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Opinion

PAUL MCMORROW

Criminally ugly

Officials could fix an East Cambridge eyesore — but they're blowing it

By Paul McMorrow | JANUARY 23, 2013



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Middlesex jail building is mostly vacant and laced with asbestos.

A JAILHOUSE has stood between Second and Third Streets in East Cambridge since the early 1800s. It sprang up behind the old Middlesex County Courthouse, not long after East Cambridge became a real place, rather than a swamp at the edge of the

Charles River. The idea of a jail along Third Street is nearly as old as the neighborhood itself. However, the monster of a building that looms over the street now is something else entirely.

The former Edward J. Sullivan courthouse and jail soars 22 stories above a tightly packed residential neighborhood. It's not a welcome presence. A classic piece of 1960s government construction, the building is massive in scale, plunked down without public notice or consent, and hugely disruptive to the neighborhood around it.

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East Cambridge residents have resented the jail tower ever since it opened in 1974. So the building's impending redevelopment should be an opportunity to improve the site. Instead, a redevelopment plan state officials recently endorsed would compound everything that's wrong with the jail today, and cement it in place.

The state's real estate arm has been hawking the Sullivan courthouse and jail tower since late 2011. The building is laced with asbestos, and the court officials and prosecutors who once filled the bulk of the East Cambridge complex decamped for modern suburban offices years ago. The tower is now vacant, save for the crowded four-story jailhouse on top. The state hopes to relocate the inmates and close on a sale to a private developer by the end of this year.



SARAH BREZINSKY GILBERT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Saltonstall Building in Boston was rehabbed more than a decade ago.

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Last month, state officials tapped Boston developer Leggat McCall Properties to redevelop the complex. That decision triggered immediate and sustained blowback. Leggat McCall emerged from a pack of three final bidders. The firm was the only prospective developer that didn't propose adding housing to the complex. Leggat McCall wants to modernize the jail tower, but the building would become a strictly commercial property. And that fact has its neighbors up in arms.

The jail isn't just objectionable because it's grossly out of scale with the low-slung residential neighborhood around it, or because of the prison catcalls that rain down from above. The building stands at arm's length from the homes all around it. It covers an entire city block, meeting the surrounding streets with three sets of blank walls, and a concrete moat on the fourth. The tower darkens and divides East Cambridge, and the current redevelopment scheme does little to improve this broken relationship. Leggat McCall sold the state on an office tower with a bit of retail on the ground floor — a proposal that will keep the jail site dark at night, with few active spaces engaging the neighborhood around it.

East Cambridge residents are currently peppering the state with protest letters, but these residents are not anti-development zealots. Instead, they're advocates for good development. They're used to tangling with MIT and Kendall Square's large landlords, and they understand how to shape new construction to improve the surrounding neighborhoods. They're assailing the plans for the jail tower, but not because they believe it could be chopped in half or torn down altogether. They're just asking for a building like the one Beacon Hill has.

More than a decade ago, the state was wrestling with another asbestos-filled office tower sitting next to a residential neighborhood. It used the enormous construction job inside the Leverett Saltonstall Building as a chance to repair the building's relationship with the surrounding neighborhood. As MassDevelopment, the state's economic development agency, was rehabbing the Saltonstall Building, it replaced a vast, bleak concrete plaza outside with shops and a bank of condominiums. The

Saltonstall complex is now a destination, rather than a spot pedestrians hurry past. Its success proves that what happens at a building's base is far more important than what it looks like on the 20th floor.

This is all the Cambridge jail's neighbors are asking for: some housing to surround the offices, to bring some life to a hard, unforgiving building perimeter. In pressing their case, they're invoking the memory of the last time the state steamrolled East Cambridge and erected the jail tower, and promising not to get rolled over again. But they shouldn't have to threaten to contest the project's zoning permits to get their way.

Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at Commonwealth Magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

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