Design and Access Statement – 19-21 Sicilian Avenue

Introduction

This Planning/Listed Building Application relates to the interconnected pair of units 19-21 Sicilian Avenue. The units were refurbished some years ago as part of the on-going project to revitalise the buildings that form this very special enclave of retail and office premises. The avenue is currently near to being fully let to independent businesses that have been attracted to the individual character of the avenue. Our business, 'Planet of the Grapes', has been active in Bloomsbury and the City for 10 years and now has three units in three locations, all with slightly different offers but all specialising in the sale of fine wine.

As part of Sicilian Avenue's positioning as a parade of distinctive, specialist and independent operators, this unit will be operated by Planet of the Grapes, providing fine wine and complementary food. The Planet model blends the retail of wine with the ability to taste the product on the premises and to be educated about the product through excellent service and special events with winemakers. We are seeking a change of use to include A1/A3/A4 to accommodate this blended model of wine retail with responsible enjoyment of the product on the premises. There will be a small number of tables and seats inside and outside the unit where customers can taste our retail wines. There will also be a dedicated, atmospheric tasting room in the basement.

Location

Sicilian Avenue is an Edwardian pedestrian shopping parade located at the junction of Southampton Row and Vernon Place, refer to location plan. The avenue follows a diagonal axis linking the two main streets. The buildings lining each side of the parade are of five storeys, and are comprised of retail tenancies at ground and basement levels with offices on the levels above. There is one residential unit on the 5th floor of Vernon House and three residential units in the building opposite, 31 Southampton Row also on the 5th floor.

Architecture, Historical Interest and Existing Features

Located in Sub Area 8 of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, Sicilian Avenue is a Grade II listed building designed for the Duke of Bedford by architect RJ Worley and completed in 1910. Envisaged as an arcade it was changed to an 'avenue' during the course of construction.

The buildings lining each side of the parade are faced in red brick with contrasting white 'Carara' terracotta decorations. The architecture is accentuated by a four-storey 'tourelle' feature. The projecting shopfronts are 20th century, whilst the upper floors contain offices which were originally used as flats.

At either end of Sicilian Avenue the buildings are linked by a neo-classical screen made up of a frieze supported by Ionic columns.

The buildings at No's 11-13 (odd) Southampton Row read as a homogeneous group with No's 15-23 (odd) Southampton Row and No's 1-6 (consecutive) Vernon Place, which are of a similar scale and treatment, faced in red brick with decorative banding and window surrounds.

The recently completed new paving scheme features textured 'White Pearl' and 'Blue Extremadura' granite slabs laid in a pattern of varying width bands across the avenue.

Scheme Design

Externally:

The works to the shop front are limited to replacing signage and branding to the shop front and awning within the overall 'Tenants' Design Guide' produced by the building owners and applied to the rest of the development.

Where any repairs and decorations are required, they will be all to match existing and not form part of the application.

The combined units open into a rear courtyard, allowing daylight into the rear of the units. The yard is lowered to basement level which allows access and means of escape. The rear elevation will remain as existing with wall mounted split air conditioning units wall mounted as per the elevation drawing.

Internally:

One of the special characteristics that make the units so appealing is the level of natural light admitted by the large original sash windows to the rear of the units. The inclusion of a ground floor wc would result in the loss of that important feature, which we feel would be detrimental to the viability and appeal of the location. The inclusion of a lift would also be prohibitively expensive for the scale of unit.

'Listed features' have been retained throughout including opening up a modest fireplace which has been concealed/boxed in, in the past to suit previous tenants.

Free standing joinery units will be used as indicated on the plans for the servery and shelving units for the display of fine wines and related merchandise.

The internal works are limited to installing partitions and joinery units with new services to form a lower ground pantry/kitchen; to define a tasting room and provide two additional customer wcs. There are to be no structural modifications to the unit.

Heritage Statement

The local authority classes a heritage asset such as Sicilian Avenue as:

"A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. Heritage asset includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing)."

……page 52

The local authority's wish for the following has been taken into account while considering these works:

- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation.
- the positive contribution that conservation of this heritage asset can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and

- the desirability of refurbishment works making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

The proposals for the change of use to Units 19-21, as with all the alterations to the units within Sicilian Avenue completed over the years, is based on the core planning principles set out in the national planning policy framework, in particular we aim to:

"Conserve heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of this and future generations" ……page 6

The proposals will pose no impact on the special interest of the structure, its setting and the setting of the adjacent listed buildings. The works will consist of internal alterations only. Please refer to the summary of the scope of works below.

Summary of Scope of Works

The unit is currently designated Use Class 'A1' – Shops and a change of use to include Use Class 'A3/4' – Drinking establishments, is the subject of this planning application. The prime use of the unit will be for the sale of wine.

The proposals are to fit out the shop to suit the needs of a wine merchant with a tasting room at lower ground level which would be supported by a small finishing kitchen, also at this level. The tasting room will be enclosed with a timber framed glazed partition with glazed double doors, as there is no cornicing at basement level this would not impact any historical features.

An additional two customer WCs will be provided at basement level.

Open 'brick bond' format security grilles, to match those installed elsewhere in the avenue, would be installed within the units at ground floor level. These will span between cross walls and be installed below the cornice level.

Mechanical ventilation and extract associated with the WCs and kitchen will be provided to the rear of the unit into the courtyard that already contains ventilation and heating and cooling equipment for the adjacent units, see image sheet 8900(03)1102. A pair of condenser units will be provided in this location to accommodate cooling associated with refrigeration required for the retail unit. Fresh air will be drawn into the basement areas via louvres set behind the existing stall riser grilles.

The unit currently covers as area of 74sqm at ground floor level and 80sqm at basement level. No additional area will be created as part of this application.

Landscaping

This project will not change any external landscaping.

Appearance

Please refer to document 8900 A(03)1101, 1102 and 1103 for photographs of the existing shop fronts and drawings 8900A(04)1100; A(05)1100, (05)1101 and (05)1102 for existing and proposed elevations.

Access

Both existing entrance doors will be retained but the primary entrance to the premises will be via the door to Unit 21. An existing shallow step into the Unit can be negotiated, with assistance, by wheelchair users.

The existing staircase to the basement will be retained. The means of escape from ground floor level is via the two doors onto Sicilian Avenue and escape from the basement level will be via the external rear courtyard or via the stairs up to the ground.

Due to the small foot print of the unit at ground floor level and the desire to preserve the large window to the rear of the unit, it is not deemed viable to install an accessible WC at ground floor level. One of the WCs at basement level has been fitted out to ambulant disabled standards.

Refuse

There is currently an agreement with Camden Council that the refuse is carried to an agreed collection point at the south end of the avenue on Southampton Row twice per day, six days per week, for units 25-29. A similar arrangement will be put in place for Unit 19-21.

Servicing arrangements

Produce will either be brought to the unit via the service access route to the rear of the unit. There is no vehicle access on the avenue.

Additional Information

As part of the fit out works elements that are damaged and in need of repair will be restored to match existing and any redundant equipment will be removed, all to a coordinated strategy.

Sources of Information

1. Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Strategy - Adopted 18th April 2012.
2. Communities and Local Government - National planning policy framework - Adopted March 2012.
3. Conservation area appraisal and management strategies - Camden Council.
4. Heritage Gateway
5. Bloomsbury conservation area Sub Area 8 Townscape appraisal map. Map Ref No: c08087.
6. Bloomsbury conservation area Townscape map. Map Ref No: c08094.