

68a Neal Street

London

WC2H 9PA

DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT

Retrospective Change of use B1 to Sui Generis



On Behalf of
Inventive Productions

INTRODUCTION:

This planning statement has been prepared on behalf of 'Inventive Productions' ('the applicant') in support of an application for the Full Planning Permission for a change of use at 68a Neal Street, London, WC2H 9PA.

The planning application seeks a change of use from B1 (office) to Sui Generis (immersive theatrical experience) retrospectively.

SITE AND SURROUNDING AREA:

The application site was formally in use as a B1 (office) which is located at basement level of 68a Neal Street and largely consists of A1 (retail) units. The property itself is accessed via a separate doorway at street level.

The premises is located on the eastern side of Neal Street comprising part of a highly active parade of shops within a busy location in Central London. The pedestrianised street means that there are no parking requirements for visitors or staff as the site benefits from excellent public transport connectivity.

The site is situated in a highly accessible location in Covent Garden, Central London with a PTAL rating of 6b, the highest possible within the classification. The site benefits from a close proximity to public transport including underground, overground and bus services.

An extensive marketing campaign has been conducted by HubbleHQ, Hub Properties and other commercial agents to market the unit as B1 office space between 2015 to 2020 including using relationships with other office brokers, direct marketing around the area and advertising the site via advertising boards outside the site. Since marketing the property, very little interest has been received for the current use class as the marketing letter shows.

PLANNING HISTORY:

From information made publicly available, the below highlights the site's relevant planning history:

Reference	Description	Decision
2008/1453/P	Change of use from office use (Class B1) to flexible use as offices/dental practice (Class B1/D1).	Granted
2007/5641/P	Change of use from office use (Class B1) to use as a dental surgery (Class D1(a)).	Granted

THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT:

The planning application seeks a change of use from B1 (offices) to Sui Generis (immersive theatrical experience) retrospectively.

The premises will function as an 'immersive theatrical experience' in that visitors will be partaking in the experience for a period of 2 hours during which they are

imprisoned in 'Alcatraz' working together with an outlaw to outsmart the warden and his guards. No alcohol will be served on the premises however guests will be allowed to bring their own as part of the experience.

A maximum of 40 clients will be present on site during scheduled 'experiences'. This ensures that overcrowding on site and on Neal Street will not become an issue, thereby assuring the safety aspects as well as having no adverse effect on the street scene. An operational management plan accompanies this document in support of this planning application.

SCALE:

The proposals will not alter the scale of the building which is approximately 97.5m² at basement level.

LANDSCAPING:

The application site topography will remain unchanged. The ground is generally level throughout the site. There are no trees or other vegetation to be affected by the proposed development.

APPEARANCE:

The geometry and layout of the present building will be retained. The proposed development is in keeping with the local character.

ACCESS:

Access to the site will remain unaltered with access to the site coming via the frontal entrance located on Neal Street.

PROPOSED OPENING HOURS:

Wednesday & Thursday: 18:15 – 22:15

Friday: 17:00 – 23:15

Saturday: 12:30 – 23:15

Sunday: 13:45 – 17:45

STAFF NUMBERS:

Full-time: 2

Part-time: 15

There are only ever 11 staff members on the premises at any given time (to a maximum of 40 guests).

NATIONAL AND LOCAL PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT:

NATIONAL POLICY:

Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that planning applications be determined in accordance with the statutory development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) came into effect on 19 February 2019. The document effectively condenses previous planning policy guidance into one document (with the exception of certain Planning Policy Statements).

At the heart of the NPPF is a presumption in favour of sustainable development as stated in Section 2's Achieving sustainable Development. Paragraph 7 states:

'The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. At a very high level, the objective of sustainable development can be summarised as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'

The NPPF explains in paragraph 8 that achieving sustainable development is possible through three overarching objectives:

- *'An economic objective - to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy*
- *A social objective - to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities*
- *An environmental objective - to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment'*

Section 12 on achieving well-designed places states that in determining applications, local planning authorities should ensure that developments:

- *'will function well and add to the overall quality of the area*
- *are sympathetic to local character and history*
- *establish or maintain a strong sense of place*
- *optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development*
- *create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible and which promote health and well-being, with a high standard of amenity for existing and future users'*

LONDON PLAN:

Camden Borough Council's local development documents have to be 'in general conformity' with the London Plan, which is also legally part of the development plan that has to be taken into account when planning decisions are taken in any part of London unless there are planning reasons why it should not.

Relating Policy:

- Policy 2.15: Town Centres

- Policy 4.7: Retail and Town Centre Development
- Policy 7.4: Local Character
- Policy 7.6: Architecture

LOCAL POLICY

- Camden Local Plan (2017)

Policy E1: Economic Development

The policy outlines the ways in which the council will aim to create the conditions for economic growth in the borough through various methods. They include backing businesses and focusing on certain sectors in order to meet demand.

Policy E2: Employment Premises and Sites

The council aims to encourage developments that provide employment on previous employment premises, ensuring that the site continues to have an acceptable use.

Policy A4: Noise and Vibration

The policy aims to ensure that noise and vibration that occur as a result of developments are controlled and minimised so that the amenity of neighbouring properties are protected.

Policy A5: Basements

The policy ensures that there are no adverse effects on neighbouring properties, the character and amenity of the area as well as the structural, ground and water conditions of the area.

Policy D1: Design

The policy is in place in order to ensure that the designs of new development are in keeping with the character and appearance of the local area and have a positive impact on the locality.

Policy TC4: Town Centre Uses

The policy aims to ensure that there is an appropriate allocation of town centre uses within the borough. It also aims to ensure that there are no adverse effects on the character, viability or vitality of the centre.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS:

The NPPF emphasises that the presumption in favour of sustainable development should be at the heart of plan-making and decision-taking which means that the planning permission should be granted unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits when assessed against the policies in the NPPF as a whole. Significant weight should be placed on developments such as this which bring investment and create new job opportunities.

The proposed change of use would wholly support the aims of the NPPF by investing in the local economy, bringing a commercial unit into gainful use, creating new jobs and providing an additional service to the local area and an attraction to a Central London location. National policy is fully supportive of the development of town centre usages in accessible locations, such as the application site.

The application site is situated in a designated 'specialist retail area' meaning that retail uses are preferred in this area. However, the application site does not have a significant frontage, with the entrance to the application site being the sole part of the frontage. Therefore, it can be argued that the site is not suitable for retail uses. There will be no signage relevant to the application site, therefore, issues relating to signage are not relevant to this application.

Policies E1 and E2 of the Camden Local Plan (2017) emphasise that employment sites will be protected and developments that create economic growth will be encouraged. The proposals will mean that employment on the site will be maintained and that the use of the site will attract visitors to the area, which will be to the benefit of the surrounding areas.

Aside from the retail frontage issue mentioned above, the lawful B1 office use is seen an unfavourable working environment with the space fundamentally not suitable as an office.

The Council state under Policy E2: Employment premises and sites, that for employment premises within the CAZ:

'We will resist development of business premises and sites for non-business use unless it is demonstrated to the Council's satisfaction:

- a) the site or building is no longer suitable for its existing business use; and*
- b) that the possibility of retaining, reusing or redeveloping the site or building for similar or alternative type and size of business use has been fully explored over an appropriate period of time.'*

The site is unsuitable for office use for multiple reasons:

- Natural light – the basement level has no access to natural light and when the lights are switched off, is in complete darkness
- Ventilation – there are no windows or accessible air vents making the site highly undesirable for office space. A basic ventilation system is installed however this would not be ideal for continuous office use
- Phone signal – being located at basement level there is no phone signal making 21st century office use virtually redundant in this space
- Access – the lack of lift access to the basement level makes the site unsuitable for disabled persons as well as making moving large office equipment a significant challenge
- Parking – whilst not essential for an office space in London, the lack of parking does limit the potential of the site for a number of businesses

Additionally, the site has been advertised as an office space for around 5 years on office advertising sites (Hubble, Office Freedom, etc.) without any interest or offers on the space (people have viewed and rejected it). Due to the nature of the site

being located underground and for the reasons listed, other similar or alternative businesses developments on the application site are limited by the same factors.

The proposals for the change of use of basement floorspace will ensure that the amenity of neighbouring properties are maintained and protected in accordance with policy A5 of the Camden Local Plan.

Furthermore, considerations for the minimal noise and vibrations that may occur as part of the development will be mitigated as much as possible in order to satisfy policy A4. The site falls within the Seven Dial's Special Policy Area, meaning noise control outside the venue is of major importance.

The applicant has implicated measures in order to address the potential noise pollution on Neal Street and the neighbouring units, including:

- The principle of the immersive theatrical experience – a key goal of the experience, especially as entering the site, is that of secrecy, with the guests aiming to be as discrete as possible to avoid detection of the guards. Guests are encouraged to be quiet as a goal of the experience.
- Guest pickup location – As highlighted in the operation management plan, guests are instructed to meet away from the venue and are then escorted by a member of staff to the venue
- Guest noise entering and exiting the premises:
 - Guests are strictly instructed to remain quiet when entering and exiting the corridor that leads to the basement which is always under staff escort
 - Guests are strictly instructed that there is no re-admission, with the ambition that guests are not loitering outside for any reason, keeping guests contained within the basement
 - Guests are strictly instructed upon exit to head towards the nearest taxi rank or tube station by security staff. Any guests booking taxis are told to direct them to a location away from the venue
- Staff/actor noise - the actors and staff have been trained to keep noise to a minimum when entering and exiting the premises, encouraging the guests to do the same
- Basement location – noise is mitigated from lack of windows, air vents and a single access point to the experience
- Sound effects – There is no live music but a quiet soundtrack is played from the speakers

The proposed opening hours are suitable for the local area in the sense that the wider Covent Garden and Soho area are very service and entertainment focused. The opening hours will have minimal adverse effects on the local area.

The application site is in an ideal location in terms of access to transport connections with particular regards to the London Underground and Overground services.

There are several bus stops in the close vicinity of the application site which are frequented by different bus services to the surrounding area. There is no car parking

facilities provided on site due to the close proximity to transport links. The proposed usage currently doesn't or will not create any additional strain on the local highway or transport systems. With the ease of access to public transport visitors and staff normally visit the property using sustainable transport methods.

All waste and recycling are and will be stored on site with waste collection arrangement remaining consistent with the neighbouring properties.

CONCLUSION:

With the above and accompanying information, it is respectfully requested that this application for a change of use from B1 to Sui Generis be approved.

It is deemed that this change of use does not negatively affect the surrounding area adversely in any way and should be viewed as a positive addition to the local community.

The proposed is in line with the NPPF, London Plan and Camden Local Planning Policy. We therefore, look forward to the validation of the application and later approval from the council.