



CASTLEWOOD HOUSE AND MEDIUS HOUSE

77-91 AND 63-69 NEW OXFORD STREET, LONDON WC1A 1DG

PROPOSAL: Demolition of existing office building at Castlewood House, and erection of an 11 storey office building with retail and restaurant uses at ground floor level; partial demolition of Medius House with retention of the existing façade, and erection of a two storey roof extension including private roof terrace, in connection with the change of use of the building from office and retail to provide 20 affordable housing units at upper floor levels with retained retail use at ground floor level.

Application for planning permission: 2017/0618/P

15 March 2017

The Bloomsbury Association objects to this application in its current form and wishes to make the following comments.

1. Overview

The public consultation on emerging design proposals has been exemplary. We have shared our thoughts at various times during the pre-application stage and regret that the outcome is not one that we can support.

The presentation of the application and the design rationale given in the D&AS is also exceptionally well presented.

The architectural expression of both buildings has been developed well.

Massing and set-backs are well judged but the rationale for the overall height of both buildings is unconvincing. Central St Giles should not be regarded as a precedent.

Although there are some significant improvements on the western side of the site, our reservations about open space provision at street level, both on and off-site remain. We are particularly concerned by the proposal for the pedestrian route connecting St Giles Court to New Oxford Street to be gated.

The findings of the Design Review Panel's consideration of the proposal should be shared.

2. Use

Continued business use of Castlewood House is welcomed. The quantum of floorspace should be subject to demonstrating that the impact of intensification is both manageable and enforceable. We have doubts that Bainbridge Street can support such intensification of servicing traffic when it is already heavily congested with lorries and vans during the day.

Residential use of Medius House is welcomed although it would be reassuring to know the affordable housing provider.

Street level retail frontages are welcomed if there is adequate footfall, if viability can be demonstrated and servicing managed.

Concern is shared that rental expectations on the retail units may preclude their occupation by independent businesses.

The street level plan suggests too much A3 use, which would need to be considered given the amount of A3 use already in Central St Giles and proposed for Centre Point. A3 uses are failing in the area because there is over provision.

The small, triangular retail unit on the party wall with Toni & Guy Academy is welcomed.

Start-up or open workspace units are suggested at first floor level in Medius House where the street environment on New Oxford Street is not ideal for residential use.

3. Scale and massing

The height of both buildings cannot be justified in urban design terms. During the pre-application consultation stage for Central St Giles, we were critical of its height and, now it is built, our concerns remain. There are lessons to be learnt here, which suggest it is not a contextual precedent to emulate.

The skyline impact of this height is evident in distant views from the western side of Bedford Square (view 1) and from Bucknall Street (view 6) as indicated in the Townscape Assessment. In our opinion this is damaging.

The setting of Toni & Guy Academy, a locally listed building, is seriously damaged by the massive scale of the buildings proposed on either side.

The northern elevational massing of Castlewood House should be further broken up to reduce apparent bulk, rather than treating it as a single entity.

4. Public realm

The development team has been encouraged to think outside the red line boundary and, in liaison with Council's officers, show an aspiration for quality public realm proposals that can be delivered through the West End Project and enhance the urban block in which both buildings are located. This is not apparent in the application.

Public realm proposals outside the application site boundary must be included in the application and realised with it as part of the Section 106 Agreement. They can't be a nice-to-have extra never to happen.

The importance of Dyott Street in linking Bloomsbury to Covent Garden also needs to be acknowledged and Camden need to do their bit by improving road crossings, north and south, long overdue since the completion of Central St Giles. We would like to see the narrow, northern section of Dyott Street between Bucknall Street and New Oxford Street be pedestrian only instead of a dangerous taxi rat-run.

Relocation of the office entrance to Earnshaw Street is welcomed.

The narrow footway on New Oxford Street is a hostile, unpleasant environment for pedestrians. There seems an opportunity to move the kerb line to make the footway wider and better cater for the increased footfall that Crossrail will generate. This seems to be picked up on current drawings but, with no existing kerb line shown, it is still difficult to judge.

The hard landscape plan included with the application is disappointing and fails to address context convincingly. Shared surfaces should be shown at the points where new pedestrian routes cross Bucknall Street and Earnshaw Street. Kerb line and pavement build-outs should be adjusted to ensure a more direct crossing of Earnshaw Street for pedestrians.

Double height 'base' and reduced building footprint at street level is welcomed.

Expressed columns where lower storeys are set back on the New Oxford Street frontage will increase dwell time in the 'outdoor rooms' outside shops and obstruct pedestrian flow. Mindful of the high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour in the area, these 'outdoor rooms' are likely to be misused and at night-time and could be designing-in the opportunity for crime. A similar device is used on the newly completed One Bedford Avenue and is already used as a public urinal and by rough sleepers.

The original alignment of the pedestrian route proposed from New Oxford Street through a 'pocket park' on Bucknall Street to Central St Giles is preferred. Narrowing it to a 'court' with blind corners is not. The void in the courtyard detracts from its potential benefit. See similar spaces between Denman Street and Glasshouse Street in Soho (Dixon Jones) and St Anne's Court, also in Soho.

This route should not be gated. We acknowledge that there are problems in the area at night but the walkways in Central St Giles are not gated so why this? To propose gates at this stage is to admit that the opportunity for crime and anti-social behaviour is designed in when it should be designed out.

Off-street servicing is welcomed; we understand it will be shared with retail uses. The opening to the loading bay is too wide. Mindful that it will always be open during operating hours, the cumulative effect of this together with the loading bay to Central St Giles on the opposite side of Bucknall Street will be damaging to the streetscape.

We are concerned by the effect of 'city bloat' on new open space - a phenomenon experienced on intensification of development where such pressure is put on street level space for accommodating utility infrastructure, parking, waste storage, servicing, bicycles and smokers that all 'public' space is effectively lost. What has happened on Hanway Street, behind Primark, and on Dyott Street behind Isis House are good examples of how good open space intentions can go very wrong.

5. Architectural expression

The architectural expression has been well developed since proposals were exhibited during the pre-application consultation stage. Varied materials and fenestration are welcomed.

Our view is that the building should be subservient to the visually dominant architecture of Centre Point. Its expression appears to be politely contextual and successfully mediates between it and the varied expressions of other buildings in the street.

The western corner expression to New Oxford Street is not convincing. The west-facing facade still appears unresolved at 7th and 8th floors (Townscape Analysis, view 15). We feel that either both floors should be brought forward or all set back, with bays, as on the north elevation.

Solar shading may be needed to the exposed eastern and western elevations.

We would have liked to have seen consideration given to the fifth elevation and the roofscape seen from Centre Point - planted roofs; a usable roof; a sculptural plant enclosure.

Communal roof garden/terraces to Medius House are welcomed but we acknowledge concern expressed by neighbours about noise. We endorse CGCA's comments about noise impact.

The flank walls on either side of Toni & Guy are unresolved when seen in oblique views. A partly glazed wall is an interesting possibility but we question whether it would be achievable technically as an 'unprotected area' of a boundary wall? It appears as something likely to be value engineered out as a future non-material alteration.

Additional floors in a contemporary intervention to Medius House are well developed and far more convincing than the stretched reproduction of the existing brick facade previously proposed. The exposed flank wall to Medus House seen in oblique views appears, for the reasons expressed above, unresolved.

No public art installation including lighting should be proposed.

For the reasons stated above, we look to the Council to refuse this application in its current form.

We would be grateful if you would let us know of any further modification to the application; the decision, if it is to be decided under delegated powers, or the meeting date if it is to be decided by Committee.

Stephen Heath
On behalf of The Bloomsbury Association

Copies to:
Councillor Julian Fulbrook, London Borough of Camden
Councillor Awale Olad, London Borough of Camden
Councillor Sue Vincent, London Borough of Camden
Councillor Adam Harrison, London Borough of Camden
David Glasgow, London Borough of Camden
Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee
South Bloomsbury Residents Association
Covent Garden Community Association
Soho Society
Chair, Bloomsbury Association