

Speaking for Scotland's Buildings



17th December 2021

John Kelly
Planning and Building Standards
Highland Council Headquarters
Glenurquhart Road
Inverness
IV3 5NX

Dear Mr Kelly,

RE: 21/05238/FUL | 122B Academy Street, Inverness, IV1 1LX | New Hotel and associated demolition

The AHSS Highlands & Islands Cases Panel **objects** to this proposal, for the following reasons:

- **Unacceptable impact on conservation area**
 - a. **This is overdevelopment of a constrained site. The development is out of scale with neighbouring properties and the historic urban fabric. The development objective has been to achieve a target number of bedrooms rather than an assessment of what is an appropriate scale of development for the site and its context.**
 - b. **Impact on neighbouring properties that are located within the conservation area. This includes severe overshadowing which will impact on the future use and viability of these historic properties.**
 - c. **The visual impact on important views, and the backdropping effect to the Old High Church**

General Comments on the Proposed Design

We note that the applicant has stated that they intend to respond sensitively to the historic context. (Section 1.5 – Outcomes, paragraph 2) however a review of the documentation submitted would indicate that this goal has not been achieved.

Contextual Analysis

The contextual analysis of the conservation area and the development setting contain statements that are not supported by the evidence that has been presented.

The analysis of the townscape is unsatisfactory. The analysis of skyline, scale and massing (Section 2.5 – Strategy, para 1 & 2) is incorrect when it states that the photograph illustrates backdropping effects of building and landscape. It is evident from the photograph that there is a consistency of roof heights across the city centre that emphasises the historic scale of development and respects the spires.

The applicant describes the gables of Academy Street as a gateway “Two clear gable ends that signify the beginning of the street”. The gable ends were originally internal walls as evident from the fireplaces that are visible



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within the stonework. The historic street line continued as a terrace of buildings, as shown on the historic maps depicted in Section 1.4- Academy Street, p9.

In Section 2.1 – Context, para 2 of the applicant's design statement makes a claim that the historic church spires establish a precedent that allows development to rise above the skyline.

It is misleading to suggest that a spire has the same mass and visual impact as a block of building accommodation which would have a considerably larger volume. It would be more appropriate to use the ridge line of the main church roof as the height for these buildings.

The majority of the historic buildings in the city centre are three storey and attic, and the scale of the historic urban fabric reduces towards this area of Academy Street. There is therefore an established pattern of roof heights that is quite distinct from that of spires and considerably lower than the development proposed.

This is particularly evident in the Academy Street Elevation prepared by the applicant (Section 3.4 – Streetscape Study, page 13), which clearly shows the scale of the buildings stepping down from three storey and attic nearer the town centre, to two storey and attic at the development site

Design Development

In the description of the design development, the applicants state that if the height of the building were reduced in one area, it had to be increased in another area in order to achieve the required number of bedrooms. (Section 3.1- Design Development, para 4, p7)

This is repeated in paragraph 6, where the applicant states, "The need to make up bedrooms was necessary." There is a clear indication that the design development has been driven by the need to hit a target for a set number of bedrooms, rather than a consideration of what the site might reasonably accommodate within the existing context.

Section 3.7 – Stepping Back.

It is noted that the development is shown as six storeys tall, markedly taller than the two storey and attic historic form of the buildings on Academy Street. The façade to the bedroom block at the rear has a vertical unbroken, planar wall surface creating a monolithic block. The change of colour and materials to try and delineate an attic space will not achieve the desired effect. Evidence for this can be seen at the 1960s development of River House on Young Street which tried unsuccessfully to achieve the same effect.

The visual interpretation of the upper floors as attic space can only be achieved if there is a significant set back from the building façade in addition to a change in materials and colour.

The height is excessive and will have a severely detrimental impact on the existing properties located in the conservation area along Academy Street which are immediately adjacent to the development site and located within the conservation area. This impact will be apparent visually from the external realm and will also have a



detrimental impact on the use of the properties themselves, limiting the activities that they can support and therefore potentially putting their future viability at risk.

The narrow space between the buildings on Academy Street and the development is identified as a pedestrian thoroughfare (section 4.3-Access Strategy), but the height of the buildings in relation to the width of the street space is excessive and will create a dark and intimidating environment. This is clearly evident on the elevation drawing PL(04)004.

In addition, the block to the North is a storey height taller at seven storeys tall, and is expressed as a single monolith. This block has lack of weathering projections, or overhangs to protect the limestone finishes, which will give rise to dark weather staining and algal growth on the stonework resulting in a unsightly appearance after a very short period of time.

Review of Relevant Planning Policy

The applicants refer to Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) as support for the principle of their development. We would also draw attention to the National Planning Framework 3 (NPF 3), which is complimentary to SPP and contains more specific guidance. In the introduction NPF 3 states that “Statutory development plans must have regard to the NPF, and Scottish Ministers expect planning decisions to support its delivery.”.

Section 2.8, NPF 3 states that “Much can be gained by focusing on the natural and cultural assets that underpin our tourism and food and drink sectors”. This development will compromise the heritage and culture that is represented within the Riverside Conservation area and is therefore contrary to the policies of NPF 3.

Historic Environment Policy For Scotland 2019

This Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS) published by Historic Environment Scotland is a material consideration for planning proposals that might affect the historic environment.

HEP Policy 1; “Decisions affecting any part of the historic environment should be informed by an inclusive understanding of its breadth and cultural significance.”

HEP Policy 2; “Decisions affecting the historic environment should ensure that its understanding and enjoyment as well as its benefits are secured for present and future generations.”

The proposals have failed to grasp the significance of the Old High Church and its landscape setting. They will have a detrimental impact on the historic environment and are therefore contrary to HEPS policies 01 and 02.

New Design in Historic Settings - Historic Environment Scotland

This guidance document provides advice on incorporating new design within the historic environment and establish a number of guiding principles. We note that the applicants have not made reference to this document.

The document states;



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"Eight general principles will sit alongside the design process as the project develops. they should be applied whatever design solution is arrived at... The designer should consider all the principles and balance them rather than focus on particular aspects. An approach from one aspect alone is unlikely to be successful. These principles can also act as a useful checklist for local authority decision makers in exploring whether schemes have been suitably developed."

In particular the documents established an important principle in relation to

Scale:

"New design should consider the surrounding scale, hierarchy and massing of the existing built form. views and landmarks that is relevant to this application"

Landmarks & Views:

*"Often historic buildings or clusters and features within rural, designed or urban landscapes are locally, regionally or nationally important landmarks because their distinctive character contributes strongly to the identity of an area.
Views embrace wide open landscapes whereas existing vistas may be channelled or terminated by landscape features and landmark buildings, intentionally or accidentally. New design should consider ways to enhance or protect their function as landmarks."*

For the reasons outlined above, the proposed development has not met these important principles. In particular, the design has not been led by a sensitivity to place and context, but by a requirement to achieve a target number of bedrooms, which has led to a development that is out of scale with its surrounding and negatively impacts on the historic environment.

Highland-Wide Local Development Plan – Policy 29 : Design Quality and Place-Making

This policy states that

"New development should be designed to make a positive contribution to the architectural and visual quality of the place in which it is located ...

"Applicants should demonstrate sensitivity and respect towards the local distinctiveness of the architecture, design and layouts

"Where relevant, the Council will judge proposals in terms of their contribution to place-making. Proposals should have regard to the historic pattern of development and landscape in the locality

For the reasons outlined above, the development does not accord with policy 29.



Highland-Wide Local Development Plan Policy 57 – Natural, built and cultural heritage

The application site is partially within and on the boundary of a conservation area. Whether or not the whole of the development is within the conservation area, it will have a significant and detrimental impact on nearby buildings that are within the conservation area and it will have an impact on views across the town towards important buildings and landmarks that are listed as Category A, indicating that they have National Significance.

In terms of Highland-wide Local Development Plan policy 57, conservation areas and listed buildings (category A) are classified as being of National importance. The proposed development would affect the setting of the Category A listed building, the Old High Church and the historic site of St Michael's Mount. In relation to features of National Importance, Policy 57 says

"For features of national importance we will allow developments that can be shown not to compromise the natural environment, amenity and heritage resource. Where there may be any significant adverse effects, these must be clearly outweighed by social or economic benefits of national importance. It must also be shown that the development will support communities in fragile areas who are having difficulties in keeping their population and services."

The applicants state in their Design Statement that "The design of the building has been carefully considered to take account of the historical setting and nearby listed buildings." and that "The higher bedroom block is set back from the main façade and is wedge shaped, designed to reflect the prominence of the spires which define much of the city, particularly with that of the Old High Church spire opposite." Design Statement page 7 & 8.

It is evident from the drawings submitted that this is not the case and that the development does not protect key views of the Grade A listed Old High Church.

It is disappointing that the applicant have not shown the impact of this development on the view from the riverside and from Huntly Street. This would show that the development will have a significant backdropping effect. The seven storey block, clad in limestone will compete visually and upstage the steeple of this important historic site.

On page 9 of the Planning Statement the applicant says that "The design and form of the building takes fully into consideration the requirement to ensure the views of the Old High Church spire in particular are preserved. Views from Longman Road and Rose Street towards the river are protected and the Spire retains its dominance." This statement is misleading. Drawing PL(90)004 shows a view from the East on the approach to the town centre. It demonstrates that the view of the Old High Church Steeple is blocked by the new development and only the top of the Free North Church Steeple is visible. Church steeples have historically been important markers in the landscape to direct travellers towards the town.

In this instance the proposed development will clearly compromise the amenity and heritage resource of the Old High Church. The proposed development would therefore be in conflict with policy 57.

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Inverness City Centre Development Brief

This policy document states that a proposal will be supported if it “creates a high-quality development that makes a positive contribution to the visual and spatial character of the surrounding area” (page 34). There are fifteen key place-making principles set out in Table 7.1, that new development must comply with. Principles relevant to the historic environment area include:

- Place-making principle 1 – contextual analysis
- Place-making principle 2 – key views
- Place-making principle 3 – historic buildings and spaces
- Place-making principle 6 – height, scale and massing

For the reasons outlined above, the contextual analysis is unsatisfactory, having failed to present key views that would show the impact of the proposals on the Old High Church. In relation to key views, Inverness City Centre Development Brief (page 39) says:

“When viewed from key locations within and on approach to the city, the scale, height and massing of development must not obscure or have an adverse impact on key views”,

We have noted that the development will result in significant backdropping to the Old High Church, resulting in a detrimental impact on the character of this nationally significant site. We have also noted that the drawings show that the view of the Old High steeple will be completely blocked from the East.

The third place-making principle relates to historic buildings and spaces. It includes:

“Development must safeguard the setting of the built heritage and retain the character and distinctiveness of heritage assets. Development impacting on a Listed Building or structure should highlight its importance and be subservient to it in height and scale.”

As already noted, when seen from the river the proposed building would have a monolithic character. It would dwarf and be incompatible with the much smaller-scale texture the neighbouring historic buildings. The proposed development would not highlight the importance of the listed buildings, nor would it be subservient to them in height and scale. It would thus conflict with the third place-making principle.

In relation to the sixth place-making principle is that the height, scale and massing of the proposed development do not relate satisfactorily to the more immediate surroundings and are contrary to the aims and objectives that underpin the establishment of the conservation area.

This development is far too large and high, compromises the conservation area, and impacts greatly on Inverness's historic townscapes, views and skylines. We therefore object.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Alastair Disley, Convenor

on behalf of the Highlands & Islands Cases Panel