

**TWENTIETH  
CENTURY  
SOCIETY**



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Sent by email: [seonaid.carr@camden.gov.uk](mailto:seonaid.carr@camden.gov.uk)

22 January 2019

Our ref: 19 01 02

Dear Seonaid Carr,

**2018/6092/P GRAND UNION HOUSE, 16-20 KENTISH TOWN ROAD**

The Twentieth Century Society has been alerted to the above application. The application seeks permission for partial demolition of Grand Union House and total demolition of 16 Kentish Town Road, and the construction of four new floors of office space, a row of retail units at street level and a new residential building. The Society wishes to **object** to the above application. This case was considered at the January meeting of the Society's casework committee, and the comments set out below are representative of members' views.

**Design**

Grand Union House is a commercial building that is one component of the mixed-use scheme designed by Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners for Sainsbury's. The complex was designed in 1985 and construction was completed in 1988. Along with a superstore for Sainsbury's, Grimshaw also designed a terrace of houses facing the Regent's Canal, a single-storey nursery school at 16 Kentish Town Road, and the elevated workshop building known as Grand Union House. The two latter buildings are the subjects of this application.

Grand Union House was designed to house light industrial and workshop units elevated above car parking and delivery access for articulated lorries. The use class of this building was dictated by LB Camden, who insisted that the former industrial use of the site be carried on in a portion of the new development. The workshop spaces are double-height flexible units with mezzanines, with lighting from both roof lights and horizontal strip windows on the Kentish Town Road and internal courtyard elevations. The façade facing Kentish Town Road uses the adaptable cladding system designed for the Herman Miller distribution building in Chippenham (1982). The remainder of the building is clad in aluminium panels, and the concrete frame at ground level is left exposed.

Following seven unsuccessful designs by a previous architect, LB Camden's planners were enthusiastic about the uncompromising industrial Grimshaw proposed for the Sainsbury's complex. The site of the former ABC Bakery was seen as the key to rejuvenating Camden's centre, and when Sainsbury's expressed interest in the site, LB Camden's Bill Riseboro insisted that the common standard for supermarket design at the time, termed the

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'Essex Barn', would be unacceptable. A modern, innovative design was Camden's principle requirement, as well as an ambitious mix of uses considering the site's location and awkward access. The aluminium cladding, which has become a signature of Grimshaw's practice from this period, retained the industrial feel of the canal-side site whilst providing a juxtaposition to the nearby postmodern TVAM building designed by Grimshaw's former partner Terry Farrell. The whole Sainsbury's site was designed to follow the scale of neighbouring buildings, and the complex has been celebrated for capturing the essence of High-Tech architecture and successfully introducing the style into a busy urban environment without overpowering surrounding historic character.

### **High-Tech Architecture**

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of Grimshaw's extraordinary contribution to architectural culture in Britain, culminating in the award of the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 2018. Grimshaw is considered to be one of the leading contributors to the British High-Tech movement which has earned international renown, and Historic England has described him as "one of the most prominent contemporary architects in England". Grimshaw held the position of President of the Royal Academy of Arts between 2004 and 2011. Two of Grimshaw's buildings have been listed at Grade II\*, along with two of his projects with former collaborator Terry Farrell, making up a substantial portion of the handful of High-Tech schemes that have been listed to date. We anticipate the number of listed High-Tech buildings will increase greatly in coming years, and rare examples of industrial design methods being adapted to urban settings and typologies will undoubtedly stand out as worthy of protection and celebration.

The Sainsbury's complex was widely praised in both the architectural and mainstream press as a pioneering retail development located in an urban setting. Martin Pawley in the Guardian described the scheme as "the most extraordinary piece of take-no-prisoners advanced technology architecture since the Lloyd's building". We consider the Sainsbury's complex to meet the criteria for listing, and as such we will be submitting an application to Historic England to list the whole the group at Grade II. We ask that the result of this listing application be known before a decision is made that will impact the site's architectural and historic interest.

### **Development Proposals**

The above application proposes to strip Grand Union House down to its concrete frame and slab up to first floor, creating a platform for the construction of a four storey commercial building. The application also proposes to infill the car parking spaces fronting Kentish Town Road, creating a row of flexible retail units. Parking spaces for the residents of Grand Union Walk and access to these spaces will be retained. The former nursery school building at 16 Kentish Town Road is proposed for total demolition, and will be replaced with a four storey affordable housing building with retail units at street level.

The Society is not opposed to the concept of altering the layout of Grand Union House and infilling the ground floor void to provide retail units. Grand Union House's design enables a high level of flexibility in the division of space, and we consider it possible for the existing space to be altered to meet current needs without affecting the external envelope of the building nor impacting its significance. We recognise the scope for improvement to the street level elevation on Kentish Town Road, and consider that the proposed infilling can be carried out successfully whilst retaining the existing aesthetic features that link the component parts of the Sainsbury's complex together. Overall we consider the building can be upgraded without the need for partial demolition, and many of the outstanding issues can be addressed without destroying the visual connection that reveals the ingenuity of Grimshaw's handling of the demanding brief.

It is our view that the complexity of the site is a key aspect of the design's success, and it pinpoints this development as one of the first mixed-use supermarket sites in an urban environment, notable for a time where the overwhelming majority of large chain stores were being built in out-of-town industrial estates. LB Camden's

insistence on a variety of uses within the site, Grimshaw's use of new structural techniques in the supermarket building and the whole scheme's striking aesthetic propelled the scheme to acclaim. We consider it vital that this aesthetic is retained across the site to reflect the architect's skill in adapting industrial design techniques to fit a range of building types and functions in a challenging setting.

### Conservation

We consider the Sainsbury's complex to be a positive contributor to the Regent's Canal Conservation Area. The involvement of one of Britain's most accomplished architects of industrial buildings reflects the history of the site and the wider canal, and the whole scheme was designed to not exceed the existing heights of the buildings in the surrounding area. The Sainsbury's scheme is featured in LB Camden's own publication *Designs on Camden: Architecture 1965-2001* (2001) and is described as follows in Pevnsner's *The Buildings of England: London 4 North*:

Grimshaw's first supermarket, and one of the first to demonstrate that such a building can have not only architectural quality but an urban form.

We see that there is scope for alterations to improve the ground level frontage to Grand Union House, however the loss of the High-Tech aesthetic on Kentish Town Road will dilute the complex character of the Regent's Canal Conservation Area. The Regent's Canal Conservation Area management guidelines state:

In all cases, existing/original architectural features and detailing which contributes to the character and appearance of the conservation area should be retained and kept in good repair, and only be replaced when there is no alternative.

The Society also sees the following management guideline for the Regent's Canal Conservation Area to be relevant for this application:

The majority of surviving industrial buildings within the conservation area are either listed or considered to make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area. With few exceptions, there is therefore a general presumption in favour of their retention.

The dominance of industrial trades along the Regent's Canal has lessened significantly in the past century, however in the mid-1980s Camden insisted on light industrial workshop units to feature in this scheme to preserve the distribution of building uses within the borough. It is therefore in-keeping with the general intent of the Conservation Area designation to retain Grand Union House's utilitarian High-Tech aesthetic, as this reflects the changing nature of industry in Camden and along the Regent's Canal.

The Camden Local Plan (2017) contains the following policy relating to Conservation Areas:

The Council will ... resist the total or substantial demolition of an unlisted building that makes a positive contribution to the character or appearance of a conservation area.

In the Society's view Grand Union House must be regarded as integral to the wider Sainsbury's scheme rather than as an individual entity, and we therefore see that this application is in direct conflict with the above policy.

The proposed development will also have a negative impact on the other remaining buildings on the Sainsbury's site, on the Regent's Canal Conservation Area and on the neighbouring Camden Town Conservation Area. The whole scheme was carefully designed to not exceed the heights of the surrounding buildings, meeting the client's and planning authority's requirements through the clever use of space rather than increasing the scale of building. It is plain to see in the townscape views provided by the applicant that Grimshaw's careful attention

to preserve sightlines and building scales will be greatly undermined by the additional height of the proposed building. The Camden Town Conservation Area includes Kentish Town Road leading north to the most southern boundary of the application site, and views of Grand Union House in relation to surrounding development is a key feature from Britannia Junction. Views into and out of observation areas require careful consideration, and in this case it is clear that the proposed building will be out of scale with the surrounding area in comparison to Grimshaw's carefully composed Sainsbury's scheme, and views of other buildings of historic and architectural importance will be obscured.

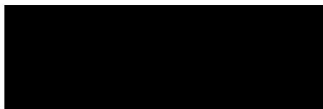
#### **Twentieth Century Society Comment**

We recognise there is scope for improved street level activity through the introduction of flexible retail units, and we consider that if done in a sensitive manner with appropriate materials, this would follow the architects original design intent. We are, however, opposed to the substantial demolition of the upper floors of Grand Union House and the nursery school at 16 Kentish Town Road, as these buildings are a rare urban interpretation of Grimshaw's internationally celebrated interpretation of the High-Tech architecture style, and together the buildings reveal LB Camden's progressive approach to planning the redevelopment of this complex site in the town centre.

The Society views the entire Sainsbury's scheme to hold sufficient architectural and historic interest to be worthy of listing, and we again ask that a decision regarding listing be made before this application is determined.

I trust that these comments are of use to you. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further queries. I would appreciate being informed of updates relating to this application where possible.

Yours sincerely,



**Grace Etherington**  
Caseworker  
Twentieth Century Society

**Remit:** The Twentieth Century Society was founded in 1979 and is the national amenity society concerned with the protection, appreciation, and study of post-1914 architecture, townscape and design. The Society is acknowledged in national planning guidance as the key organisation concerned with the modern period and is a constituent member of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies. Under the procedures set out in *ODPM Circular 09/2005*, all English local planning authorities must inform the Twentieth Century Society when an application for listed building consent involving partial or total demolition is received, and they must notify us of the decisions taken on these applications.