

EcoResponsive Environments

Design review statement of Broadwater Gardens, Welwyn Garden City

EcoResponsive Environments have been asked by the Welwyn Garden City Heritage Trust to review proposals for developing Broadwater Gardens submitted by HG Group. We have been asked to focus our review on the application's impacts on Garden City identity. In preparing these notes, we draw on an in-depth engagement with Garden City design principles gained through the preparation of our RIBA competition-winning proposal for Re-imagining the Garden City in June 2019 (entry title: Grange-in-the-hedges), and through subsequent ongoing work for Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.

Garden City identity is ultimately founded on the character of the public spaces that all the city's inhabitants and visitors share. In his seminal book 'Town Planning in Practice'¹ Raymond Unwin, pioneer planner of the Garden City movement, emphasised the importance of street character; claiming that a key role of architecture was to *enable the creation of... street pictures*². From this perspective, the architectural quality of a project depends on the extent to which its buildings create perceptions of street spaces as positive elements in the urban scene. The buildings of the proposed development fail this basic test at both large and small scales.

At the largest scale, the buildings on the main part of the site are placed as freestanding elements, rather than relating together to create a street-defining wall. This means that these buildings will be experienced as sculptures standing in space, rather than acting in combination to define public space as an important 'street picture' in its own right. This lost opportunity is particularly unfortunate since the scheme creates an important pedestrian route to the railway station, which many people will experience very often.

The pedestrian experience of this route is also adversely affected by more detailed aspects of the layout on the main site. Here the experience of walking past the ground floors of the buildings is particularly important. Some 'eyes on the street' are provided by main entrances to the residential buildings and by the community hub. The plots shown for ground-floor dwellings, however, imply that the station route will be bordered partly by the private spaces of bedrooms which in practice will provide no 'eyes on the street' to enhance the pedestrian's sense of community safety. This is

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made worse by the placement of the vehicular ramp, which will provide another dead wall to the station route experience.

Garden City identity also depends on the role of architectural detail reinforcing the perception of harmony in the whole. As Raymond Unwin explained, architecture *'should enable the creation of, not destroy the harmony of our street pictures'*. Harmony, he writes, *'does not require monotony, but a proper relation between the different colours and parts'*³, whilst monotony can be avoided *'not by an irregular jumble of materials and colours, but by a sufficient though unobtrusive variation in the different buildings producing interest and variety on the estate, which will be greatly helped by the sense of unity maintained in each individual part, and of harmony over the whole'*⁴. In the scheme here reviewed, the frequent large-scale and apparently arbitrary shifts in forms, materials and colours - particularly in the absence of an overall street picture to hold the whole together which we have noted above - seem far from generating any 'harmony over the whole'.

Given the multi-scale range of issues we have outlined above, we feel that this project would have a negative overall impact in terms of Garden City identity.

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References:

1. Unwin R., (1909). Town Planning in Practice
2. Unwin R., (1909). Town Planning in Practice, p.364
3. Unwin R., (1909). Town Planning in Practice, p.364
4. Unwin R., (1909). Town Planning in Practice, p.371