

## **Local Resident Response to Planning Application ref 2023/0692/P (13, Belsize Crescent)**

Unfortunately the original architectural character, which gave rise to high status Classically-inspired stucco fronted houses on our street, are gradually becoming lost or eroded to both our local community and future generations, as a result of weak Local Authority Planning Control and Planning Enforcement of Article 4 Direction planning legislation and as such, every opportunity to restore the original architectural integrity should be taken.

There have been several recent examples on Belsize Crescent that demonstrate the Local Planning Authority's failure to improve to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area especially in the context of road frontage treatments, which these policies are supposed to protect, but have sadly been allowed to vary from property to property, as a result of the approval of poorly drawn representations of original architectural features on numerous submissions, a reliance on the often untrained acumen of builders to source architectural elements, a planning failure to request actual samples of architectural elements for approval and a failure to apply planning conditions which would provide an opportunity to insist upon the reinstatement of original architectural features in order to re-establish the uniform elegance that the original facades of the terrace provided to the streetscape, (which is after all the aim of all of the associated conservation policies and interests)

For too long, property owners have often failed to appreciate that they are merely custodians of our architectural heritage, which anchors our societal culture, so conservation area planning legislation, serves to protect our local architectural visual amenity, to apply planning conditions whenever they have the opportunity to enforce the reinstatement the original uniform integrity of the streetscape and advance some form of community cohesion.

Unfortunately, however, the prevailing mercenary attitude towards housing stock, (which represents a significant capital asset), have inclined owners to act in their own interests, to the detriment of the community as a whole. This unilateralism is a microcosm of what's happening globally, but will take grassroots involvement to stop the wider movement – As such, the residents of Belsize Crescent need the involvement of the Belsize Conservation Society's advice more readily in the planning process, as this entity is more focused on the consequences of such aesthetic loss on the neighbourhood in which we reside.

In addition, as a result of weaknesses in our current Local Planning Authority, instead of acting as a tool to help address this demise, appears to be failing us, despite so many concerned local parties, advisories and policies involved. Planners therefore need to improve their process. A lack of funds is a poor excuse, as it doesn't address the several persons whose paid employment (and duty of care) is to apply the policies that are currently in force; it seems they simply aren't doing their job thoroughly. And Planners should not lose the opportunity that this application(s) present them with, to make it a Planning Condition of any Approval that all original architectural features and details are restored to the front façade, exactly as originals, in order that it is prohibited to replace original features with poor quality, diluted imitations, including:

- the **original painted iron 'pot guard' railings** around the raised ground floor front window sill.
- the **original front door** with heavy curved moulding, which provides the authentic framing around the arched glazing panels.
- the **original etched glass side panels** (either side of the door)
- the original **stone bottle balustrading on top of the portico**, with correct spacing
- the original **glazing bar** in the centre of the first floor triple window fenestration.
- the original **stone bottle balustrading boundary wall treatment**, with correct spacing

Such original decorative architectural elements form the character and appearance of the streetscape of Belsize Crescent, which is within the Belsize Conservation Area and their absence, erosion or dilution only stands to detract from the character and /appearance of the whole terrace, which is not only a huge loss for future generations, but at odds with the Council's own planning policy guidance.

The removal of intrinsic architectural features and details of 13, Belsize Crescent would therefore be detrimental to the aims of the '**Belsize Conservation Area Design Guide**', to preserve the unique architectural characteristics at the front of properties in this locality, and whose objective is "to prevent harmful works taking place and to ensure that Belsize Conservation Area keeps its historic character and appearance and remains an attractive and desirable place to live into the future."

It is also the Local Planning Authority's duty to designate, protect and enhance Conservation Areas, as outlined in the their advertised Article 4 Directions:

- [Article 4 Direction fact sheet for the Belsize Conservation Area \(PDF, 85KB\)](#)
- [Belsize Conservation Area Design Guide \(PDF, 1MB\)](#)

The following extracts from this guidance are of particular relevance and noteworthy:

*An Article 4(1) Direction was introduced on 1st September 2010 on most of the properties in the Belsize Conservation Area. This means that additional planning controls have been introduced and some types of work which previously did not need planning permission now do. The Article 4(1) Direction applies only to the fronts of houses, and the sides of houses which face the street, and includes single family dwelling houses and houses converted to flats. It seeks to prevent harmful works taking place and to ensure that Belsize Conservation Area keeps its historic character and appearance and remains an attractive and desirable place to live into the future. This Guide explains why the Belsize Conservation Area is special and gives advice on what works are suitable and what will require planning permission. It encourages owners and occupiers to undertake sensitive repairs and to reinstate historic features where they have been lost. Even minor changes to the appearance of houses can destroy the character and appearance of the area, and potentially lower the value of the house.*

*The following works to the fronts of houses and flats, and the sides of houses and flats which face the road now need planning permission:*

*1. Any works to enlarge, alter or improve your property including replacing part or all of any window or door, and any works which alter the appearance of decorative features, including their removal.*

*Replacing original windows on the front elevation (or side elevations where these front the street) now needs planning permission.*

*2. Alterations to porches or porticos*

*3. Painting the front of a house or flat if it will differ from the traditional surface treatment. You do not need to apply for planning permission to repaint your property if it is already painted or covered in 'stucco' or a traditional render finish, provided it remains the same colour.*

*4. Additions or alterations to the roof or chimney, including the installation of a roof-light or solar panel*

*5. Installation of a flue or soil and vent pipe at the front of a house or flat*

*6. Erecting, altering or demolishing a gate, wall or fence at the front of a house or flat*

*7. Making, enlarging, improving or altering a hard surface at the front of a house or flat*

*The following sections give more information on each of these categories.*

*Like-for-like replacement and repair does not need planning permission.*

*These approaches are those that:*

- match in materials, colour and surface finish (e.g. bricks and mortar)*
- have the same dimensions and*
- have the same pattern and detailed profile*
- replicate original details*

*Replacement windows should have the same pattern and profile of glazing bars / frame • has the same glazing bar / frame / window sill dimensions and opens in the same way and any details should be replicated and original catches, handles, pulleys.*

*Decorative Details often occur around the windows and doors of stucco-fronted properties and may include columns and mouldings to porticos, projecting console brackets and quoins. Decorative details are very important to the character of Belsize and should be preserved and reinstated where lost or damaged. Their removal now needs planning permission and will be resisted.*

*Alterations to porches and porticos*

*The distinctive porches and porticos in Belsize are an architectural feature integral to the Classically-inspired design of the stucco fronted houses. They emphasize the area's high-status and are often supported on Ionic columns, with a deep entablature or horizontal decoration above. Adding a new porch or altering existing porches or porticos on front elevations (or side elevations where this fronts the street) now needs planning permission and will be resisted.*

*Walls, Railings, Fences, and Hedges*

*Unbroken runs of boundary walls to green front gardens are one of the most noticeable aspects of Belsize's historic character. The traditional treatment of the boundary varies according to the date and style of house. In some areas, stucco walls, decorated as balustrades with traditional dark painted iron railings predominate.*

*Boundary walls and hedges help give the area its serene and respectable charm, and by restoring them where they are lost residents can restore the attractive qualities of the streetscape for residents and passers by. The demolition of boundary walls and railings facing the street now needs planning permission and will be resisted. Where boundary walls or railings have been lost or replaced in non-original materials or to a different design we encourage residents to restore them to their original form.*

The **Belsize Conservation Area Statement** aims to provide a clear indication of the Council's approach to the preservation and enhancement of the Belsize Conservation Area, for the use of local residents, community groups, businesses, property owners, architects and developers as an aid to the formulation and design of development proposals and change in this area and by the Council in the assessment of all development proposals, so needs to be applied thoroughly in this case irrespective of how many planning applications the project has made.

In addition, the following extracts from the Local Planning Authority's own conservation guidance are of particular note to this planning application:

*Camden has a duty under the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to designate as conservation areas any "areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance." Designation provides the*

*basis for policies designed to preserve or enhance the special interest of such an area. Designation also introduces a general control over the demolition of unlisted buildings. The Council's policies and guidance for conservation areas are contained in the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) and Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG). This statement is part of SPG and gives additional detailed guidance in support of UDP policies.*

#### **MATERIALS AND MAINTENANCE**

*In all cases, existing/ original architectural features and detailing characteristic of the Conservation Area should be retained and kept in good repair, and only be replaced when there is no alternative, or to enhance the appearance of the building through the restoration of missing features. Original detailing such as porticoes; door and window architraves, pediments, hoods and finials; eaves brackets; balustrading; cornicing; timber shopfront facades, iron balustrades, timber framed sash windows, doors, where retained add to the visual interest of properties. Where removed in the past, replacement with suitable copies will be encouraged. Original, traditional materials should be retained wherever possible and repaired if necessary. The choice of materials in new work will be most important and will be the subject of control by the Council. Where replacement is the only possible option, materials should be chosen to closely match the original. Generally the use of the original (or as similar as possible) natural materials will be required.*

With specific reference to the planning application(s) for 13, Belsize Crescent, my main concern is why they appear to be submitting at least three (separately zoned) planning applications, rather than one that can be considered holistically, in view of the advantages that holistic Planning Conditions could provide (as outlined previously). The Local Planning Authority should therefore consider them in their totality.

There also appears to be issues with both the proposed design and drafting of the submission:

##### 1. Reinstatement of the Original Barrel Dormer:

The previous owner of no 13, hastily replaced the original barrel dormer with a broader flat-roof dormer just prior to Article 4 Directions, which prohibited this form of extension, therefore this application represents an opportunity to replace the currently incongruous new dormer and revert back to the original barrel dormer design, not only to restore the character of the streetscape, but to avoid further encroachment of a proposed roof terrace, which would have an over-bearing visual impact from the front of the street, thus impacting on visual amenity and setting a precedent detrimental to the aims of the Conservation Area.

##### 2. Reinstatement of Original Stone Balustrading to front steps, boundary wall and at first floor window level:

The original stone bottled balustrading design and spacing creates the distinctive visual character of this local Conservation Area and as such, in view of statutory planning legislation under Article 4 Directions, to which Planning has a duty of care, must be reinstated exactly. It should be a non-negotiable element as they form a substantial fabric of our local visual amenity. Reinstating boundary walls in the exact design of the original is entirely possible using casting fabricators. And as custodians of our architectural heritage, surely we should take pride in our ability to safeguard our architectural heritage for future generations. A lax stance or inaction on behalf of Planning Enforcement, (despite possessing an instrument to enforce 'like for like' replacements and new installations in the planning process), sends out a weak message to other local property owners who now appear to think they have free rein to build whatever they like within this supposedly protected street frontage and this impacts on the visual amenity of neighbours and is detrimental to the very purpose of the Belsize Conservation Area.

### 3. Vague Annotations and Schematic Illustrations should be thoroughly addressed

Unfortunately, the annotations provided on the proposed elevations are similarly vague to that of no 11 (describing proposed architectural details, "as neighbours", which makes it open to subjective interpretation - for example, in relation to the exact matching of original stone bottled balustrading, coping stones, and column caps, etc. Which neighbours are they referring to? For this planning application, every architectural detail by way of a sample must be requested and approved by the Local Planning Authority, as these individual architectural elements together create aesthetic integrity and consistent uniformity, which forms the unique character of Belsize Crescent.

### 4. Impact of Disabled Access on Conservation Area / Article 4 Direction Frontage

The proposed wheel chair lift to the front of the property is far too conspicuous from the street, and has a consequent visual amenity impact to the local community, in contravention of the intentions of the Belsize Conservation Area design guidelines and should be resisted on Article 4 Direction grounds. There are other accessibility methods that could be considered in this context and the Belsize Conservation Societies should advise here, as it could set a precedent.

Rather cynically, I would also add that the inclusion of wheelchair access within the design, however, may have been incorporated to manipulate a consent for an enlarged access (to get all of this leisure amenity equipment and garden furniture in easily), rather than facilitate a disabled person, as the residents are not requiring this facility themselves, but say it is for visitors.

### 5. Additional Excavation of the Existing Basement

If anyone noted the recent estate agents sales particular photographs of the existing basement, it revealed that the previous owners had naively removed every supporting spine wall to this 5-storey building, which then already puts it at risk of collapse and the terrace of implosion. So, whilst the proposed inclusion of a swimming pool has no impact on anyone's visual amenity from the street, it does however, provide an opportunity, with significant engineering input, to address the structural weakness that now exists in the centre of the terrace, with the inclusion of steels cast in concrete to reinforce any potential weakness.

A Structural Engineer would need to address the correct structural calculations and procedure of further excavating the existing basement, as I'm sure the process could risk having a significant effect on adjoining neighbours in terms of vibrations, inconveniences linked to the enabling works and the impact of the provision of substantial quantities of modern cement anchors, which will lack the flexibility of the neighbouring traditional lime construction of the original properties within the terrace.

Notwithstanding this, however, the proposed inclusion of a swimming pool does seem rather disproportionate to the other amenities provided in the scheme as well as being disproportionate to the landscaped garden amenity - the disproportionate provision of soft landscaping shrubs to attract insects, birds, etc, seems to be low in the scheme's hierarchy and somewhat disregarded.

It is also unclear what the circular symbols are at the rear of the proposed "LG Floor" plan?

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