

## **Local Resident Response to Planning Application ref 2023/0693/P (13, Belsize Crescent)**

Despite the Design & Access Statement for this proposal stating that one of its main objectives is to, “enhance the property and its contribution to the character of the street and Conservation Area”, the current proposal fails to address the loss of its most significant architectural feature – the reinstatement of the original barrel dormer, that elegantly crowns and punctuates the uniformity of the front facades of this terrace, and is inconsistent with the aims of the Belsize Conservation Area guide, so on the basis of the failure to reinstate this original architectural element alone, I object to the currently proposed scheme being approved at all, as the response is contradictory and insufficient considerations has been made.

The poorly grafted photomontage of the proposed dormer, in comparison to the existing reveals the poor calibre of thought put into this issue. It illustrates the proposed remodelling of the existing dormer, with yet another ill-conceived, inappropriate design , yet another bulky square dormer in place which is similarly inappropriate, with windows that don't even align vertically to those lined up on floor below and in with large glazed expanses which aren't divided proportionately with fine lambs tongue timber divisions, This demonstrates a poor grasp of the desired detailing and quality of the original architectural features and materials, required by the aims of the Belsize Conservation Area guidelines and Local Planning Authority conservation design policies, which requires tighter control if we aim to restore the fast eroding original character and quality of the area.

The Local Authority should desist any further loss of the original architectural character, which gave rise to high status classically-inspired stucco fronted houses on our street, for the sake of our local community and future generations and seek every possible opportunity to restore its original architectural integrity, particularly with new planning applications, whereby this can be insisted upon, as the applicants need conservation guidance.

Unfortunately, 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; no 11, next door to this property is an example, whereby the reinstatement of the original stone boundary wall was not insisted upon and the poor imitations of the stone bottle balustrading at first floor level are not good like for like matches of original designs, nor is the inconsistent spacing of them. In addition, some of the fenestration division are inconsistent, as if poor copies have been copied without any thought to what the original looked like (i.e proportionately the same)

These variations from property to property, no doubt result from the approval of poor annotations or poorly drawn representations of original architectural features on 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, and conservation area planning legislation, must serve to protect our local architectural visual amenity, to apply planning

conditions to reinstate our architectural heritage, whenever they have the opportunity which would engender pride and advance community cohesion.

It seems that the prevailing mercenary attitude towards housing stock, (as 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 and will take grassroots involvement to stop - As such, the Belsize Conservation Society's advice should be more readily involved the planning process, with more focus on detailed solutions to the reoccurring issues of these architectural elements, (such as boundary wall treatments, stone bottle design and spacing, replicating original designs in decorative metalwork, etc), as the consequential aesthetic loss on the neighbourhood in which we reside, is substantial.

In addition, weaknesses in our current Local Planning Authority, can, instead of acting as a tool to help address this demise, fail 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 enough, as so many opportunities have been lost. If Planners made Planning Conditions of any Approval for all original architectural features and details to be restored to the front façade, exactly as the originals, and prohibit the replacement of 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 / first floor window**, (with correct spacing)
- the original **glazing bar divisions** in the centre all window fenestration. (to create equal proportions)
- the original **stone bottle balustrading on the step handrails and along the boundary wall**, (with correct spacing)

Such original decorative architectural elements form the character and appearance of the streetscape of Belsize Crescent, 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 also be detrimental to the aims of the '**Belsize Conservation Area Design Guide**', whose aim is 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.*

*Like-for-like replacement and repairs should.*

- 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. 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 very thoroughly in this case irrespective of how many planning applications are 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 objections are:

**1. Reinstatement of the Original Barrel Dormer is necessary to fulfil the aims of the Belsize Conservation Area Design Guide:**

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 subsequently prohibited this form of extension, therefore this application represents an opportunity to apply a Planning Condition, which requires replacement of the currently incongruous 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 the proposed roof terrace on top, 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 the front steps, boundary wall, above the portico and at first floor window balconettes is necessary, but should be exact replicas of originals.**

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 on the proposal

Unfortunately, the annotations provided on the proposals are similarly vague to that of no 11 – which caused subsequent issues (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 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 Guide and should therefore be resisted. 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, may have only 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 supporting spine walls to this 5-storey building, which would already put it at risk of collapse and the terrace of implosion. So, 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, is necessary and the involvement of a Structural Engineer to not only do structural calculations, but to proactively project manage these works would alleviate risk to 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 traditional lime construction of the original terrace.

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