

45 Hillfield Road, London NW6 1QD

Development Control Planning Services
London Borough of Camden
Town Hall Extension, Argyll St,
London WC1H 8ND

29th January, 2014

Dear Mr MacDonagh,

PLANNING APPLICATION 2013/7585/P - GONDAR GARDENS RESERVOIR

Introduction

I am chair of the Hillfield and Aldred Road's Residents' Association (HARRA) and gave evidence, focussing on the design at the planning enquiry, where I am sure we met. I should also declare that I am on the committee of the West Hampstead NDF, which is in the process of writing a neighbourhood plan at the moment, currently it the proposed final draft is out for consultation.

HARRA is a formally constituted organisation, set up in April 2000, as grown to have 82 households of Hillfield and Aldred as members. We are a year older than GARA and are slightly less focussed on the reservoir, but still stand shoulder to shoulder with our neighbours on this issue. We appreciate the huge amount work that they have done and have supported them putting evidence together, collecting signatures and giving evidence at the enquiries.

The main focus of this letter is to comment on the proposed design - this was the key factor in turning down the previous application by planning committee and as you know the inspector agreed, so refusing the planning appeal. At the enquiry I expressed the opinion that - as it widely acknowledged - the planning process doesn't work as well as it should. There is much mistrust and I said to the inspector that I hoped that the NDF/NDP would help encourage better dialogue. I will come on the merits of the design later but I want to first talk about the 'engagement' process for this application.

Given that the design was a central issue I was surprised and disappointed at the 'consultation' on design. Instead of being given some suggested options/improvements or opening a dialogue we were shown a final scheme. Admittedly the revised design did seek to address the Inspectors concerns and it has been tweaked between the scheme shown at consultation and the scheme under consideration, but without sufficient dialogue there are still flaws in the proposed design. The 'consultation' event was held in a church the other side of the Finchley Road, not exactly convenient and not surprisingly there was a very poor turnout - even photograph on page 77 of the Design Statement from the consultation show a drafty empty church with just two people wandering about, hardly evidence of active 'engagement'. Furthermore, they state "*the applicants are committed to consulting with stakeholders and the local community regarding their planning application for this site. They have a strong track record of engaging with residents, community groups and relevant third parties*". Are they being serious?

However, having placed on record that the 'consultation' has - yet again - been disappointing, like GARA's letter, the object of this letter is to offer constructive criticism.

Comments on the application - Detailed Design

Blocked view

The proposed scheme will obscure the view across the site, however, the inspector (s) ruled this was acceptable given the other benefits of the scheme. Linden Wates have increased the size of the gap in the scheme and lowered the carport so that there will be at least a better view through the gap compared to the previous scheme. People do value these views - there is another view further down Gondar Gardens (along Hillfield Road) that lifts the spirits as you pass it. By chance that view is across to Hampstead with Hampstead Church as a focal point. There doesn't seem to have been any consideration to the view from Gondar Gardens - to 'frame' a particular view, Perhaps a better architect or more consultation might have considered this. Still at least there is a better view, which will help the scheme fit in better.

Brick/massing

The proposed scheme is an improvement on the previous one from the perspective of the brick and the massing. The previous scheme was rather vague about brick colour - with extensive use of an apparently dark brick. Loved by architects, hated by West Hampstead. West Hampstead is predominantly red brick, with some London stock so this seems a sensible choice of material to use. It can still be used in a contemporary manner. However, I would like to add a strong caveat; that there is careful scrutiny of the bricks during building. Too often West Hampstead has been shown one brick in a planning application only to have the brick colour switched during construction.

Although the massing is improved it is still not quite there. I think that what Linden Wates refer to as dimension 1 (the projecting blocks) are too wide, they go right up to the windows of the receding (red brick) block. It doesn't quite feel right. Conversely the receding blocks are too small, particularly the third one (nearest south mansions). I think that the scheme shown at consultation had *better* massing of the rear block. But you can keep on making major changes to a scheme at some point you have to accept that this may not be perfect but it is good enough.

Roofline/ building line

Credit to the design that it follows the roofline between Chase and South Mansions. This is a key factor in making a design 'fit in'. Credit also to the improvements made to create a more pitched roof which echoes far better the surround mansion blocks. This also reduces the weight of the building reducing an important element of the 'blockyness'. The previous scheme (turned down at appeal) was far too 'blocky'.

The proposed scheme is set back varying distances from the pavement, setting it back does create a better division between public and private space than schemes built right to the building line. Also positive is the inclusion of hedging and greenery between the street and the proposed development. The NDF has done a 'love-it/ loath-it' ranking of recent developments in West Hampstead and one of the features of more the most popular developments was that they all had soft landscaping.

Windows

Having been reasonably positive up until now there now comes the tricky task of commenting on the most difficult aspect of the proposed development. Specifically the glass winter gardens and glass balconies. I can't understand why the architect has been so insistent on these. It was a problem that I raised at the planning enquiry about the previous scheme. Floor to ceiling glass seems like a good idea in theory but in practice not everyone lives clean and tidy like an architect, in fact not all architects live like that. The glass causes two problems; inhabitants want their privacy so cover the windows with blinds or curtains (take a look at the Pulse on the Finchley Road). And neighbours have to look at the rubbish people end up storing on their balconies. I don't know if you know Tyler Brule - he is a commentator on many things including urban design. In a recent column he called for the removal of *'unimaginative and occasionally dangerous glass balconies ... The glass panels should be replaced by intricate metal railings... At the same time the residents will be invited for inspirational talks on how to decorate outdoor spaces rather than use them as excess storage space for unwanted toys, skis and other unsightly objects that belong in basement storage not on display for the world to see.'*

On page 43 of the evidence Linden shows a building on Gondar Gardens - in support of it's proposal but you can see that the bedroom window of the building has the blinds down. All day and night. People don't like large windows in bedrooms! Matching the floorplans with the elevations; it seems that of the fifteen glass balconies that will face Gondar Gardens nine are bedrooms. This is crazy. They won't want people looking in. There was also a very heartfelt plea from the residents of Sarre Road that if this development is to go ahead that their privacy was also protected. Being looked down on by these glass balconies and winter gardens will be intrusive.

There is a further problem with the proposed winter gardens - they are west facing. They will become ovens in the summer. Why not open them up as balconies? They won't get so hot and there will be somewhere to sit out and read the paper. Residents could also have the door to the living room open but still be private because of the privacy afforded by the balcony (with the adjustment proposed below).

However, it is clear (excuse the pun) that the glass balconies should be replaced by another material that provides privacy. I wondered about brick but I think that will be too heavy visually so I think either repeating the material used elsewhere in the panels on the front or better yet some some of metalwork. GARA have suggested this too. This is certainly for the first floor projecting balconies but also for the second floor too. I will send an annotated page of the elevations with some suggestions.

I hope my comments are not too late. And also hope that they can be integrated into the design so that we end up with a building that is acceptable.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Stonebanks
Chair, HARRA

