

2/3/14

263 Hurley St. #2
Cambridge, MA 02141
3 February 2014

Hugh Russell, Chairman
Planning Board
City of Cambridge

RE: Sullivan Courthouse, 40 Thorndike Street

I am a member of the East Cambridge Planning Team (ECPT) and attended a community gathering at the East End House on Wednesday, January 29, 2014 to review the recent proposed plan and to discuss the project with other ECPT members. It was a very valuable exercise in understanding the current status of the project. I am writing to you because I strongly believe that this will be the only opportunity we will have for the redesign and reuse of the former courthouse and the long term impact the design and use will have on the neighborhood as it continues to develop and expand.

Many issues have been raised regarding the redesign and reuse of the building, as well as numerous long and tired discussions about the history of the building and why it exists today. Regardless of how or why it was built, it exists and there is now an opportunity to transform to the existing structure into an exceptional and invigorating structure for the neighborhood. The existing building is massive and out of scale with the existing neighborhood, but I am very optimistic about the potential for creating an exciting piece of architecture that that will become a positive landmark for the East Cambridge neighborhood.

I would like to share some of my thoughts about the project that is being presented to the board for approval. I will try to be as brief and concise as possible in outlining the ideas and concerns regarding the programming and design of the existing building, which may better serve the neighborhood from Kendall Square to Lechmere and the future growth and development in East Cambridge.

- **Number of housing units:** The number and size of the residential units, four lofts and two, two bedroom apartments, seems inappropriate for a building that size. The units are located at one side of the building and appear to be isolated from the rest of the building and surrounding neighborhood.

It seems that a better and more integrated design for the residential units would be to wrap the units around the building on the third and fourth floors with offices above. Housing units wrapping around the lower levels of the building would alter the streetscape making a visual adjustment to the scale of the building to fit better into the surrounding residential neighborhood. A greater number of residential units may offer an opportunity for the residents to become part of the neighborhood and not isolated within the building and from the surrounding neighborhood as currently shown on the plan. An increased number of residents within the building will also support any retail as well.

- **Open space on Spring Street:** I like the design and concept for the green space and building entry from Spring Street, but it is not realistic. Considering the wind patterns of the building and how difficult it is to walk past the building on the sidewalk today, it does not look like much will change with the existing plan and the area will continue to be windswept and not a place to sit or have any use except as a quick passage. It looks good on paper but appears to be a way of connecting the building entrance to the street without any consequence as green space. It does not make any sense to include open space on any side of the building. For many years, I have observed the trash and debris that gets blown around by the wind drafts created by the building. I think it will continue to be an area that ends up collecting trash and garbage that is blown around the street by these wind patterns. While I appreciate the intent, I question the final outcome of

green space anywhere along the exterior of the building. This segues to retail and developing an interior space of the building for public use.

- **Retail:** With the size and scale of the project, it may be beneficial to have two levels of retail and include the open space within the building. This would give an opportunity for restaurants to possibly extend seating to an interior balcony at the second level inside the building overlooking an indoor garden and possibly a fountain or water wall. As you are aware, this is common inside hotel lobbies and other public spaces within office buildings and would be conducive to this particular building with the walk through and design of an open lobby space. If treated in this manner, the space can be maximized all year round. An increased number of residents in the building and the number of office workers utilizing the services, shops, and restaurants, along with the current housing, office, lab, and hotel developments under construction on Third Street, Binney Street, First Street, as well as the existing residential and commercial developments near Kendall Square, there will be enough support for a variety of retail in the building. More importantly, it will create a 24/7 environment that will prevent the building from becoming a dark, downtown office building with no night life disconnected from the rest of the neighborhood. Focusing on creating a lively, interactive space seems crucial for removing the feel and element of "the old courthouse" embracing a new and revitalizing entity on the block. This will be beneficial for the growth and the quality of life of the surrounding neighborhood long term rather than transforming the building from one monstrosity to another leaving the dark and empty shell hovering over empty streets at night.
- **Tower design:** My question and concern is about the exterior design of the tower and why the two rectangular bump outs remain on one the side of the building. In my opinion, it is very unappealing and greatly distracts from the elegant line of the tower, which is straight on the other three sides. Those two chunky and incongruous sections take away from any sleekness creating a visual weight that disrupts the smoothness of the tower and clean design. I would prefer to see those removed regardless of the material that will be used on the exterior of the building.

This project has great potential for becoming a landmark that our neighborhood can be proud of and no longer wants to blow up! I am asking that you allocate the necessary time needed for this project and carefully consider all aspects of the building redesign from its commercial use, housing, public space, and construction materials to be significant and esthetically pleasing, which is critical for the future of our community. In addition, some bold color to add excitement and to provide some warmth and texture to the streetscape would be welcomed.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I can be reached at 617-930-4740 or at sondela@verizon.net.

Sincerely,

Donna M. Keefe