

Rainham Library (November 2009)



Design for London comments 21/05/2010 [LK]

Introduction

Design for London has been consulted early on in the development of the scheme for a new Library and Life Long Learning Centre and 16 housing units in Rainham. Design for London were recently asked to provide written comments, to formalise the strong support expressed in meetings attended during the design process.

Good design is central to the objectives of the London Plan and encompasses both general design principles and specific design issues. The construction of this scheme could prove to be an exemplar for sensitive contextual design in London.

1. Density and Uses

The scheme is a positive contribution to the village, with an emphasis on providing much needed civic and social facilities for the local community. In urban design terms the scheme can be regarded as an extension of the village centre to embrace the station and bring the village closet to the marshes through the activation provided by carefully located active frontages and modest retail units comparable to the scale of those already in Rainham village. The residential component of the scheme is relatively small and compact, which helps to create a balanced mix of uses in this town centre location, and maintain evening life in what would otherwise be a remote area around the station.

2. Site Layout, Routes and Public Realm

Design for London had initial concerns that the proposals were coming forward without the full land assembly required to facilitate the proposed urban form in earlier masterplans, which may result in less than optimum urban arrangements. However the current proposed site layout has undergone extensive testing, and pragmatically resolved initial concerns to make a virtue out of potentially problematic conditions.

There is a direct pedestrian route to the station from the village centre improving legibility for visitors, and walking distances for residents. The pedestrian routes echo the pattern of the medieval Y-junction where routes split in two around a significant building. In urban design terms, the public square creates a positive relationship between the library, the station, and the village. This includes an intimate green space which strikes the right tone for associations of the traditional village green, while maintaining the landscape character of the low lying marshland and stone surfaces found in and around Rainham village.

While the bus loop had the risk of isolating the island site, the one-way bus only sections minimise traffic, while kerbs and crossing points achieve a good relationship between the library and the station and interchange for pedestrians. The building incorporates bus waiting areas as part of it's design. The bus drop-off and pick-up locations minimise interchange distances. The risk of an inactive zone on the Ferry Lane elevation is alleviated by clever internal layouts and important servicing uses.

3. Scale and massing

The scale of the building achieves an appropriate balance between the desire to present a positive relationship with the scale of the village without overpowering the historic buildings, whilst marking a significant civic building and public space around the station with a higher element. The proportions of this element are well judged. Any taller would be too tall, anything lower would constitute a petering out of the village. Instead the massing punctuates the location of the station, and addresses the marshes.

APPENDIX 3

An equal three storey massing over the library would have added to the apparent bulk of the building towards the village, and compromised the interior functionality of the library spaces. The positioning and adjustment of this higher element means it is not overbearing on views from the village due to the effect of perspective at that distance, and also has the benefit of obscuring the negative presence of the rather crude recent housing to the east of the conservation area. The resolution of the building form complements Rainham Hall, but does not compete with the church in terms of hierarchy, with a precise judgement of the role and function of the building in the village expressed through materials and detailing. The selection of materials for a significant public building is explored further below. In general the scheme is a welcome contribution to the village and an extension of its character and values.

4. Internal Layouts

The scheme has a compact housing layout whilst achieving dual aspect on the majority of units, and reasonably generous space standards internally. Private outdoor space is recessed on elevations visible from the village centre, and expressed overlooking the marshes, as promontories which have an association with the jetties and walkways on the marshes. The layouts for the public functions are well considered to achieve the optimal balance of the uses, which require slightly different conditions. Particular attention is on the relationship between inside and outside both in the design of window seats and roof lights, which give good natural light, and provide active frontages. Although the fittings and furniture of the interior may not form part of the planning application, it is important to ensure that these continue the special character of the outside of the building and avoid generic internal spaces.

5. Elevations and Materials

There is a sensitive interpretation of the local vernacular in the materials of the building and public realm. There is a certain informality to elevational openings, overall massing, which initially echoes the medieval and vernacular buildings of the village, picked up in the rhythm of the roof pitches. However on closer inspection the application of a rigorous formal logic becomes apparent in the roof lines and massing, and around important window openings, which brings out to the Georgian and Victorian character of the village. The roof lines are carefully designed and adjusted to achieve certain elevational changes that respond to the playfulness of some of the openings hints at the slightly eccentric collection of details and styles in Rainham Hall (which was built as a showcase home by a building materials merchant). The metalwork on shutters and balconies is an interpretation of the predominant tradition of fine railings in Rainham. The use of a high quality red brick and fine metal work is appropriate to the public role of the building in the hierarchy of the village. It suggests an investment in the village on a par with a wealthy merchant's house, however does sit below the importance of the stone church which continues to stand out as a distinctive building. We would seek to ensure the high quality of detailing and materials in order to achieve a development with longevity.

I hope these comments will serve as a re-statement of our support for this scheme. We look forward to continued involvement in the realisation of what promises to be a very successful building for the people of Rainham.

Yours Sincerely,

Levent Kerimol
Design for London
London Development Agency