Write A Letter ... !
...to our City Planners and Reps to express your opinion about the proposed renovation of the ghastly *Sullivan Courthouse* building in *East Cambridge* at 40 Thorndike St. Write to:

Liza Paden <lpaden@cambridgema.gov>
(she will get it to the full Planning Board)

council@cambridgema.gov
(everyone on the Cambridge City Council)

citymanager@cambridgema.gov

Brian Murphy <bmurphy@cambridgema.gov>
(Brian is head of Community Development)

Marjorie Decker <marjorie.decker@gmail.com>
(Our representative in the State House,
she lobbied Gov. Patrick to block the sale; he refused).

David Maher <mayor@cambridgema.gov>
(The Mayor of Cambridge)

You know the building: a concrete/asbestos tombstone that looks like it fell from an orbiting UFO and landed on an unsuspecting quiet neighborhood. It was foisted on East Cambridge in 1974, abandoned by 2008 after barely three decades: an atrocious and costly failure. All it does really well is disfigure the town.

It is now slated for development, to be transformed into a glass tower for commercial office workers. Many of us have come to feel this is a truly bad idea. You might glance at these letters for background:


More documents, including the proposed development plans, are at [http://101third.com](http://101third.com).

Two wrongs don’t make a right. The proposed renovation would only perpetuate a stupid mistake. Instead of fixing the mistake, the Commonwealth is milking it for cash, and the Developer is impelled to do the same. It’s the antithesis of a sensible plan for growth and community.

**The Cambridge Planning Board meets on 18 Feb to decide on permits.** If approved, development would be green lighted to commence, and the only recourse would be legal action.

We owe it to future generations to clean up this mistake properly — not give them an even bigger and more costly headache. A bit more information follows.

*Michael Hawley*
Behold, the **Sullivan Courthouse in East Cambridge**. It is a horrid high-rise block with Stalinist aspirations, and an infamous architectural atrocity. It was opened in 1974 and abandoned by 2008. The building served as a courthouse, and the top block (from red section up) is an overcrowded jail.

![The Sullivan Courthouse hulking at nearly 300' over a quiet, historic neighborhood.](image)

The 22-story building is obscenely out of whack with the modest neighborhood surrounding it — a historic neighborhood comprising gracious 1820's era buildings, like the eloquent old courthouse (designed by America’s first architect, Charles Bulfinch, and now Graham Gund's architectural offices), the landmark 1827 church, the charming brownstone and brick townhouses on Quality Row, and modest homes all around. It was a horrendous concept to begin with — badly designed, badly built, reviled by occupants, and a blight on the community. It is more than three times the height permitted in current zoning.

Is it possible to contemplate strolling past it without a 10mg dose of Xanax? I don't think so, particularly when convicts are hooting catcalls at pedestrians, and wind shear whipping around the tower almost knocks you over. It was largely abandoned (at least by everyone who wasn't incarcerated there) because it was unmaintainable, to put it mildly: riddled with asbestos, failing infrastructure (plumbing, elevators, HVAC: estimated in 2006 to cost over $130m to fix), plagued by lawsuits, prisoner revolts.

If you ever wanted to point to a singularly awful, brutalist fiasco of a building — this would be a dandy “Exhibit A.” Even by the standards of designing jails (compare to the Charles Street Jail, now the spectacular Liberty Hotel), this was an abject failure. Nobody disputes this. It's a turd.

The monstrosity looms over an otherwise pleasant, historic neighborhood, which looks more like this:
That's the lovely Bullfinch-designed brick courthouse (now it's architect Graham Gund's studio).

And across the street, here's “Quality Row,” a line of inviting brick and brownstone townhouses with mansard windows, old churches, cobbled sidewalks, etc.
To give a better idea of just how obnoxious the building is, and how horrifically out of step it is with the rest of the charming neighborhood around it:

Occasionally, the streets are blocked when police squads come to "manage" a problem — like, evacuating the entire jail due to flooding. (That happened when the 400 prisoners, who were packed into a jail designed for 160, revolted, yanked out the fire/water plumbing which flooded 100,000 gallons from the top down and caused $500k in damage).

The Commonwealth owns it, and in the depth of the recession, ran an auction, selling the building to the highest bidder, Leggett McCall.

The top criterion of the state's RFP: maximize financial return to the state. The bidding process was held deep in the recession. After 8 proposals were received, the state halted the auction and deemed all the proposals unacceptable. We don't know why. So they refreshed the RFP, relaunched the auction, and awarded the contract to Leggat McCall, with Elfrus Manfredi, architects.

East Cambridge denizens were irate. The developer is greasing through a plan that basically tries to polish the turd: giftwrapping it in glass with a chintzy brick skirt, sprinkling a few “nature bandaids” (urban shrubs) around the block. The permit application and plans are here and here and here. Here is a rendering:
(That third photo, above right, showing the architectural model, shows the top four floors removed).

At first, the proposal was for purely office space and retail. Not that this is achingly needed — half a dozen big new office buildings have been built in the past couple years, and there's a giant mall and plenty of shops within a few blocks radius. Cambridge community members went ballistic and demanded that there be residential housing. So, the developer rejiggered two floors with 24 condos at 1,000 sqft each.

Basically, this plan calls for 2000+ new business occupants (hard to say how many daily visitors), adds just 92 new parking spaces, is being budgeted at $200m (and we don't know if that includes the cost to buy it, the costs to remediate, etc — we have not seen the financials). We don't know what it would cost to simply tear the existing building down, and design something new and respectable from the ground up, but that process seems to require that the current plan be abandoned.

Note that the residential population of all of East Cambridge is about 9000 people. Traffic on Third Street during rush hour is already a parking lot, and gets worse every day as more occupants settle into the half a dozen big new business buildings and labs built in the last few years.

The problem is, absent a white knight philanthropist or Al Qaeda crashing a plane into the thing, it seems difficult to stop. It may be that the City refuses to issue permits, or re-zones things to a respectable height level, or that the economics collapse, or enough people scream loudly enough.

We don't entirely fault the architects, and developers, who basically responded to the state's RFP the only way they could.

As the old saying goes, you can't polish a turd.
Selected Press Coverage & Quotes

In 2006, employees at the courthouse brought a civil suit for an asbestos mess.

In 2009, prisoners rioted — they complained bitterly about overcrowding, asbestos, flu transmission, and broke sprinkler heads in the fire protection system, causing half a million in damage. It was ironic that the prisoners complained about overcrowding because the 18 lower floors were vacant. They were abandoned due to the need for renovations — asbestos, elevators, HVAC, estimated (2006) at $130m.

On any list of Cambridge eyesores, the Sullivan high-rise is likely to score near the top. It has been called a “triumph of Stalinist architecture,” a “hideous monument to concrete,” “East Cambridge’s sore thumb” and numerous epithets that cannot be repeated.

Many of the people who worked there also hated it. They complained that the lighting was poor, it was too hot in summer and too cold in winter, the elevators were constantly out of service, it was sterile and generally, just not a pleasant place to be.

Finally, after it had been largely abandoned in 2008, the State put it on the market in 2010.

There was some hope that the winning bidder would just tear it down. But there was the chilling quote:

“I think that this building has had a long, storied history and many, many in Cambridge felt that it was too big when it was built so there are hard feelings that go way back,” Maher said. “I think in redoing this building we want to make sure we don’t open those wounds again.”

Nice try.

Boston Globe, Jan 2013:

“Criminally ugly: Officials could fix an East Cambridge eyesore — but they're blowing it.”

The auction was not a straightforward process. Oops: All eight initial bids were rejected.

“Just as tall, not as bad…”

They still can't manage to move the prisoners out in a timely manner.

Residents in the 'hood have written to the Governor, imploring/warning him.

Developers try to throw a bone to irate Cambridge residents by offering to stick a grocery story in the garage.

Developers cave in and agree to allocate 24 micro condos.

Oops, plan includes parking spaces that haven't been approved yet.

Oops, the sale is delayed because the Commonwealth fails again to relocate prisoners.