

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 July 2015

by Gary Deane BSc (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 18 August 2015

Appeal Ref: APP/X5210/W/15/3010729

114-118 Southampton Row, London WC1B 5AA

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Penatura Properties A Limited against the decision of the Council of the London Borough of Camden.
 - The application Ref 2014/3422/P, dated 8 May 2014, was refused by notice dated 2 October 2014.
 - The development proposed is the installation and maintenance of green living wall and associated external alterations to front façade.
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Decision

1. The appeal is allowed and planning permission is granted for the installation and maintenance of green living wall and associated external alterations to front façade at 114-118 Southampton Row, London WC1B 5AA in accordance with the terms of the application Ref 2014/3422/P, dated 8 May 2014, subject to the conditions set out in the schedule to this decision.

Procedural matter

2. At the site visit, construction work above ground floor level was underway at the appeal property. As the upper part of the appeal building was covered in scaffolding and tarpaulins, much of the front elevation was hidden from public view. Nevertheless, several photographs of the appeal property have been provided, which clearly show the building in its context from several different vantage points along Southampton Row. The remainder of the terrace to which Nos 114-118 belongs was visible from the street during the site visit.
3. Taken together, I consider that the submitted photographs and my own observations, in the light of all of the evidence before me, allow a reasonable assessment of the development sought. I have proceeded on that basis.

Main issue

4. The main issue is the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the host building and the local area.

Reasons

5. The appeal property, Synergy House, is a tall mid-terrace building that faces Southampton Row, which is a busy thoroughfare in a predominantly commercial area. It stands within a long and substantial terrace that includes several fine Edwardian and Victorian red brick buildings with decorative facades that add to the character and appearance of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area (CA), within which the site is located.
6. In contrast, the appeal building, with its grid-like façade and lack of detailing has a bland uniformity. The recessed windows and long brick piers give the main facade a strong vertical emphasis, which differs to the more subtly balanced front elevations of the buildings on either side. These particular features set Synergy House apart from other buildings in the same terrace. I note that the appeal building is identified in the Council's CA Appraisal and Management Strategy (CAAMS) as a neutral contributor to the CA.
7. I have paid special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the CA, as required by section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

The proposal

8. The proposal is to clad the front elevation of the appeal property above ground floor level with a living wall, which is a structure fixed by rails to the external wall and covered in vegetation with gaps left to reflect the existing openings. About 8,000 plants would occupy the new living wall with species carefully selected to reflect local conditions. Plant panels would be pre grown elsewhere and thus semi-mature when put in place on the new installation with the irrigation and other supporting equipment located away from public view.
9. The proposal follows and is intended to complement a recently approved scheme to extend, alter and convert part of the main building to a range of uses. Construction work in relation to this scheme appears to be underway.

Planning policy

10. Paragraph 132 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) states that when considering the impact of a proposal on the significance of a designated heritage asset, such as a conservation area, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation, which have done in this instance.
11. Planning policy at the local level offers qualified support for green walls. Policy DP22 of the Camden Development Policies 2010-2025 (CDP) notes that the Council will require development to incorporate sustainable design measures and that schemes must incorporate green walls wherever suitable. Paragraph 22.9 of the CDP acknowledges the important role that green walls play in achieving sustainable development by, amongst other things, enhancing biodiversity, retaining rainfall, reducing water run off and increasing insulation.
12. The Camden Planning Guidance, *Sustainability*, (CPG) similarly provides support for green walls with the benefits outlined at paragraph 10.8. At paragraph 10.3, the CPG states that all developments will be expected to incorporate green walls unless it is demonstrably not possible or appropriate.

Character and appearance

13. Once in place, the new living wall would dramatically alter the character and appearance of the appeal building. However, the concerns of the Council and others that the proposal would be incompatible with its context; 'visually break' the rhythm and continuity of the terrace to which it would belong; draw undue attention to an uninspiring building; and potentially disfigure the main façade are, to my mind, overstated.
14. The proposal would conceal the red brick of the host building thus obscuring a visual connection with other properties in the same terrace. However, I share the appellant's opinion that the rhythm of the terrace is already 'visually broken' as the existing building is an obvious infill development of contrasting form, fenestration and appearance. While clearly different in appearance and texture to the brick and stone on either side, the new greenery would subdue the vertical emphasis of the existing front elevation. Moreover, other aspects of the host building that contribute to the continuity of the terrace, notably the building line, a commercial ground floor frontage, the height in relation to the attached buildings and the pattern of openings, would all be unaffected by the proposal. While the appearance of Synergy House would obviously change, in terms of the built environment, the proportions and visual character of the building as a later addition to a historic terrace would remain.
15. From what I saw, the CA, which covers a wide area, contains a rich variety of buildings of all ages, including some modern examples that stand comfortably alongside others that are traditional in style. To that extent, development that is different to nearby buildings is not an uncharacteristic feature of the CA.
16. The new living wall would draw the eye to a building that the Council describes as the least architecturally impressive on the street. In doing so, I consider that it would add considerable visual interest to the building with a natural variation in the appearance and texture of the vegetation across the façade. The vertical emphasis of the front elevation would be moderated while leaving the proportions and fenestration pattern intact. By masking the rather undistinguished architectural design of the building, the appeal scheme would transform the rather drab façade into a vibrant new addition that would add life and vitality to the terrace and the area. In doing so, the proposal would enhance the character of this part of the CA.
17. The impact of these benefits for the local area is compounded by my strong impression during the site visit that Southampton Row is a very busy street. As such, the new living wall provides an opportunity for many people to experience and appreciate the welcome introduction of greenery into a predominantly commercial area that includes modern influences as well historic townscape. Other benefits to the area may also arise through the support given to biodiversity, a reduction in rainwater run-off, a filter for pollution and thus providing a means to improve air quality and an increase in energy efficiency, all of which are encouraged at national and local policy levels.
18. If the new living wall fails in situ in the sense that some or all the planting does not become established or is left untended to overgrow, the Council is understandably concerned that the appearance of the host building and the wider terrace would be seriously harmed. It also states that removal of the

living wall could scar the external wall of the host building, thus spoiling the appearance of the main façade.

19. For as long as the new living wall is in place, there would be an obvious commercial imperative for the owner to keep the installation well maintained so that the building is an attractive proposition for occupiers and visitors. Even so, a comprehensive and robust management and maintenance regime could be put in place, and secured by conditions, with the central aim of keeping the new living wall in good order. This scheme could ensure adequate irrigation and regular maintenance, which the appellant considers to be the hallmarks of a successful living wall.
20. It could also address, amongst other things, the long-term outcomes for the development, performance targets and the measures to be taken if those targets are not achieved. In this regard, various indicators and remedial measures are put forward by the appellant that include an assurance that at least 95% of the plants on the living wall will be alive at any one time. This level may be effective in ensuring the overall appearance of the living wall is satisfactory. However, it seems to me that an outcome of this kind, if it is applied, should be embedded into a coherent and agreed landscape management and maintenance plan. The scheme could also include the arrangements to restore the front elevation of the appeal building to its current or a previously agreed condition if the living wall is permanently removed.
21. With these safeguards in place, I consider that the risks associated with the potential failure of the proposal could be appropriately managed in a way that avoids the problems to which the Council refers.

Summary

22. It seems to me from the photographs provided that Synergy House visually fragments the existing terrace and contributes little positively to the character and appearance of the CA. That the proposal is an unusual and unconventional form of cladding to the building does not in itself make it unacceptable.
23. Due to the considerable length of the terrace, views of the new living wall from street level would tend to unfold in a sequence of oblique views on the approach to the site in both directions. From these directions, the proposal would be revealed as a surprising and welcome addition to the area, adding vitality and life to the local street scene. It would conceal the bland existing elevation. The marked contrast in appearance with neighbouring buildings could, as the appellant suggests, accentuate the remainder of the terrace, in a positive way. To my mind, the proposal would not be out of keeping with the rich diversity in the built environment that characterises the CA, wherein modern and unusual buildings and structures are sometimes juxtaposed with more traditional forms.
24. For all of these reasons, I consider that the proposal would contribute positively to the character and appearance of the local area. The upkeep of the appeal scheme could be appropriately managed and monitored. Should the vegetation fail to become established then appropriate replacement planting could take place. If the new living wall fails then the host building could be reinstated to its existing or to a pre-agreed condition.

25. In other words, there is much to be gained from embracing a bold and ambitious initiative that others may follow with the consequences of potential failure managed in a way that protects the character and qualities of the CA.

Conclusion

26. Overall, I conclude on the main issue that the proposed living wall would be an acceptable form of development that would improve the character and appearance of the host building and the local area. It would preserve, if not enhance, the character and appearance of the CA.
27. Accordingly, the appeal scheme is in accordance with Policy DP22 of the CDP. It does not materially conflict with Policy CS14 of the Camden Core Strategy 2010-2025 and Policies DP24 and DP25 of the CDP. Taken together, these policies promote green walls and seek to ensure that development achieves a high standard of design, respects its local context and character, and preserves or enhances Camden's heritage assets including conservation areas.
28. There would also be no conflict with the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), which aims to promote high quality design, taking into account the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness and protecting heritage assets such as conservation areas.
29. For the reasons set out above, and having regard to all other matters raised, I therefore conclude that the appeal should be allowed with conditions.

Conditions

30. It is necessary to impose a condition to ensure that the development is carried out in accordance with the approved plans for the avoidance of doubt and in the interests of proper planning. To achieve a satisfactory appearance for the development in the long term, conditions are necessary to require landscape details and for a scheme to be put in place to manage and maintain the living wall and to cover restoration of the host building if the development is permanently removed.
31. In doing so, I have amended the suggested conditions on these matters in the interests of clarity and precision, and to more closely reflect national guidance.

Gary Deane

INSPECTOR

Schedule of Conditions
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114-118 Southampton Row, London WC1B 5AA

1. The development hereby permitted shall begin not later than three years from the date of this decision.
2. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans: Refs 00 020, 00 021, 01 020, 01 021, REP 002 and 10 001.
3. No development shall commence until details of landscape works have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. These details shall include: (a) planting panels and the means of fixing these to the external wall; (b) planting plans including cultivation and other operations associated with plant establishment; (c) schedules of plants noting species, quantity, density and positions; and (d) an implementation programme. The approved works shall be carried out in accordance with the agreed implementation programme.
4. No development shall commence until a landscape management plan, has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The landscape management plan shall include long term design objectives and how these will be delivered; (b) performance targets; (c) management responsibilities; and (d) procedures for dealing with any variations to the performance targets and incidents. The landscape management plan shall be carried out as approved.
5. No development shall commence until a schedule of landscape and equipment maintenance for a period of at least 3-years has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The schedule shall include: (a) maintenance schedules for all landscaping; (b) provision for replacement planting should establishment of any part of the landscaping fail; (c) the arrangements for the service and maintenance of the equipment required to support the landscaping; and (d) the arrangements for inspection and reporting. Maintenance shall be carried out in accordance with the approved schedule.
6. No development shall commence details of a scheme to restore the front elevation of the building to its condition before the development took place (or such other restoration as agreed in writing by the local planning authority) shall have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. This scheme shall set out the circumstances in which the development hereby permitted will be permanently removed from the building. The scheme shall also include an implementation programme for the restoration works. The restoration works shall be carried out as approved and in accordance with the agreed implementation programme.