

To: Camden Planning Dept

35 Museum Chambers
Bury Place
London WC1A 2JA

11th November, 2014

Dear Sir/Madam,

Nos 21-31 New Oxford St. (former Sorting Office)
Planning Reference: 2014/5946/P

I am writing as Secretary of the South Bloomsbury T.R.A. to object in the strongest possible terms to the proposed development of the former sorting office, New Oxford St.

Our objections relate both to the impact of the proposed design of the building and the lack of community benefit.

This site is of huge strategic importance due to its dimensions and prominence at the junction of north-south and east-west routes as well as its proximity to one of the most historic and well-known parts of London - that is, Bloomsbury. The area has an outstanding and wide-ranging cultural legacy, home to artists and writers, past and present. This particular quarter, adjacent to the site and south of the British Museum - is primarily residential and is characterised by low-scale Georgian style buildings, a warren of narrow streets and small shops and it has a thriving and diverse local community.

In 2004, following consultation with stakeholders, including local residents, Camden issued a Planning Brief which provided a vision for the site, incorporating both economic and community aspirations designed to help invigorate the area while emphasising the need to conserve the local historic environment.

However, it now appears that the recommendations of the Planning Brief are now being disregarded, and with it, the needs and aspirations of the local community as well as the stated objective to safeguard and enhance the setting of the conservation area.

The applicant's Design and Access Statement indicates considerable overdevelopment in this very sensitive site. The building will be 6m higher and it is also proposed that the upper levels will be built out which together will have a major detrimental effect on the conservation area, as it will be as high, or higher, than the iconic landmark of the tower of S. George's on Bloomsbury Way and it will completely dominate the skyline from key strategic viewing points.

The 2004 Planning Brief was concerned to avoid this:

"The north-west corner of the site when viewed from west to east along New Oxford Street and from north to south along Museum Street sets the building as a bookend for the prominent view from the British Museum.."

The existing sorting office building, although Brutalist in style, incorporated design features to minimise its impact, by e.g. inserting 'voids' into the roofline but this proposal will do the opposite by completely dominating the view unsympathetically, south from Museum St, blocking out the skyline.

The CGI images provided by the applicant for this particular view give some impression of the change but do not give an true indication of its huge impact as the images were taken through a 35mm lens which reduces the effect.

The build-out will potentially minimise daylight and sunlight for residents in nearby blocks such as Stedham Chambers where daylight is already at a premium (a previous application was rejected on these grounds by the D.C.C. for a much smaller development nearby); this does not seem to have been considered in the daylight and sunlight reports that have been submitted.

The British Museum is situated only 200m to the south of the site and it is a one of the major tourist attractions in London, with almost 7 million visitors per annum. Footfall is likely to increase substantially when the Crossrail works at Tottenham Ct. Rd. are completed in 2017. The need for more public open space will be paramount and although it is proposed that Dunn's passage be re-opened, this alone will not satisfy the demand for more public open space and the applicant has resisted any requests to provide some. Unsympathetic changes to the area such as the proposed development will also diminish the quality of experience for visitors to the area.

A second view was stressed as important to protect in the Planning Brief, (although there are others)

" from east to west along New Oxford Street is important as it provides the dominant foreground to an excellent view of Centrepoint. This view, as existing, contributes very positively to the existing townscape. The building line at lower and upper levels should be carefully determined to take full advantage of these views."

Again, the proposed additional build at higher level will completely block out the view of Centre Point and will also undermine the Art Deco, streamlined design of No.1 New Oxford St.

A key consideration in 2004 Planning Brief was the need for more affordable housing; this was referred to repeatedly, as :

5.7: " The Council considers this site to be well suited to housing and it will seek the maximum possible residential element as part of the mix of uses to be provided. It will therefore seek a target of at least 50% of any additional floorspace on the site to be allocated for residential use."

The proposal as it now stands means that although there will be an additional 44% of floorspace, only 21 homes will be provided, and only 13 of these will fall within the category of 'affordable', i.e. 80% of market values, which for the majority of Londoners is not affordable, and is certainly not affordable for the majority of local people or for many key workers. It will be a missed opportunity for Camden to help meet its own targets for affordable housing and considering the even greater demand for housing that has arisen since 2004 and the long waiting list for social housing, it is a total disgrace.

Additionally, the homes that are being proposed will be placed in the most unattractive part of the site (south-east) with single aspect, facing directly onto the main road along High Holborn.

We are dismayed by the fact that there will be no community amenities on the site, although this was also a key objective of the 2004 Planning Brief:

5.14 "Implementation of the existing planning consent (PS/9704327 R3) has established a significant area of D1 (non-residential institutions) floorspace on the site. There is a demand for, but a shortage of sites suitable for such uses within the Central London area and in accordance with its adopted UDP policies, the Council will seek to secure the retention and re-use of the D1 parts of this site for social and community purposes."

With one local surgery already closed and another due for closure, it is *surely* reasonable that a small part of the site could be used to provide this essential facility, while other space for non-residential uses would help to strengthen a sense of neighbourhood, in an area which is being enveloped by new developments in the St. Giles - City corridor.

The intention to attract retail clients on the ground floor of the building will likely mean that the large retail chains will move in; this will do nothing to protect small shopkeepers who will be unable to compete nor will it enhance the cultural/artistic legacy of the area.

Conclusion

This site should not be used purely for the benefit of the developers who will make enormous financial gains from speculative office and retail in an area which is increasing in value due to public money being spent on an enhanced CrossRail transport system. This could be a wonderful and unique opportunity, to link up Bloomsbury and Covent Garden in a way which respects the local character of the area and meets the needs of the local community. The opposition to this large scale development is reminiscent of the struggle by local residents to oppose similar encroachments in the 1970s, except for the fact that at that time, Camden Council joined them in opposing such developments. We would urge Camden Council to implement a more shared vision for the area, contained in their Planning Brief of 2004.

Yours faithfully,

Helen Mc Murray
Secretary, South Bloomsbury T.R.A.