house (where it was not wanted) to another building on the estate.

This would most likely have occurred in the last years of the Regency in about 1827 to 32 and the design team have chosen a classical architectural style from this period as the external expression of the proposed new lodge/house. The design review panel are fully supportive of this narrative because it treats architectural style in an embracing and holistic manner. It also embodied the rather romantic retelling of history and acts as an atonement for the disgraceful way Woodfold Hall was treated by post war planning authorities.

Architectural design in a historic style is a most difficult art and the design panel were very impressed with the care and attention to detail that had been deployed to this end. The house is very convincing and gently modern.

A familiar difficulty often arises in conflating a historic style with current ways of life and accommodation needs. There was no need in 1830 for a family kitchen or numerous bathrooms! It is, therefore, to the credit of the design team to have resolved this matter in such an elegant way; losing nothing of the formal plan in the process.

A fine example of the care taken concerns the removal of above ground ancillary buildings by putting a basement garage storey under the house. This is inspired as it removes a collection of subservient structures that might clutter the site and leaves the house to stand alone; a Villa / Pavilion / Folly in the landscape setting.

The building sections help to demonstrate that the interior experience will be as rewarding as the external expression. The house plan has been resolved to a very high standard, with a clear expression of the solidity of the internal dividing walls as formers of the room spaces within.

Other minor points / suggestions for minor revisions-

The subdivision of the dressing room and bathroom in the master bedroom (Bedroom 6) is a 'more' successful subdivision of the bay than its sibling bay at the other side of the house.

Glass roof of the orangery- Does this need to be fully glazed or is there a different configuration to reduce the amount of glass proposed?

The separation of orangery and pool house might be better expressed through a change in the parapet detailing. Possibly more solid parapet detail over the pool building. Perhaps the use of a solid parapet is an approach that will avoid having to re-consider the height of the orangery or pool building whilst demonstrating hierarchy or differentiation.

The separation of the pool from the main house (via the orangery) is arguably more successful on the east elevation than the west elevation. Might the detailing of the west elevation of the orangery be gently simplified to further emphasise the subservience of the single storey elements?

The architectural detailing is a sparse simple language done well but care must be taken as any tiny 'mistakes' will be prominent.

The roadside elevation should be extended to show new context, elements proposed in the grounds etc.

Local materials- where will these come from? Any application should be supported by a more detailed explanation of materials sources and craftsmanship that will be used.

Conclusion-

This is more than competent restrained design that should be able to achieve the requirements as set out in the paragraph 80e clause. In the next iterations and with the additional information suggested there should be no barrier to achieving this.

On first glance this is an apparently simple proposal. It is clear that the simplicity is just a polite face to a design of restrained elegance and sophistication; both as architecture and as landscape.

The proposal harmonises with the topography and wider setting to produce an exemplar example of its building type and, in its context, reflects the highest standards of architecture.

Issued 31st May, 2022.



A Linked Society of the RIBA

The Traditional Architecture Group is an independent voluntary association of RIBA members. It is a Linked Society of the RIBA but retains no legal or financial call on the RIBA. The aims of the society are to celebrate the highest achievements of the past as a living source for modern inspiration. The group seeks to work within architectural, planning and educational disciplines to promote the value of a traditional approach in architecture and design. The group will provide mutual support, a meeting point and a venue for the exchange of ideas for those individuals interested in or practicing contemporary traditional architecture.

Its registered and correspondence address is
c/o Apollodorus Architecture Ltd, 18a Broadlands Road, London N6 4AN