

For the attention of the Director of Culture and the Environment, Camden Council

Dear Madam,

Centre Point – planning application ref 2014/4360/L

The on-line data for this application states that it was registered on 14 July 2014 and that comments are acceptable until 3 July 2014 – 11 days before registration. Is this symptomatic of the approach to public consultation on this critical site at the centre of London? I assume that the first date is more likely to be correct than the second, and so propose to submit comments, some of which I appreciate are more broad-ranging than the very limited scope of the application. But since I have never had an opportunity to comment in the past on the works affecting Centre Point, a building which I myself originally nominated for listing, I feel a need to express myself also on the broader issues.

I am an architect (for eight years a member of Camden's Department of Architecture) and a writer on architecture, and was a member for about 20 years of the Twentieth Century Society's Casework Committee, and for the same time also Chair or Co-Chair of DOCOMOMO-UK, the UK branch of the international UNESCO-recognized association for the Documentation and Conservation of works of the Modern Movement. I first lectured about Centre Point at the Architectural Association in January 1984 in a series called 'Best Buildings' and was the first I believe to write appreciatively about any work from the Seifert practice, for example in the *Architects Journal* of 21 November 1984 and subsequently, and I included original drawings of Centre Point in the exhibition *London: Images from the Modern City* that I put on at the RIBA Heinz Gallery in 1986. I lectured more recently on Seifert in the Architects who Made London series at the Royal Academy in 2009. I had by then learnt that the buildings I have admired from the Seifert office were almost all designed either directly by or the under the influence of George Marsh, Col. Seifert's first design partner, as was Centre Point, but that his name was later effectively suppressed. Marsh took his role as designer very seriously and towards the end of his life successfully submitted the house he designed and built for himself in Radlett for listing. It was in some ways a test run for Centre Point, which itself remains the only 'Seifert' building that is listed.

I would therefore very much have hoped that English Heritage and your Department would have insisted on the qualities and setting of Centre Point being more respected throughout this whole Crossrail saga than seems to have been the case.

A lot of the drama of the office Tower – including its tall narrow form - derived from its position on a cramped site on a roundabout. So its entrance hall too had to be raised above ground to leave room for an impressive spiral ramp leading down to an underground car park beneath it. To reach this elevated entrance hall external stairs were required and these were angled out from the Tower expressively. Attention was drawn to the location of that on the western side of the tower by a series of emphatic vertical ribs applied to the façade above. The tower itself was raised two storeys above ground on massive 'pilotis' given dramatic sculptural form, and the entrance hall slung beneath it. The secondary residential block to the west and the bridge block linking the two were each given distinctive treatments and the whole composition was treated as an emphatic sculptural or spatial composition in which space passing under the tower and the bridge and the space of the 'plaza' and pool in front of the Tower all played an important role. It was for these reasons, as well as its 'iconic' 'sixties' character, that Centre Point was listed.

But most of this, as you will know, either has been or is about to be destroyed. The spiral ramp was floored over and the entrance hall lowered to ground level about ten years ago, leaving the external stairs functionally redundant and blocking the flow of space under the Tower. Now the expressive external stairs are to be removed altogether and apparently recreated inside the tower in a totally different context. This is a solution that I can only see as the height of absurdity because they will have none of the spatial context for which they were designed; they will be cramped and redundant, no longer affording important sculptural enrichment to the Tower, and the ribs on the façade will have lost their meaning. The details of their re-creation within the tower – the subject of this current planning application – are therefore immaterial: care over details in such a case is ridiculous when the big issues are so massively awry. It would be better to retain at least the east stair in situ even if by this stage the critical west stair can no longer be saved. Meanwhile the plaza in front is to be filled with large canopies over the entrances to the Underground station masking the views of the canonical pilotis and denying them the space they need to express their sculptural form. The additional plaza space beyond them over Charing Cross Road will not compensate for the loss of space where it is needed - right in front of the Tower.

The loss of the original pool and fountain is regrettable but not crucial: space is what is needed as a forecourt to the Tower (as the Seagram Plaza provides a forecourt to the Seagram Tower in New York – which of course has pools too), and that could be supplied by a pedestrian plaza. Ideally the entrances to the underground station would be like those in Paris: – without canopies at all, but with entrance doors to the station at the bottom of the steps. In that way they would not intrude into the requisite plaza space at ground level. The Tower would provide a sufficient marker for the station. Alternatively, low canopies, not more than one storey high and with an unobtrusive horizontal roof line, would be far preferable to the tall angular structures proposed, whose angularity will itself also conflict with the different angularity of the pre-cast elements of the Tower. The proposed 11-storey extension at the south end of the residential block would be far better omitted since it too will destroy important spatial qualities in that area.

George Marsh was much inspired by Oscar Niemeyer, the architect of Brasilia, and much of his zany interpretation of the ideas of Modern Movement informs Centre Point too. It is truly an iconic and also a populist building, but it stands to have a great deal of what survives of its quality destroyed by what is now proposed – which seems to me quite incompatible with its status as a listed building. One is left with the feeling that listing affords little protection to a post war building – contrary to the meaning of the Act. If there is any way whatsoever even at this late stage of amending these proposals, while the external stairs remain in place and the canopies remain unbuilt, then I would ask you urgently to find a way of doing so. London would in due course be very grateful.

Yours sincerely

James Dunnett, MA, Dip Arch (Cantab), RIBA

**James Dunnett Architects,
142 Barnsbury Road,
London N1 0ER**