

Centre Heights, 139-150 Finchley Road, London NW3

Townscape Note

Introduction

- 1 This note has been produced to support the application proposals for Centre Heights, 137 Finchley Road, having regard to the design rationale produced by the architects and also comments made during the statutory consultation period, including by the Council Planning and Design Officer, Conservation Area Advisory Committee and third parties.
- 2 The note has been prepared by Nick Collins BSc (Hons) MSc MRICS IHBC. Nick has been a Principal Inspector of Historic Buildings & Areas in the London Region of English Heritage and is a former Vice Chairman of the Twentieth Century Society. Most recently he was a Director of Conservation at Alan Baxter & Associates. Nick has extensive experience in dealing with proposals that affect the historic and urban environment and also has a background in research in policy analysis and in understanding historic buildings and places.

Existing Townscape

- 3 Centre Heights was built in 1961-63 as a multi-storey, multi-functional building prominently sited between Finchley Road and Belsize Road. Designed by Panos Koulermos and the Douglas Stephen & Partners architectural practice it is an example of brutalist architecture.
- 4 The building is located on the Finchley Road in the London Borough of Camden. It was recently turned down for listing by Historic England the Department for Culture Media & Sport and does not sit within a conservation area.
- 5 Finchley Road, at this point is a busy dual carriageway, close to the Swiss Cottage gyratory and the surrounding buildings are a mixture of styles, heights and uses with no predominant style or character. The road is physically divided with a full length barrier along its middle and the environment is one dominated by traffic.
- 6 To the south of the site is a large red brick mixed use block that rises to 9-10 storeys in red brick that appears to date from the 1980s. To the north of the site a mixture of buildings of different styles and age and range in height from 4 to 8 storeys. To the west, immediately adjacent, is Station House whilst beyond on Harben Road is a

former local authority housing estate with a number of blocks of flats rising to 7 storeys.

- 7 Opposite the site to the east, Finchley Road is fronted by a series of inter-war apartment blocks which appear to rise to 7 storeys in height.
- 8 As has been described in the Design & Access Statement, Centre Heights is architecturally somewhat bleak, partly an aspect of its functionalist architectural character and partly a result of its physical deterioration through a combination of concrete staining and uncoordinated additions to the urban block. This is exacerbated at the rear by the lack of architectural coherence with the delivery yard and carparking which gives a 'secondary' and 'leftover' character although only very limited views of this part of the site are available from the surrounding streets.
- 9 As a consequence, the townscape at this point on Finchley Road lacks a cohesive character in terms of materials, height, style and function, with the existing Centre Heights contributing yet further negatively to this by its current state and brutalist impact when viewed from most directions.
- 10 The variance in heights of the different existing buildings and the lack of consistency mean that any variation to Centre Heights in the future will not affect the overall character of the area other than in a positive way.

The proposals

- 11 The proposals comprise a number of different elements, but the ones most relevant to the surrounding townscape are the refurbishment of the exterior of the building and the addition of five penthouse duplex units at the top of the building. The proposals to the rear for a Mews development will deliver improvements on the existing conditions, although as noted there are only very limited passing views of this part of the site.
- 12 The existing building fabric is to be repaired and the concrete painted to give it a fresh and uniform appearance that will take away the bleak and unforgiving nature of its current appearance in the townscape. This will be a huge benefit in its external appearance and will substantially enhance its contribution to Finchley Road when viewed from all directions.
- 13 The penthouse extension has been carefully designed to complement the existing building architecturally. The massing ensures that the proportional principles of the existing building are maintained. At the lower level the accommodation is set back to articulate the change between the new and existing with the horizontal emphasis of the lower element of the building reflecting in its frame.

- 14 Since its previous iteration, the form and structure of the upper floors has been given more solidity - to visually anchor it more firmly to the existing building and to reflect the grid pattern of the existing architecture.
- 15 As a consequence the building, when seen from afar, appears to be an entire architectural composition with the extension carefully following the architectural language of the original. The newly refurbished exterior gives the building a fresh appearance that enables its architectural functionalism to be appreciated and enjoyed when viewed along Finchley Road rather than presenting a bleak and dominant concrete structure as is currently the case.
- 16 The staircase will be extended upwards with the difference in height between the stair and the existing main parapet level replicated. The lanterns that will provide access to roof terraces have been positioned so that they follow the rhythm of the grid structure of the building and substantially reduced in size following comments from the Council and other consultees. The parapet along the top of the building has also been raised. Whilst the original proposals were acceptable in townscape terms as they were in lightweight glazed form that did not detract from the overall solidity of the main building, this amendment has the dual benefit of providing a more solid 'top' to the building reflecting the architectural solidity of the existing building, and will minimise the impact of the lanterns such that they will be barely visible when seen from a distance.
- 17 This carefully designed 'top' to the building is a great improvement on the existing roofscape which has ad hoc plant and telecommunication equipment that provides a cluttered and unkempt roof top.

Summary

- 18 The revised proposals have been designed to address the comments raised by the Council and other consultees. In addressing these points the design has been modified to reduce the size of the rooftop lanterns and also to improve the connectivity of the proposed extension with the existing building.
- 19 These amendments have the beneficial effect of further unifying the whole architectural composition of the building, in form, solidity and grid.
- 20 When seen in the context of the repaired, painted and refurbished exterior of the whole building these amendments mean that the building is transformed from an 'eyesore' in the townscape to one that contributes positively to the eclectic mix of buildings that line Finchley Road and the surrounding area. The building will sit comfortably amongst its neighbours and will positively enhance the surrounding townscape.

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