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Subject: Comments on Wood Green AAP

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from Alex King, [REDACTED]
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Shopping City

The departure of major general clothing, furnishing and electrical goods outlets, is a blow to the High Road's retail offer but these have departed for reasons internal to those businesses. If the nature of retailers of this scale and diversity has changed so that they now concentrate in a few central sites, or remote supply depots servicing online or click-&-collect sales, trying to attract them back may be increasingly difficult. (I am not clear why exactly Debenhams did not take the site at the Mall, but that suggests that the area would have to prove its accessibility and popularity before businesses of this type would reconsider it.)

However, on a smaller scale there is quite a broad range of suppliers which serves the community pretty well as far as it goes, especially (in the market hall) for budget household goods and food, but access and visibility, especially for the small shops in the Mall and Library arcade, is poor (unless you know the area, and what you are looking for). More visible frontage, and better circulation - more directly open to thoroughfares - would be a great improvement. If it is planned to develop the now derelict and fenced-off service area/car park and the old petrol-station site at the north end of Shopping City into a public shopping space, extension and opening out to the north of the existing market hall would provide what's needed. It is very important to retain these retailers and not drive them away during the redevelopment process, or their services to the community will probably be lost for good. If modifications are made to the existing site, then the current traders need not be greatly disrupted. This could be part of a gradual rebuilding out into the currently unused space. Otherwise, acceptable alternatives to offer them need to be ready before any closure of their existing premises.

So far as I can see the multi-storey car-park is not well used, and the space here could be reused, allowing considerable height for retail, office, residential, etc, with a facade suitable to a public square on its north side.

Streetscape between High Road and Coburg Road.

The sketched proposals make much of long perspectives, often justified by a view of the Palace in the distance, but what actually gives character at street-level to passers by, and even more to people resting, dining etc., is the immediate mix of buildings and how interesting individual buildings are. A long uniform frontage may be fine for window displays, as they don't have to compete with any other visual interest, but it creates anonymity and an absence of any sense of place. The streetscape itself will have no particular attraction. Amongst the plan's 'spatial objectives' is 'diversity and heritage', and this recognises correctly that character is based on historical continuity and rootedness, in staying in touch with the past of a particular place. For most people, 'liveability' (spatial objective 3) will also mean continuity and recognisability. (The Crown Court building in Lordship Lane is a successful application of this principle.)

Commerce in Wood Green has until now been a shallow layer of building along the High Road, closely connected with often considerably older residential buildings behind and at the sides, and visible at every street entrance and crossing. It would contribute to maintaining this character if the houses in the Caxton Road and Mayes Road terraces facing the shopping centre were retained to knit new buildings on the unused or redeveloped sites into their surroundings, and help maintain a sense of connection with the area's past, and sustain its mixed character.

Making a fetish of a few significant buildings will not do this, in fact it will tend to emphasise any absence of interest in the immediate detail of the streetscape. A distant view of Alexandra Palace from the High Road, down a canyon of new facades, possibly of considerable height, will only emphasise the distance and separateness of the Palace and park. It's only once you are past the barrier of the railway (improving the tunnel will be an excellent thing) that the easy accessibility of the park will be apparent. There will also still be the interruption of Mayes Road itself, which forms a distinct break as far as users on the ground are concerned between the Caxton Road and Coburg Road areas. It would be better to acknowledge the separateness of the various areas and treat them with more attention to their immediate locality. The need to refer constantly to a distant point outside the immediate urban space, to give character and a sense of direction and identity, suggests that a failure to do so in the immediate locality is already taken for granted.

Library

Page 123 of the local plan document specifies a 'landmark' building in the area of the Library and town square opening off the High Road. This could perfectly well be provided by the existing Library itself and the by now signature space in front of it which has developed a 'tradition' of use by evangelists and campaigners (recognised by naming it 'Free Speech area'). Haringey has a number of excellent examples of mid-twentieth-century library architecture - Wood Green central, Hornsey, Alexandra Park. - and it would be a great pity to lose them.

Although at first sight the Library appears to close off this space to the area behind, it does this only slightly. About half the building is actually behind the terrace of High Road shops, and covers their unattractive backs from the west. It also shields the space behind from easterly wind. Opening the space immediately south of the Library would allow a view through at a glance from the High Street, and so give an initial sight of a square behind.

If the existing dreary quadrant of shopping space behind the Library was removed, and the retail units relocated in a new building (perhaps behind the northern half of the Library, extending round towards the space now occupied by Morrisons carpark), then the remaining covered space outside the entrance to the Library proper can become a gateway to the square. Given that the building appears to rest on substantial columns, perhaps the south end wall could also be opened out, creating a varied, partly covered and partly open way into a square behind. Refacing with the intended tiles, and generous plant cover from the balconies, would make the building and entrance to the square a striking and unusual feature. As a now long-familiar feature of the High Road, the Library's appearance would also act as a transition between the Edwardian High Road facades and new build in the new town square and beyond. The relatively intimate entrance to new St. Pancras Square, with some old building embedded in it, which does a lot to alleviate the bland bulk of new build behind, is an example worth considering.

The Library continues to be well-used (all the study areas packed on a Saturday morning) even with its depleted shelves. It could probably develop much further as a community centre, with space for function rooms, community organisation offices etc., possibly a theatre/auditorium, which a number of people have suggested. There could also be an opportunity for additional space in an appropriate upward extension to the building along the lines of the glazed storeys added to Tate Modern/Bankside Powerstation. The Plan appears to identify this site as one potentially for a tall building, which suggests the intention is to retain a major street frontage of some kind here

anyway, and remarks about Turnpike Lane station as a landmark building acknowledge that it is character and recognisability which constitutes a landmark, not size or distant visibility. The current Library and piazza has these qualities. If highly visible prestige commercial space, with immediate access to transport is wanted here, it could perfectly well adjoin the existing Mall, or something which replaces it.

Phased development and alternatives.

I appreciate that the AAP is intended as long-term guidance for development over a good-many years, but it is hard to see how the elements within it would be prioritised to accommodate the uncertain and perhaps volatile circumstances in which development would take place. Even the most basic assumption - the presence of a CrossRail station - is uncertain, but I think the comments above would continue to apply. It seems important to consider proposed development organically over time, as well as spatially. It is quite possible that such a large overall scheme could itself lead to the kind of fragmentary and piece-meal development the Council is trying to avoid, unless it is thought out in quite specific terms on a small scale at the same time; not just in terms of sites, but of the fulfilment and growth of the desired functions, in a way that would not be left hanging by changes in the wider economy which might terminate work. This is an important question of sustainability - viability over time and through changing circumstances - which applies as much to the process of getting to a desired conclusion as to how viable that conclusion ultimately is.



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