

[REDACTED]

From: David Blagbrough [REDACTED]
Sent: 27 September 2017 00:28
To: Whittingham, Gideon
Cc: Planning
Subject: Spiritualist Temple: Ref 2016/7088/P
Attachments: Comments on application for Spiritualist Timple site Sept 2017.docx

Dear Gideon

Good to talk to you the other day and many thanks for your help and advice

As I mentioned to you, the developers of the Spiritualist Temple site organised two public meetings at the Irish Centre neither of which was widely publicised – despite last minute efforts by the Camden Square Neighbourhood Association to publicise the second meeting. On both occasions those in attendance were united in their opposition to the plans. At the end of the first meeting the developers said that they would submit new drawings in the light of some of the criticism they had received. For the second meeting the developers produced some revised plans which again attracted widespread criticism from those present. Despite their poor reception, the developers said that they would withdraw the original application in favour of the new designs. I have been deferring to comment on the application until these revised plans were posted. Sadly, as you know, this has not happened. As agreed, therefore I am submitting our comments on the original application.

In my conversation with the developers at the second meeting, I focused on the issue of ownership of the site and pointed out to a representative of UrbanLab that a number of people had suggested that the SNU only held the property in trust and were not legally entitled to sell it. This came as a surprise to the representative who said that he would need to look into the matter. I have heard nothing further from him. I did however check on the Land Registry and from my limited understanding of the legal language there do appear to be restrictions on the disposition of the land. Whether or not this is true is difficult to say, though it is certainly something worth investigating. Indeed this is something one of the neighbours has said he will pursue.

Leaving aside ownership and historical significance, however, the actual design of the development fails to enhance the conservation area and should be rejected.

Warmest regards

David

David Blagbrough
Chair
Camden Square CAAC

Camden Square Conservation Area Advisory Committee

Spiritualist Temple
Rochester Square
London
NW1 9RY

Date: 26 September 2017

Planning application Reference: 2016/7088/P

Proposal: Redevelopment of site involving demolition of the building (Use Class D1) and erection of a 3-storey building, plus basement level, to accommodate an art workshop/gallery (Use Class B1) and 9 self-contained flats (Use Class C3) comprising 8 x 2 bed and 1 x 1 bed, together with landscape works.

Summary: We strongly object to the proposed development. Apart from questions regarding ownership of the site and the demolition of an existing building of historic and local interest, in relation to the conservation area the proposed development will be excessive in bulk and have a negative impact on privacy, overshadowing and flooding of neighbouring buildings

Comments:

1. Unusually, and for reasons that are self-evident, these comments cover three areas: ownership, demolition of the exiting building and the proposed new development itself
2. Concerns have been expressed about the nature of the ownership of the site of the Spiritualist Temple. It has been claimed that the current proprietor of the property as listed in the Land Registry, the Spiritualists National Union (SNU), hold the property 'in trust' for the original owners of the property, whoever they may be. The Land Registry appears to give some credence to this claim in that the transfer of the property to the SNU in February 1957 was accompanied by a restriction on its disposition. Clearly the matter of ownership needs to be resolved before demolition can take place.

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3. Although the existing building is not listed, it is, nonetheless, a significant feature of the conservation area and, leaving aside its obvious religious legacy, is associated with social reform activities of the 19th and early 20th century when leading proponents of the cooperative and socialist movements seeking a new utopia were attracted to spiritualism. Prominent among these were Robert Owen, the great social reformer, Robert Blatchford, the author of *Merrie England* and more recently Hannen Swaffer, the left wing journalist, whose involvement with the Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple and presence at its opening in 1926 is recorded in a plaque. The demolition of the building would diminish this heritage and would be seen by many as an act of vandalism.
4. With respect to the proposed development itself the drawings are generally technically adequate and a substantial amount of documentation has been submitted. However, there does not appear to be any daylight analysis - information which was alluded to in the public consultation - and this is pertinent to the neighbouring buildings in Rochester Square. Also, the 3D visuals are all from either end of what is a very long building – avoiding any view of the bulk and massing of the building along its entire length and in relation to the neighbouring buildings. This makes it difficult to assess.
5. The height and volume of the proposal are inappropriate in relation to neighbouring buildings. The scheme rises up to a height that whilst not quite to the level of the apex of the existing (to be demolished) church, is of a square profile that protrudes significantly beyond the pitched roofline of the existing church, and extends along the length of the entire site, impacting on the neighbouring buildings significantly. Currently the church extends along only a portion of the site, with a garden area to the north, so in this area the site is changing from having no built form to having a 3 storey building.
6. Although the scale and proportion of the elevations may be considered satisfactory, the elevations BB and DD (east and west) offer a somewhat blank façade along the longer faces of the proposal. Whilst this is not dissimilar to the existing structure on the site, the height of these facades mean that the result is more imposing and extends along the entirety of the site.
7. A major concern with the current proposal is the impact of the development on the privacy of neighbours. There will be significant levels of overlooking and overshadowing from the “Screened” terraces to the east, which overlook the rear gardens of the Rochester Square terrace houses, as well as from the interstitial terrace spaces between each of the proposed flats.
8. The scale of the proposed development will reduce the levels of light to the neighbouring buildings and indeed could result in low levels of light into the proposed flats. It is also noted that the proposed workshop spaces at basement level appear to have very low provision for natural daylight. This is surprising since they are being pitched as artist spaces to be available for rent. Most artistic pursuits require adequate levels of natural light and all of the light to

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these spaces appear to be delivered via a small lightwell to the front of the space.

9. It is unclear whether there is a real need for community artists' workshop spaces. There is already local provision for a community art workshop space in the form of the Rochester Square Art Space, as well as Maiden Lane community centre. The proposal for the workshop and exhibition space is vague at best, and may result in a redundant empty space at ground and basement level which would then need to be repurposed. It appears that by making this one of the drivers for the scheme, it has resulted in an over-scaled development proposal. The developer's argument for having to maximise the number of flats to sell in order to fund this community space has resulted in overdevelopment. A more modest scheme without a redundant "community space" might be preferable?
10. As has already been noted, the Spiritualist Temple and its association both with Conan Doyle and the social reform movements of the late 19th century early 20th century are of significant historical and local importance. Regrettably this has been underplayed in the application and are largely dismissed in the Historical Assessment. The suitability of re-purposing rather than demolishing the building should first be established. A mixed refurbishment and new-build solution would likely prove more suitable in the Conservation Area context.
11. We also have concerns about aspects of the internal layout of the proposed building. The flats are designed to minimum design guidelines, so could be considered adequate but not generous in their proportions. The flats located within the heart of the site, are somewhat "landlocked" and could have reduced light levels and poor visual amenity via the internal light-wells.
12. The introduction of a basement presents additional problems. The basement development in an adjacent building, for example, apparently caused extensive flooding in Julian Court. The proposal for an entire new basement level under the site, therefore, is of major concern. As previously mentioned, the provision of rentable artists' workspaces in the basement level, with a limited amount of natural daylight provided, is questionable in terms of future viability and desirability. The residential half of the basement level fares slightly better with the provision of light-well/terraces.
13. The current proposal fails to enhance the conservation area. Over and above the question of ownership of the site and the right of its disposition, the demolition of a significant and historical feature of the neighbourhood will diminish the conservation area. Moreover the proposed development and the desire to maximize the number of residential units in order to fund the provision of a community space, has resulted in a scheme of excessive bulk which will have negative impact on the privacy and overshadowing of neighbouring buildings and, on recent experience the construction of a sizeable basement

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offers the prospect of large scale flooding of neighbouring properties. The proposal should be rejected.



Signed:
David Blagbrough
Chair
Camden Square CAAC

Date: 26 September 2017

Secretary: Jim Humphris, 88 Agar Grove, NW1 9TL

