

THE CHING COURT ASSOCIATION



Samir Benmbarek
London Borough of Camden, Planning department
5 Pancras Square
London
N1C 4AG

17th April 2019

Dear Mr. Benmbarek,

We write to object to the modifications to the Comyn Ching Triangle as proposed in applications ref. 2019/1710/L and 2019/1646/P.

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Our association represents the occupants of the buildings around the Comyn Ching Triangle, including 20 dwellings and several small businesses. Our objects include the maintenance and improvement of the historic nature and tranquil amenity of Ching Court, which is visited by hundreds of people each year and which features in books and other media Worldwide.

This unique and significant development is a single, cohesive entity - whose parts happen, happily, to originate from **four centuries**. The importance of its buildings, features and character were recognised in 2017 when Historic England updated the list to include all the buildings that surround Ching Court as well as the space behind them.

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In addressing the applications, we should first ask **"Do we want the Comyn Ching Triangle to become almost entirely residential?"** For us, the answer is a resounding "No", for reasons that we develop below. We understand that the Council agrees with us. However, the applicant does not.

If consent is granted for 53 & 55 Monmouth Street, we believe that it would be difficult not to grant similar consent to 57 & 59 Monmouth Street (which are joined to make 4 Ching Court) and to 61 & 63 Monmouth Street (which are joined to make 5 Ching Court). This would leave us with no office use above 1st floor level, except the narrow frontages of the two 20th century buildings in the North and South corners.

If any of the Monmouth Street side of Ching Court were to be converted to residential use, then from some planning consent perspectives it might be number 3 (55 Monmouth Street) that we would choose as least objectionable. This is because it has access from outside Ching Court and therefore avoids some of the issues around security and noise nuisance so cannot be a precedent for the others. However, this building is the most objectionable from a listed building perspective because, as the Historic England list entry states, "the corner buildings at Seven Dials were demolished and the C17 panelled interiors and stairs from 51 Monmouth Street were removed and stored, to be reinstated in 55 Monmouth Street."

No other substantial interiors around Ching Court survive from the 17th century originals, and we are not sure that there are any others around Seven Dials either. Few would now dare to mess with such a rare interior from 1690, and rightly so.

This leaves an impossible situation in relation to any changes of use to residential in Ching Court. We therefore support the view of the Covent Garden Community Association, that the council should refuse these applications and also make a clear statement of Planning policy to protect these small office buildings from any future attempts to convert them into flats.

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We are opposed to any of the buildings at 53 to 63 Monmouth Street being converted to residential use because this would alter the very nature of Ching Court.

As the listings state, it is “a spatially powerful, mixed-use regenerative scheme”. This is what it is famous for, along with its amazing design and incorporation of ancient and modern. The mixed use comes about because, across the frontages visible on Ching Court, roughly half are residential, one quarter offices and one quarter retail. Please see Appendix 1 for details.

A change of use in any one of these 6 buildings would skew the proportions by almost 4% away from office and over to residential use. If all 6 buildings were converted, then we would be left with only 8% offices, which would certainly no longer be ‘mixed use’. As stated above, if consent is given to the current proposals then we do not see how this could be stopped in due course.

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We are opposed to any of the buildings at 53 Monmouth Street, or 57 to 63 Monmouth Street, being converted to residential use because of issues relating to security and noise nuisance when these buildings are accessed outside office hours.

These office buildings have no means of access from the street. They are accessed from within Ching Court, which is locked at night and at the weekends. There are a number of protective covenants that do not allow the use of Ching Court at night. This arrangement of design and operation is a very deliberate part of the Farrell redevelopment, ensuring that those using the buildings all around Ching Court can co-exist safely and with minimal nuisance.

There have been serious problems with security in the Seven Dials area for decades. Ching Court is especially vulnerable to use by drug addicts and shoplifters, but it is protected at night because nobody opens it then.

Any sound made in the courtyard echoes and is amplified. Even during the day neighbours can hear the office doors in Ching Court whenever they close, but at night when everyone is asleep and there is no ambient noise such sounds are seriously disturbing. We believe that it is impractical and unreasonable to expect residents and their guests not to make any sound when accessing their flats at night.

The applicant understands these problems, so the application relating to 53 Monmouth Street (2 Ching Court) seeks to achieve access via 55 Monmouth Street’s front door. However, this access is incomplete because residents would need to come out of the back of 55 Monmouth Street (3 Ching Court) and go back into the back of 53 Monmouth Street (2 Ching Court). A solution might be achieved using a new door to ‘blank off’ access to Ching Court between

doors 2 and 3, matching those on the other porches. However, this would only solve one of the many problems presented by these applications.

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We are opposed to any of the buildings at 53 to 63 Monmouth Street (2 to 5 Ching Court) being converted to residential use because this would compromise security during the day.

The deliberate arrangement of mixed uses provides for natural security during the working day while the courtyard is open. People come and go to the offices constantly. Each building accommodates around 10 desks, so, depending upon the mix of business tenants, around 60 workers and their visitors can be moving in and out every working day. Residential use would provide none of this.

At present drug addicts and dealers often enter the courtyard, but only stay for a short time because someone soon comes through, and usually not alone, to disrupt their activity. Things have noticeably deteriorated since the two office buildings at 57 & 59 Monmouth Street (4 Ching Court) have been emptied, and we look forward to their reoccupation soon following refurbishment.

We have asked the local police about these proposals and they share our concerns.

Suggestions have been made that Ching Court could remain locked at all times. But we believe that it should remain open during the working day, to be enjoyed and appreciated by the public as long as there is good security for those living, working and visiting here. We believe that this is only possible if the 4 doorways remain in active use by workers during the day. These proposals would take 2 of those doors out of use.

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We are opposed to any of the buildings at 53 to 63 Monmouth Street being converted to residential use because this would lead to unacceptable levels of overlooking into habitable rooms outside working hours.

Dwellings around Ching Court face busy, unusually narrow streets at the front. There are no forecourts or railings to separate them from street, so people look in all the time from the pavement and from buildings opposite. Those who live in these dwellings therefore depend upon the rear for some privacy more than many people living in other parts of the West End.

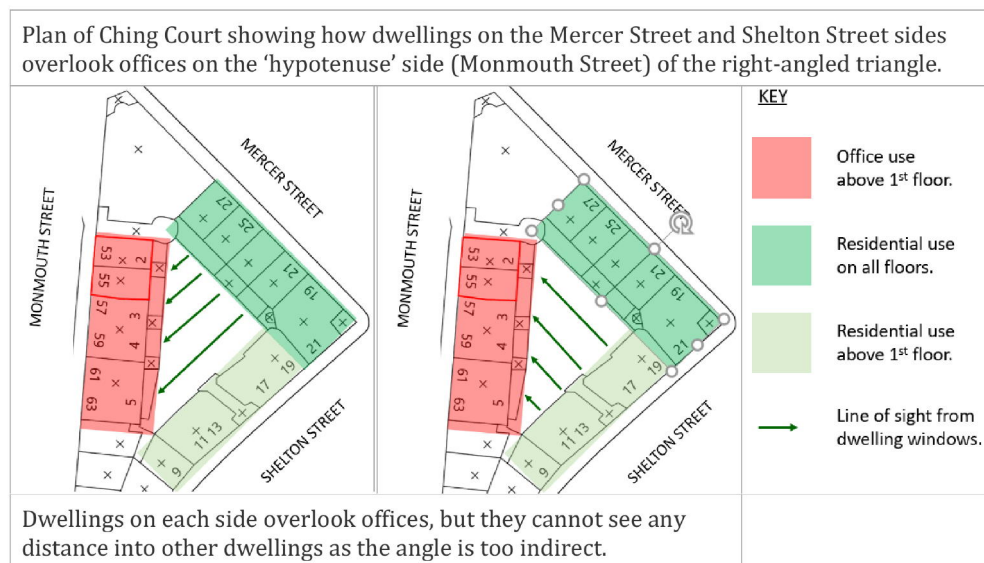
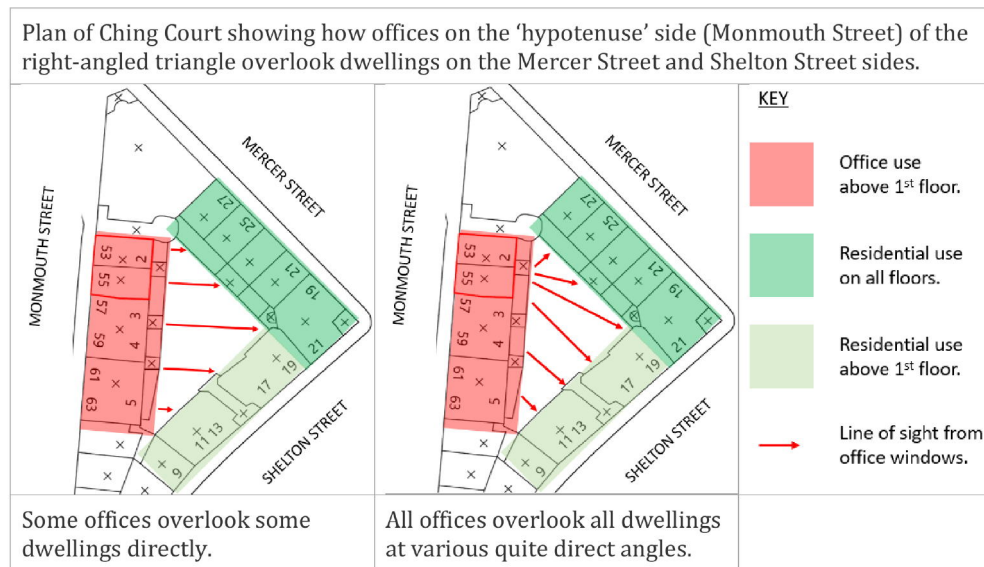
These residents have settled in Ching Court because it offers a safe, tranquil, private aspect at the rear, and they have arranged their lives accordingly for over 30 years. Any conversions of buildings along the Monmouth Street side would spoil that privacy for 18 of the existing dwellings outside office hours, as well as giving poor privacy to the new ones.

This is a major consideration in relation to numbers 53 & 55 Monmouth Street because the distance at the back between the closest façade & existing residential balcony is **only 6 metres**.

The proposals would affect 10 of the existing dwellings more seriously because they have windows and balconies straight in the line of sight of 2 or 3 Ching Court, or are very close at a 45 degree angle of sight. Residents are clearly distressed about this.

The courtyard is a right-angled triangle. All the commercial uses above ground floor level are placed on the hypotenuse, while all the residential uses are along the two shorter sides. This means that no residential windows directly overlook each other, and at times when residents most want privacy the offices opposite are closed.

Diagrams below show how this works.



This photograph illustrates how, from most residential windows, the office windows are in full view. But other residential windows are at a sharper angle and privacy is maintained.



Terry Farrell can thank Thomas Neale, 300 years earlier, for his good fortune in having a right-angled triangle to deal with in 1984.

It is the clever use of this shape that divides the workday and out-of-hours uses, so that residents have a good level of privacy that they are desperate not to lose.

We don't know if new-build mixed-use developments have employed this trick since, but we think that it should be used as a model!

The current proposals would, of course, destroy this key characteristic of Ching Court. The photographs below show the different types of overlooking into, and from, what would be habitable rooms.



View from child's room some way into rooms at 2 Ching Court, 7.7 metres away.



View from balcony directly into rooms at 2 Ching Court, 6 metres away.



View from habitable room directly into rooms at 2 and 3 Ching Court, less than 10 metres away.



View into current offices at night.

We would like to be able to access number 2 or 3 Ching Court to take the equivalent photographs from their windows. These will show how they can see a substantial distance inside habitable rooms of existing dwellings opposite, as well as completely overlooking 5 balconies. The thumbnail shots provided with the planning application unfortunately do not show views into the closest dwellings.

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We are opposed to any of the buildings at 53 to 63 Monmouth Street being converted to residential use because this would lead to additional noise nuisance.

As outlined above, the Ching Court space is what we always describe as “acoustically challenging”, with every sound reverberating. If people open their windows, then others can hear them as if they were in the courtyard itself, even behind their own closed windows. Residents around the courtyard have got to know one another over the years, and a proportion have been here for over two decades, so there is a mutual understanding that we depend upon one another to be neighbourly.

If there is a problem with a new resident, or with a tenant in one of the few rented flats, then we can refer to the covenants that were put in place when the buildings were re-established in the 1980's to ensure that no noise emanates. No such protections have been offered in relation to the proposal for 3 new flats.

We are also very concerned that the proposals are for 1-bedroom flats. Such small units tend to be rented by short term residents, or even holiday let with rapid turnover under the 90 day AirBnB rule. Reaching any understanding in these circumstances is fraught with difficulty and we would anticipate regular disturbance to our existing residents.

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The applicant refers to a prior planning consent to convert 57 & 59 Monmouth Street nearly 10 years ago. However, we do not believe that this should be used as a reference because much has changed since then in relation to planning policy, and in relation to the recognition of Post-Modernism and the significance of the Comyn Ching Triangle as a seminal example of mixed use within that genre.

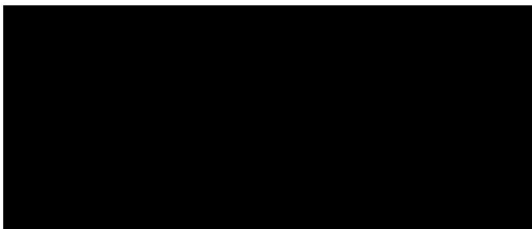
Further, some of the issues described above in relation to 53 & 55 Monmouth Street do not apply to the earlier consent. Notwithstanding this, we hope that any future application to convert 57 & 59 Monmouth Street would be refused, bearing in mind the changed planning context and the arguments given above in relation to issues that are common to all the buildings.

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We hope that this letter is helpful in showing you that there are many reasons why changing the two office buildings at 53 and 55 Monmouth Street into one building of 3 flats is a bad idea.

There are no good reasons that we can find. Please refuse both applications.

We also reiterate our request that Ching Court can be protected in a way that means that we don't live in constant fear of further applications. The applications in recent years have been very stressful to deal with.



THE CHING COURT ASSOCIATION continued...

APPENDIX 1

Mix of uses backing onto Ching Court

	Current situation			Situation if 2 & 3 Ching Court converted			Situation if all 2 to 5 Ching Court converted				
	No floors in use as			No floors in use as			No floors in use as				
	Resi	Office	Retail	Resi	Office	Retail	Resi	Office	Retail		
Monmouth Street											
51	0	4	0	0	4	0	0	4	0		
53	0	3	2	3	0	2	3	0	2		
55	0	3	2	3	0	2	3	0	2		
57	0	3	2	0	3	2	3	0	2		
59	0	3	2	0	3	2	3	0	2		
61	0	3	2	0	3	2	3	0	2		
63	0	3	2	0	3	2	3	0	2		
65	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2		
Shelton Street											
11	3	0	2	3	0	2	3	0	2		
13	3	0	2	3	0	2	3	0	2		
15	3	0	0	3	0	0	3	0	0		
17	3	0	2	3	0	2	3	0	2		
19	3	0	2	3	0	2	3	0	2		
Mercer Street											
19	7	0	0	7	0	0	7	0	0		
21	5	0	0	5	0	0	5	0	0		
23	5	0	0	5	0	0	5	0	0		
25	5	0	0	5	0	0	5	0	0		
27	5	0	0	5	0	0	5	0	0		
Total:	43	25	22	90	49	19	22	90	61	7	22
Percentage:	48%	28%	24%		54%	21%	24%		68%	8%	24%