

16A/B-18 West Central Street, 10-12 Museum Street and 35, 37 & 39-41 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1JJ: Heritage appraisal

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Introduction

- 1 This report has been prepared by KMHeritage in relation to a current planning application (ref 2013/4275/P) for the alteration, replacement and extension of properties at 16A/B-18 West Central Street, 10-12 Museum Street and 35, 37 & 39-41 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1JJ. The report has been prepared for City and General New Oxford Street LLP.
- 2 The full description of the proposal is as follows:

Demolition and redevelopment of 16A/B & 18 West Central Street and part demolition, change of use and works of conversion of remaining buildings to replace existing nightclub (Class D2), retail/food and drink (Classes A1-A5) and residential (26 x Class C3 residential studio units) with a new mix of uses comprising retail/food and drink (A1-A3), office (B1) and 19 x residential flats (7 x retained studios, 4 x 1-bed, 7 x 2-bed and 1 x 3-bed) (Class C3) resulting in a net addition of 716sqm gross external floorspace.
- 3 The proposed scheme is illustrated in the drawings and Design & Access Statement of Squire & Partners.
- 4 In this report ‘the site’ refers to the buildings described at Section 2.2 of the Design & Access Statement.

Purpose and scope of report

- 5 This report is an independent heritage assessment of the proposed scheme. It sits alongside, and has been prepared with reference to, the 'Townscape and Conservation Assessment' and 'Demolition & Enhancement' reports prepared by Richard Coleman Citydesigner in support of the planning application.
- 6 However, the report represents a separate exercise in assessment and justification of the effect of the proposed development on the significance of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and the setting of listed buildings, which has been undertaken separately from the work of Richard Coleman Citydesigner. KMHeritage was asked to examine the proposed development in early March 2014, to review the assessment and justification work already undertaken, and to provide an independent view as to the acceptability of the scheme.
- 7 This report focuses on three principal areas:
- The assessment of the heritage significance of the site and its context;
 - The assessment of the level of 'harm' to that heritage significance caused by the proposed development;
 - The assessment of the public benefit delivered by the proposed development that balances any harm caused to heritage significance.
- 8 This report has been prepared by examining the site and its buildings along with its surroundings, and by reviewing a variety of written information and assessment concerning the site, its context and the scheme. This includes the following:
- The Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal;
 - The 'Donald Insall Report'¹;
 - The scheme drawings and Design & Access Statement (dated 31 May 2013);
 - The 'Townscape and Conservation Assessment' report by Richard Coleman Citydesigner (June 2013);
 - The 'Demolition & Enhancement' report by Richard Coleman Citydesigner (March 2014);
 - London Borough of Camden Conservation Officer internal pre-application advice dated 17 January 2013;

¹ 35-41 New Oxford Street, 10-12 Museum Street and 16A, 16B AND 18 West Central Street, London WC1: Historic Buildings Architect's Report for Central Investment Properties (London) Limited, Donald Insall Associates, June 2008

- London Borough of Camden pre-application advice letter (ref CA/2013/ENQ/00949) dated 22 April 2103.
- 9 This report does not reiterate or repeat factual information and description concerning the site and its surroundings contained in these documents. Similarly, this report does not re-state the findings of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal or national and local policy contained in the National Planning Policy Framework or Camden’s Local Plan.

Authorship

- 10 I am Kevin Murphy B.Arch MUBC RIBA IHBC. I hold an honours degree in architecture, I am a registered architect, and I am a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects. I also have a Masters in Urban and Building Conservation, and I am a full member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation.
- 11 I am a consultant providing advice and guidance on all aspects of the historic built environment. I have undertaken this work since June 2005. Prior to this I was the head of the Historic Buildings Unit at John McAslan and Partners, architects, for a period of approximately eight months.
- 12 Between 1999 and November 2004, I was an Inspector of Historic Buildings in the London Region of English Heritage dealing with a range of projects involving listed buildings and conservation areas in London. Prior to this, I was a conservation officer with the London Borough of Southwark, and I led the Conservation & Design Team at the London Borough of Hackney.
- 13 As an architect, I worked in London, Dublin, Paris and Glasgow, on a broad range of projects in a variety of contexts. This range includes office and other commercial buildings, residential development, transportation, healthcare and pharmaceutical buildings, and on the conservation and reuse of older buildings. I have considerable experience of architectural and urban design in various environments.
- 14 While an Inspector of Historic Buildings in the London Region of English Heritage, part of my responsibility was planning casework in the London Borough of Camden.

The heritage significance of the site and its context

- 15 The listed buildings at 43 and 45 New Oxford Street and 16 West Central Street, and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, are ‘designated heritage assets’, as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). What is referred to as ‘non-

designated heritage assets'² or 'undesigned heritage assets' in common usage are described by the NPPF as 'assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing)'. The unlisted buildings within a conservation area are not automatically 'non-designated heritage assets', even when they possess some historical or architectural interest; the guidance provided in 'Camden's Local List - Selection Criteria and guide', for instance, makes it clear that buildings in conservation areas should not necessarily be considered as 'non-designated heritage assets'. The Government's recently published online 'Planning Practice Guidance' relating to non-designated heritage assets³ studiously avoids making a connection between conservation area status and non-designated heritage assets status. It points out that 'a substantial majority of buildings have little or no heritage significance and thus do not constitute heritage assets. Only a minority have enough heritage interest for their significance to be a material consideration in the planning process'.

- 16 'Significance' is defined in the NPPF as 'the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic'. The English Heritage 'Planning for the Historic Environment Practice Guide' puts it slightly differently – as 'the sum of its architectural, historic, artistic or archaeological interest'. 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment' (English Heritage, April 2008) describes a number of 'heritage values' that may be present in a 'significant place'. These are evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value.
- 17 In any assessment of heritage significance concerning sites and buildings within conservation areas, reference to the conservation area appraisal is essential. This, it seems, has been done by both the Council and the applicant, albeit with somewhat differing outcomes. However, while the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal is an essential tool in determining levels of significance regarding the site, two factors are important. Firstly, and of necessity (particularly in such a large conservation area as the Bloomsbury Conservation Area), its assessments are based on high-level information and a general survey of the conservation area. More precise assessment is not possible in, or the purpose of, the appraisal exercise. In the case of the site, the Donald Insall Report provides far more than the conservation area appraisal in terms of understanding of the site and its buildings, and, in my view, is of more relevance.

² This is the term used in Planning Practice Guidance

³ <http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/what-are-non-designated-heritage-assets-and-how-important-are-they/>

- 18 Secondly, the judgements provided by a conservation area appraisal regarding 'contribution' are not always as simple as 'positive', 'negative' or 'detracting', and 'neutral'. It is clear that while a large number of buildings will be at either end of the spectrum of contribution, proper decisions rest on an assessment of contribution that assigns a level of contribution of other buildings between these extremes in a more nuanced fashion. The buildings on the site fall into this category. The Donald Insall Report, as well as providing information and assessment of significance, is useful in allocating levels of significance.
- 19 In my view, 10, 11, 12 Museum Street make a moderately positive contribution to the Bloomsbury Conservation Area by virtue of the age, their architectural design and their contribution to the urban scene. This contribution matches that of many other unlisted buildings in the conservation area and in central London; their architectural design, while attractive, is not uncommon or unique or exceptional. It is their street elevations that make the majority of this contribution. In order to make a contribution to the character and appearance of a conservation area - i.e. not a building, but an area - an element of a building in a conservation area must, logically, be capable of being appreciated in area terms. As well as being less than readily appreciable, the degree of insensitive alteration of the rear elevations of 10, 11, 12 Museum Street and their roofscape reduces the contribution of these buildings from straightforwardly positive to moderately positive. Finally, while the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal identifies the shop fronts of 10, 11, 12 Museum Street as being 'of merit', the actual present reality of the shop fronts is at odds with such a simplistic assessment; they are, at best, obviously very altered remnants of (possibly) original or early shop fronts whose only (possibly) original features can be the bracketed pilasters to No 11 and the architrave of the door to No. 12.
- 20 In respect of 16A/B and 18 West Central Street, I agree with the view that the elements possess a certain level of evidential and historical value connected with their 19th century origins, but I believe these qualities to be limited in extent. Much has been made of the links between the existing elements of 16A and 18 West Central Street and the brewery or distillery use of the listed building at 16 West Central Street - and subsequent use by a railway company and as a post office - but while this may be a historic fact there is very little specific physical evidence of these uses in any tangible architectural way - there is no link between the buildings and their past that permits that that past to be intelligible in, say, the way the former brewery buildings in Seven Dials make their past clear. Many former uses leave clear evidence of their nature and duration by means of their design and fabric; that is not the case here, and these buildings display nothing other than a generic quality of being of lesser status and of more utilitarian purpose than the listed

buildings to the north. In this they do not differ from many other buildings in the lesser streets of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

- 21 In terms of aesthetic value, they are similarly limited, and they are early 20th century in character and appearance as opposed to the strong 19th century architectural character of the more significant (listed and unlisted) buildings in the northern part of the block. The Donald Insall Report makes clear that the similarity in appearance of No. 16A with No. 16 West Central Street is a later occurrence, and the result is of very obvious lesser architectural quality. 18 West Central Street, at its upper floors, is singularly unremarkable in architectural terms. In conservation area terms, 16B West Central Street is essentially a largely blank wall; its age and appearance - some architectural detailing consistent in style and 20th century date with that to the lower parts of 16A and 18 West Central Street - are of no greater significance than that of 16A and 18 West Central Street
- 22 None of this analysis necessarily suggests that 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street do not make a positive contribution to the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, but that positive contribution can only be sensibly considered as very minor. They may well be older buildings that are connected to the development of this part of the conservation area, but they do not possess sufficient specific physical qualities to illustrate that connection to a notable degree, or sufficient aesthetic interest to mark them out from the general run of buildings on lesser streets in the conservation area, to make more of a contribution than that.
- 23 The point, made in respect of 10-12 Museum Street regarding how a contribution to a conservation area is made by a building, applies to 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street. I note that there has been some discussion of the interior of these properties. I cannot see that they possess any internal fabric of any historic significance whatsoever. In any event, they are unlisted buildings, whose interiors are largely hidden behind a substantially blank elevation, and those interiors do not form part of an assessment of their heritage significance or their contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area.
- 24 Change over time to older buildings inherently affects their heritage significance. Some change adds to that significance, some change unavoidably reduces it. The buildings on the site facing West Central Street or Museum Street have experienced the latter kind of change, not the former - inappropriate shop fronts and insensitively inserted openings, for instance. This is inextricably linked with their level of contribution to the conservation area. 10-12 Museum Street and 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street have been insensitively altered and - regardless of whether this is reversible - their present significance and contribution to the Bloomsbury Conservation Area is thus reduced.

- 25 I note that the distinction in character between the north and south of the urban block in which the site is located has been the subject of discussion. It is correct to say that this character is more formal and public facing New Oxford Street and more 'backland' in quality to the south, on West Central Street, and that this backland quality is part of the contribution that 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street make to the conservation area. This polarity is, however, complicated by the position of the site on the edge of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, and the presence of very substantial and notably ugly post-war development to the south. The southern side of West Central Street was swept away as a result of this development, and this fundamentally alters the nature of the street. It is no longer simply the historically secondary street that it was, but a piece of notably compromised streetscape. This, in my view, reveals 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street in a way that is at odds with their original character and purpose.
- 26 In my view, the existing nightclub use of does not cause the site to contribute in any way to the character and appearance of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. Bloomsbury is not Soho, Covent Garden, Camden Town or Chinatown. Bloomsbury may have restaurants and bars; these are found nearly everywhere in central London. Night clubs, however, are not, and have nothing to do with the character and appearance of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area in general or this part of it.
- 27 In summary, 10-12 Museum Street and 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street make positive contributions to the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, but that contribution varies from moderately positive in the case of 10-12 Museum Street to something considerably less in the case of 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street. With regard to 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street that lesser contribution has to do with the lack of specificity or singularity that would allow the buildings to communicate their origins and uses better, their inherently prosaic architectural quality even when assessed against other modest industrial or commercial 19th century properties, and the insensitive changes that have occurred to them.

The proposed scheme

- 28 I have examined the proposed scheme, and I consider that there is a clear rationale for the assessment used by the architects in its design and the resulting architectural proposal. The Design & Access Statement illustrates a sound and intelligent approach to the site and its redevelopment. The scheme is well designed, and strikes a very well-judged balance between contemporaneity and 'knowing its place' in relation to the surrounding urban scene and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. In my view, the proposed scheme enhances the setting of the listed buildings and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

- 29 I understand that submissions have been made to the Council that illustrate the economic case for redevelopment, and that the retention and reuse of the existing buildings do not permit of a meaningfully viable scheme for anything other than continued night club use. Though I am not an expert in the field of commercial property valuation, it seems empirically obvious that the site is capable of delivering more by way of economic outputs than the lawful existing use provides.
- 30 A key and obvious question is whether it is possible to both retain the existing buildings at 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street, and to alter and extend them in such a way as to permit an enhanced social, economic and urban contribution than they presently make. The answer seems very clear - such is the relatively small architectural contribution that they make that the degree of change required to effect any significant uplift in the sites economic potential would necessarily overwhelm what little significance exists. Extension upwards above 16A and 16B West Central Street would distort and obscure the qualities of the host buildings, and cause 18 West Central Street to appear strange and out of place. Making sufficient openings at ground level across 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street would remove more than it would protect. The level and nature of the heritage significance of these buildings does not warrant their retention at all costs, and retention and extension/alteration would result in the loss of the very thing it was intended to protect.

Harm to heritage significance

- 31 A key requirement in the assessment of change that may affect the heritage significance of heritage assets is to establish what level of harm is caused to that significance by a proposed development. The NPPF identifies two levels of potential 'harm' that might be caused to a heritage asset by a development: 'substantial harm...or total loss of significance' or 'less than substantial'. Both levels of harm must be caused to a *designated* heritage asset – in this instance, the setting of the listed buildings at 43 and 45 New Oxford Street and 16 West Central Street or the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.
- 32 The recently published Planning Practice Guidance provides useful advice on how to consider these matters. In respect of 'How to assess if there is substantial harm?', it says:

Whether a proposal causes substantial harm will be a judgment for the decision taker, having regard to the circumstances of the case and the policy in the National Planning Policy Framework. In general terms, substantial harm is a high test, so it may not arise in many cases. For example, in determining whether works to a listed building constitute substantial harm, an important consideration would be whether the adverse impact seriously affects a key element of its special architectural or

historic interest. It is the degree of harm to the asset's significance rather than the scale of the development that is to be assessed. The harm may arise from works to the asset or from development within its setting.

While the impact of total destruction is obvious, partial destruction is likely to have a considerable impact but, depending on the circumstances, it may still be less than substantial harm or conceivably not harmful at all, for example, when removing later inappropriate additions to historic buildings which harm their significance. Similarly, works that are moderate or minor in scale are likely to cause less than substantial harm or no harm at all. However, even minor works have the potential to cause substantial harm⁴.

33 The Guidance goes on to discuss harm in relation to conservation areas:

An unlisted building that makes a positive contribution to a conservation area is individually of lesser importance than a listed building (paragraph 132 of the National Planning Policy Framework). If the building is important or integral to the character or appearance of the conservation area then its demolition is more likely to amount to substantial harm to the conservation area, engaging the tests in paragraph 133 of the National Planning Policy Framework. However, the justification for its demolition will still be proportionate to the relative significance of the building and its contribution to the significance of the conservation area as a whole⁵.

34 It is clear to me that the removal of 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street cannot constitute substantial harm to either the listed buildings or the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. The listed buildings and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area do not rely, for their central heritage significance, on the retention of the existing buildings. Those buildings simply do not make such a contribution to either the setting of listed buildings or the character and appearance of the overall conservation area that these heritage assets would be fundamentally harmed by their loss. In my view, therefore, the fact that 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street make a minor positive contribution to the conservation area means that the proposed development causes a certain degree of less than substantial harm to the two designated heritage assets in question. The proposals for 10, 11, 12 Museum Street do not cause any harm, nor do any of the other parts of the proposed scheme.

35 Paragraph 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework says that 'Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a

⁴ <http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment/why-is-significance-important-in-decision-taking/>

⁵ *ibid*

designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including securing its optimum viable use. It should be noted that the requirement is for ‘public benefit’, not ‘substantial public benefit’ - this distinction is important.

The balance of ‘harm’ versus public benefit driving from the proposed development

36 Planning Practice Guidance provides further advice regarding public benefit:

Public benefits may follow from many developments and could be anything that delivers economic, social or environmental progress as described in the National Planning Policy Framework (Paragraph 7). Public benefits should flow from the proposed development. They should be of a nature or scale to be of benefit to the public at large and should not just be a private benefit. However, benefits do not always have to be visible or accessible to the public in order to be genuine public benefits⁶.

37 Paragraph 7 of the NPPF refers to sustainable development, and talks about development ‘contributing to building a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right type is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth and innovation’; and about development ‘supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by providing the supply of housing required to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by creating a high quality built environment, with accessible local services that reflect the community’s needs and support its health, social and cultural well-being’

38 It seems to me entirely obvious that the proposed development does exactly these things. It is equally obvious that commercial development is as fully capable of delivering ‘public benefit’ as any other means - it is, for instance, the manner in which most housing and all retail and office space is provided. Housing, offices and shops on this site are indisputably more beneficial and socially useful than the existing uses, in particular the night club use.

39 The urban effect of the proposed development will be powerfully regenerative, and fundamentally alters the context for detracting building to the south. That building may remain in place for some time, but if the proposed development is permitted, the opportunity for that detracting building to be replaced with something far better, and which creates active ground level frontages like the proposed scheme, will be far greater.

⁶ ibid

Compliance with national and local policy for the historic built environment

- 40 As has been argued earlier, the proposed development does not lead to ‘substantial’ harm or any meaningful level of ‘less than substantial’ harm. In any event, a series of tangible and distinct public benefits flow from the scheme. These are set out here, in the Design & Access Statement and in the Planning Statement. These more than outweigh what ‘less than substantial harm ‘might be caused by the loss of 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street. The proposed development complies with Paragraphs 133 and 134 of the NPPF for the reasons given in detail earlier. Any ‘less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset’ – i.e. the conservation area or nearby listed structures – that can be ascribed to the scheme is greatly outweighed by the benefits generated by the scheme – economic, architectural and heritage-related.
- 41 The scheme positively enhances the conservation area by the quality of its design. The scheme very definitely strikes the balance suggested by Paragraph 138 of the NPPF – it responds to the site in a manner commensurate to its significance, its contribution to the conservation area and its contribution to the setting of the listed building. The scheme also does the relevant things that the (still valid) ‘Planning for the Historic Environment Practice Guide’ urges in its Paragraph 79. For the reasons explained earlier, the proposed development ‘makes a positive contribution to economic vitality and sustainable communities’, and ‘is an appropriate design for its context and makes a positive contribution to the appearance, character, quality and local distinctiveness of the historic environment’.
- 42 For these reasons, and those given earlier, the proposed development is consistent with Camden’s Local Development Framework policies regarding demolition and new development in conservation areas. It also preserves the setting of nearby listed buildings, and thus complies with Policy DP25.

Conclusion

- 43 It is in the nature of cities to evolve physically in response to social, demographic and commercial change; that is, for instance, why a brewery is no longer present on the site of the proposed development. The proposed scheme plays a part in the larger regeneration picture in Holborn, replacing poor-quality and much-altered building stock with new development that will deliver real economic, social, architectural and urban benefits. These benefits will far outweigh the loss of the limited social, commercial or heritage value of the existing buildings at 16A, 16B and 18 West Central Street and their uses while preserving and enhancing 10-12 Museum Street and other buildings in the block. Some harm may be caused by that loss, but that harm is less than substantial to what is central to the character and appearance of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area or the special architectural and

historic interest of the listed buildings. For these reasons, the proposed scheme complies with national and local policy and guidance for the historic built environment and should be granted planning permission.

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