

Date: 14th September 2016
Project: The Poetry Society

Draft response to CGCA objection to planning application 2016/3621/NEW

The CGCA has objected to The Poetry Society's proposal to replace upper windows and ground floor façade, quoting CS5, CS9, CS14 and DP24 and DP25.

Please read this response with our Design and Access Statement submitted with the application.

**1. Core Strategy Policy CS5 – Managing the impact of growth and development
Core Strategy Policy CS9 – Achieving a successful central London**

The Poetry Society is an existing occupant of 22 Betterton Street and would like to refurbish their building so that they can stay in Betterton Street. The presence of The Poetry Society in Covent Garden retains 21 jobs, contributes to the economy of Covent Garden, provides a café for locals and writers and provides a small venue space for poetry events, including the opportunity for new and renowned poets to share and perform their work. It is a national organisation and overall contributes to Camden's significance in London.

The Poetry Society has been a lively part of the local community in Covent Garden for more than twenty years. It was founded locally just off Trafalgar Square in 1909 by Suffragists and Fabians, then moving to Red Lion Square and then to Betterton Street, in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, famous for its associations with writers and performers.

The current building on the site was built around 1900 and has been extensively remodeled since. It was home to The International Times and also to the first Hare Krishna Temple in London in the 1960s. George Harrison is known to have spent time here and is said to have written 'Here Comes the Sun' here.

All indications from Camden so far are that The Poetry Society is a valued resident of the Borough and of the Conservation Area.

2. Core Strategy Policy CS14 – Promoting high quality places and preserving our heritage

The Poetry Society's proposals address all aspects of this policy. It is high quality design that respects the local context, it enhances the setting of the neighbouring listed building and the wider conservation area and it improves inclusivity by providing access to the basement space.

These aspects of the proposal are further developed below.

3. Development Policy DP25 – Conserving Camden's heritage

Betterton Street is in the Seven Dials Conservation Area, it links the east and west sections.

Character of Betterton Street

Careful consideration has been given to the characteristics of the development site. Betterton Street does not have a consistent architectural style nor date. Number 24 is Georgian and listed grade II*, number 33 is listed, however other buildings on the street range from nineteenth to twentieth century (see attached photos).

The Poetry Society building is thought to have been built around 1900.

The scale of development ranges from a single unit such as listed number 33, and The Poetry

Society number 22, to intermediate width units such as the listed number 24, and much larger width offices, substation and residential tenement Betterton House. The materials and uses of this eclectic architecture include the large electricity sub-station in orange brick which stores giant cabling reels that are occasionally wheeled down the street, tenement blocks, (until recently) a laundrette, a dry-cleaners and warehouse style buildings such as the Yoga studio and Majestic Wine Warehouse, a marketing agency with magenta vinyl lettering and residential. Some of the plots have large lengths of inactive street front with no windows or doors. There are services entrances as well as warehouse type entrances, domestic doors and shop or pub windows.

Setting of the listed building 24 Betterton Street

The setting of the listed building is this eclectic mix of architecture and scales. From the Endell Street end, there is the recent buff brick office building with blank street level aluminium framed windows and service entrances with metal shutters right next to the listed Georgian residential building in the process of being refurbished, then the narrow stock brick Poetry Society building, a stock brick double fronted Victorian residential building with sash windows in multiple occupancy, a warehouse building with Crittall windows and a double height ground floor, then the delivery entrance with metal shutter of the completely blank substation. Opposite is the large scale stock brick sash windowed tenement building Betterton House with a single entrance.

Conservation Area Statement – Seven Dials Conservation Area Statement

The Conservation Area Statement identifies the historic nature and unique character of the Seven Dials Conservation Area as mixed and welcomes the historic and high quality contemporary design styles, which are at the heart of the character of the conservation area.

Contemporary design is appropriate for 22 Betterton Street

The assumption by the CGAC that this proposal is an, 'opportunity to restore the building to a state that more accurately reflects the historic nature of the building and the context in which it sits' is counter to Development Policy DP24 and to the Conservation Area Statement.

DP25.3 does state that where alterations are proposed in a conservation area, 'traditional features should be retained or reinstated where they have been lost, using examples on neighbouring houses and streets to inform restoration'. However, there are no original features to retain on 22 Betterton Street and the neighbouring buildings, which are of different dates and styles, offer no clues as to the original features of the building.

DP24 explicitly encourages high quality contemporary design and states that it will take account of the conservation area statement. The Seven Dials conservation area statement is clear that it does not expect historic features that do not exist to be reinstated, and recognises the value and vitality that contemporary design brings to the conservation area.

The Poetry Society is a modern, welcoming, open society and as such a contemporary design is appropriate and would represent the values of the Society.

In the context of the lack of historic features on the existing building at number 22 and the eclectic character of Betterton Street identified above, we are confident that a modern style for this proposal is appropriate. We show below how the proposal enhances the conservation area and setting of the listed building.

4. Development Policy DP24 – Securing high quality design

DP24 encourages contemporary style architecture and design. It states, 'unless a scheme is within an area of homogenous architectural style ... high quality contemporary design will be welcomed. As demonstrated above, Betterton Street manifestly does not have a homogenous

style.

5. The street façade above eye level – uniformity and rhythm

Our conclusion is that the street has a variety of features, but no dominant or consistent architectural style. However, the height of the street is reasonably uniform and as set out in our Design and Access Statement the predominant feature is the plane of the brickwork creating the street façade. As such we have enhanced this plane of brickwork by setting the new upper windows back from the face of the brickwork by half a brick, so that the sense of solid and void created will enhance the rhythm of the apertures in the street wall above eye level and in particular the setting of the neighbouring listed building.

The existing windows compromise the existing stone sill by sitting a second timber sill on top. The proposal removes the second sill and restores the stone sill.

The proportion of the window apertures are wide, they are almost a square. It is unlikely that a there was originally a single sash. This proportion aperture is more likely to have been divided into three with a wider central section if the windows were timber, or gridded like warehouse windows if the windows were metal. There is no evidence either way.

The proposed design does not attempt to speculate as to what features were there originally. The proposal is for timber windows that are subdivided into three, with opening casements on either side and a single wider fixed section in the middle. These windows will be of high quality painted timber, and being set back from the plane of the brickwork, they will improve the conservation area and the setting of the listed building.

DP24.15 refers specifically to insensitive replacement of windows. There is no loss of architectural detail in this proposal, in fact by replacing the existing '70s windows, there is an enhancement, by setting the new timber windows back by half a brick to enable the rhythm of solid and void along the street façade to read more clearly, and by restoring the stone sills.

6. The 'shop front' at ground level – contemporary design

The Poetry Society ground floor façade accommodates the door to the Society offices and the door and window to the Poetry Café. It is currently a mess proportionally and very shabby with large areas of solid painted render. There is no merit in the subdivision of the solid and glazed elements.

DP30 – Shopfronts states that, 'where an original shopfront of architectural or historic value survives ... there will be a presumption in favour of retention'. Conversely where the shop front has no merit, the policy seeks to ensure new shopfronts are of, 'high quality and sensitive to the area'. It does not seek reinvention of a historic shopfront, where there are no pilasters, fascias or console brackets to be retained or restored, nor any indication of what may have been, it states, 'contemporary shopfronts will be supported in appropriate locations'. DP24, states as recited above, 'unless a scheme is within an area of homogenous architectural style ... high quality contemporary design will be welcomed'. The Conservation Area Statement also welcomes contemporary design.

The proposal seeks to do two things: to unify the façade to create the impression the building as a whole is The Poetry Society and to increase the amount of glazing across the width in order to enhance the sense of an active frontage along the street. Given the lack of historical detail, a contemporary design is appropriate in this location, and will enhance the adjacent listed building with a high quality design.

As outlined in the Design and Access Statement, we propose no work to the rendered frame of the ground floor beyond repair and paint. The new frontage is contained within this frame and

remains respectful of the scale of shop frontages in the street. Signage will be painted on the render and the hanging sign above removed entirely. A new shop front within the existing render frame will not detract from the listed building next door, which has a double frontage with its front door in the middle, not immediately adjacent to number 22 and furthermore it is in the context of a very eclectic architecture along Betterton Street.

The fact that new work will be entirely within the boundary of the existing render frame also allows the existing railings on either side of number 22 to remain as existing with a bit of space between them and the new façade elements. Our judgment is that this juxtaposition is acceptable and appropriate to the character of Betterton Street.

The proposal enhances the threshold to the Café between the railings with large scale porcelain tiles that will be sourced to match the tone of the York stone paving (there is not enough thickness above the basement to install Yorkstone).

7. The 'shop front' at ground level – visually interesting

We are further guided by DP24.17 which welcomes, 'visually interesting frontages at street level, with entrances and windows used to create active frontages'. A fully transparent plate window is not appropriate, since the shop front does not actually contain a shop, it combines the door to offices with the café window and door. Some subdivision of the café window is appropriate to create a light screen between street and café rather than a plate glass shop window display. The most relevant precedents in Covent Garden are the other café windows, bars and pubs, such as 61-62 St Giles High Street illustrated in the Design and Access Statement.

The CGCA's reference to 36 Earlham Street and 'busyness' are disingenuous. The cycle shop has a highly subdivided façade with shutters, windows, door, overlight, blocked off basement delivery hatch and grating in the street. This could be interpreted as 'busy' and it also seems to have an abundance of historical details and original features. That is not the case with 22 Betterton Street.

The starting point for the design of the windows and doors of the proposal at 22 Betterton Street is to face the existing nibs of rendered brickwork that finish just short of the façade, left right and off centre, with 3 vertical panels. This brings unity to the ground floor elevation within the existing rendered frame and underlines the sense that the whole elevation is The Poetry Society.

Between these panels, the subdivision is simple, with a solid door below a glazed overlight to the offices, a glazed door below an overlight to the Café and a subdivided window to the Café. The language of these frames and subdivisions is consistent in oiled timber. The pattern of subdivision to the Café window is based on the proportional system of A4, A3, A2 etc paper, which could be seen as whimsical, and is intended to refer to the poet's writing materials. This pattern also creates a clear upper window for a view into the Café and a lightly subdivided window at the lower level to screen the descent into the basement space without obscuring it.

The proposal enhances the appearance and character of the area in replacing a dull poorly proportioned and cheap façade with a visually interesting well proportioned new design consistently executed in high quality materials.

8. Development Policy DP29 - Improving access

DP24 and DP29 are both explicit about improving accessibility. The Poetry Society is refurbishing its ground floor and basement in order to improve accessibility to its basement event and meeting space. The basement space is not currently accessible, because the existing

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lift has reached the end of its life and is broken and unrepairable.

The proposal is in part being driven by making the basement accessible. In order to improve the accessibility of the lift which is blocked by café chairs in its current location, the new lift will be located nearer to the front of the building, which necessitates relocation of the café door and therefore replacement of the café window.

The proposal is being part funded by The City Bridge Trust, dedicated specifically to fund access improvements to London buildings.