

Camden Square Conservation Area Advisory Committee

The Irish Centre
50-52 Camden Square
London
NW1 9XB

Date: 26 April 2020

Planning application Reference: 2020/1481/P

Proposal: Redevelopment of site to provide new and reconfigured community centre and ancillary residential accommodation (Class D2) involving alterations to retained buildings at No's. 50, 51 and 52 Camden Square including replacement of two storey 'link' building; demolition of Murray Street and Murray Mews buildings and replacement with three storey building (plus basement level) with third floor terrace and new entrance; associated landscaping and cycle parking.

Summary: Although there are some aspects of the application that are commendable, as it currently stands there are a number of significant design flaws around the bulk of the new build which appears monolithic in scale, the treatment of the front gardens and boundary walls and in particular the relocation of the main entrance to Murray Street. Overall the proposal neither maintains nor enhances the conservation area and should be rejected

Comments:

1. This is generally an extremely thorough and comprehensive application, particularly in comparison with the standard of the majority of applications presented for assessment. It is therefore somewhat surprising and indeed disappointing that
 - the elevations fail to reflect the shape of the proposed building elements in a clearer way - which could have been achieved by adding shadows to express the different depths of recesses, curved walls etc - but appear rather flat and difficult to read.
 - the choice of views shown in the "Location and Site" section of the design and access statement is rather unfortunate, as the majority has been taken from angles where trees or cars obscure large parts of the streetscape and the relevant buildings.



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2. The proposed new build along Murray Street represents a significant increase in the bulk and massing when compared to the structure that it replaces.
 - 2.1. Despite some attempts to break down the massing along the Murray Street façade, it appears both monolithic and rather scaleless.
 - 2.2. Currently the maximum height of the buildings to be demolished falls well below that of the retained building on the corner (fronting onto Camden Square). The new proposal rises a further storey and matches the parapet height. It is possible that this increased bulk could be accommodated if the execution of the blocks were managed sensitively, but sadly this is not the case.
 - 2.3. The monolithic appearance might have been avoided, for example, by introducing some sort of break between the 19th century building at the corner of Camden Square and Murray Street and more pronounced steps in height, rather than continuing the roofline through the whole length of the South façade - albeit slightly set back at third floor level - and almost seamlessly abutting to the existing structure.
3. The proposed element of new build along Murray Street also presents a larger scale and proportion than the surrounding buildings.
 - 3.1. Whilst the buildings that are being demolished are of limited value, they do offer a certain grain to the streetscape which is even referenced in the applicant's DAS:

"The definition of the existing 3 façades along Murray Street adds to the character of the townscape. This variety creates a collage of building types to break down the scale of the buildings into a more domestic scale."

In spite of this acknowledgement, the resulting elevation proposed is one of monolithic bulk.
 - 3.2. As suggested in para 2.3, some separation between the new construction and the retained existing building would be welcomed, whereas currently it abuts in the same line and plane. An expression of this junction would be welcomed (in the form of a slight recess or set-back for instance).
 - 3.3. An attempt has been made to retain two separate elements of building along this street by means of introducing two differing brick types. However, these are then overlapped and not utilised with any rigour so the aspiration of bookending the elevation with two white blocks and an interstitial connecting block is lost.



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- 3.4. The two main design features of the new extension - the two differently coloured bricks and the large openings so clearly illustrated in the CGIs shown on page 18 of the Built Heritage Statement – are combined to create the south and east façades, but appear arbitrarily composed and do not relate to the surrounding buildings.

The net effect of the Murray street elevation is that of a “side elevation” and a reduction in the quality of the streetscape along this part of Murray Street.

4. The proposed new build on Murray Street neither supports the current rhythm of neighbouring buildings nor does it create a beneficial contrast. The applicant's DAS makes reference to *“Creating an unapologetically contemporary building that is responsive to the different neighbouring conditions, producing a domestic scaled, public building”* And yet the resultant new build element does not seem to carry this idea through to its execution
- 4.1. It is assembled in a way to create large areas of the same material, without any relieving variation. This is particularly problematic on the Murray Mews elevation, where an opportunity has been missed to replace a façade currently unsympathetic to the small scale of the mews houses with something more appropriate.
- 4.2. Furthermore
- 4.2.1. The windows to the elevation are over-sized and limited in number
- 4.2.2. The relocated main entrance appears low and cramped and too small scale to act as a strong enough counterweight to the rest of the façade.
- 4.2.3. No clear articulation has been made between the existing corner building and the new build element, even though reference is made to this as an aspiration, in the documentation.
5. For such a prominent building in a crucial position, more information on the proposed materials and their durability is required.
- 5.1. Of the two different brick types proposed is the darker toned brick supposed to be London stock or similar to what has been used at Hillier House, as the two photographs in the design and access statement show quite different coloured and textured bricks).
- 5.2. It would be helpful to know whether or not the white bricks are to be glazed. If not, there may suffer discolouration due to air pollution etc
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6. In terms of style, the “unapologetically modern” approach is not seen as a negative and could provide a welcome and successful contrast to the neighbouring buildings. As stated above, reservations regarding the style are more in connection with its execution - the monolithic form, lack of breaking down of the form and lack of clarity with the proposed new entrance. Ultimately it is a question of whether or not it maintains or enhances the conservation area
7. The proposed development and the inclusion of the roof terrace is likely to impact on the privacy of neighbours in Murray Street and Murray Mews.
8. Whilst the proposed landscaping of the therapy garden area fronting onto Camden Square is welcomed, any intention to pave large areas should be strongly resisted and, in any case, conflicts with para 8.0 of the Council’s own Camden Square Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy.
 - 8.1. A more detailed landscape proposal should be requested to ensure the front gardens are treated within the guidelines for the conservation area.
 - 8.2. The removal of three mature trees, two of which are in the public domain, is of concern. Arrangements should be made to work round these trees or at the very least for them to be relocated or replaced by equally mature trees in a different location on this site.
 - 8.3. Detail regarding the new rendered wall to separate this from the pavement of Camden Square is currently lacking. The existing wall has a horizontal top with piers at intervals, the proposed wall slopes parallel to the pavement and lacks detail which does not add anything to the streetscape. More information on this detail would be welcomed
 - 8.4. The proposal to raise the height of the garden wall with a solid appearance should be resisted. Such a development conflicts with Camden’s own guidelines enshrined in Camden Square Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy in which it is stated that *“Where boundary walls or railings have been lost or replaced in non-original materials or to a different design we encourage residents to restore them to their original form. This is particularly important in Camden Square, where cast ‘strapwork’ pattern adds to the character of the area.”*
9. The London Irish Centre (LIC), one of only two civic buildings in the Camden Square Conservation Area, is highly valued as a community asset and provides a range of services to both local residents and the Irish community. The main Camden Square entrance is open to the public, feels welcoming and communicates its important role. As such, the desire to improve its facilities, make it more accessible and continue its role as a community centre, is



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welcomed in principle provided the proposed development makes a positive contribution to the conservation area and does not have a negative impact on its immediate neighbours.

10. In this context, converting the main Camden Square entrance into a private paved area and service yard surrounded by high, solid wall and high gates would completely negate this feeling of connection and accessibility. Critically, moving the main entrance from Camden Square to Murray Street, a key element of the proposal, will have a significant impact on local residents
 - 10.1. The rationale for this relocation, as stated in the Design and Access statement is to remove "the burden on the residential Square". This does not make sense, as the current main entrance is set back from the street with the front gardens forming a generous, semi-public buffer zone. It is also important to note that there are no residential buildings directly opposite its current position in Camden Square.
 - 10.2. The proposed new location on the other hand would be in a much narrower and more densely populated residential street, where noise levels after a popular event would put a disproportionate burden on residents. The planning statement alleges that potential noise levels from visitors after events would be contained within the building by providing a 'holding space' in the community hub space. If visitors travel by taxi, "they will be encouraged to wait inside the community hub until their vehicle arrives to prevent noise and disturbance for surrounding residential properties". This would be extremely difficult to manage and control, especially after a popular concert or similar event that would attract a large number of visitors.
 - 10.3. According to the Planning Statement the existing building has a total capacity of around 1400 visitors at any one time though fire regulations and poor access currently restrict this to around 1000. The development proposes a 79% increase in useable space, most of which will be more accessible, which suggests a potential overall capacity in the range of 1500-1800 at the very least, considerably greater than the 1250 proposed. The impact of such numbers spilling out onto Murray Street in terms of noise and traffic flow will be considerable. The absence of any fire strategy at this stage is to be regretted as presumably capacity has a bearing on design, event programming and financial viability of the institution.
 - 10.4. The positioning of the main entrance in Murray Street will also have a significant impact on traffic flow, made worse, of course by an increased volume visitors.. With over 5000 vehicles per day currently passing through Murray Street, potential vehicle drop offs and



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collection outside the new entrance will cause traffic hold ups and inevitable noise.

- 10.5. That there are no parking places or holding bays for cabs planned, nor indeed should there be, is another factor that would put additional stress on the street.
 - 10.6. The abiding image of the Irish Centre for local residents, visitors and wedding celebrants alike is likely to remain the elegant Camden Square facade even if a side entrance were seen as expedient for internal circulation, yet this is proposed to be relegated to a 'back of house' function.
 - 10.7. These problems could be alleviated if the main entrance position were to remain in its current location or thereabouts where there are fewer immediate residential neighbours and a more generous street and semi-public space.
11. In contrast to the new build on Murray Street, certain elements of the proposal, notably the retention and improvement of the Villas (50 – 52 Camden Square), are welcomed and support the development of the conservation area. Replacement of the existing glazed link with a more discreet, lower built form could also be seen as an improvement. It should be noted - and perhaps there are lessons to be learned from this – that the link and ramp were not constructed as approved and there is no evidence of planning approval for the significant alterations.
- 11.1. Much cheaper framed glazing with ill-advised white framing was used instead of the elegant frameless structural glazing drawn, the link appears to have been recessed only 300mm from the facade of No. 50, and the solid roof brought forward to that level.
 - 11.2. The entrance is about 1500 below the 'piano nobile' level rather than the 620mm lower drawn, and the link roof about 300 higher.
 - 11.3. The ramp arrangement was changed, a very basic galvanised steel pipe railing was built around the ramp, and hard-standing for bicycles added.
 - 11.4. These changes caused significant damage, but in any case the proposal appears to have failed in its original intention
- The CAAC comments in 2003 on this earlier development, a copy of which is attached, make salutary reading.
12. Although the submitted documentation is thorough and well researched and presented, the aspirations outlined and statements made do not appear to translate into the proposal. Given, too, the confusing layout of a building that



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has grown like Topsy over the years, the proposal represents a missed opportunity to really clarify its spatial organisation

- 12.1. The introduction of an internal courtyard garden is a nice idea but looks to be cramped and a slightly token gesture
- 12.2. Although the Design and Access Statement (DAS) explains the design process at length and cites as aims the importance of both improving access and rationalising the entrances, the actual design fails to achieve either adequately: there are multiple entrances, plus other features such as the double height glazing in Murray Street which possibly look more like major entrances, but which are not, next to what is in fact the main entrance which is low in height. The situation is further confused by an additional corner entrance labelled "ceremonial entrance"
- 12.3. Section 9.0 of the DAS states that deliveries would be in any of three ways
 - 12.3.1. The main Murray Street public entrance to a building hosting frequent daytime and evening events which is also described as the direct level service entrance
 - 12.3.2. The proposed Camden Square 'back of house' entrance, which includes five external steps and no ramp, unless two additional doors under either side of the incongruously-extended entrance steps are opened to give a through route. (This is stated as being the access route to take out the large bins to Murray Street twice a week.)
 - 12.3.3. The stage door entrance in Murray Mews which is even less viable as it is up 10 steps and then passes through the main Macnamara Hall itself or down two further flights.
- 12.4. It appears obvious that there should be one main service and 'back of house' entrance, readily accessible at grade . A position on the Murray Mews elevation directly accessible from Murray Street by an enclosed external area should be investigated. This would also give appropriate cycle storage area, not damaging the elegant main Camden Square setting.
13. This is a disappointing proposal for what should be an exciting opportunity for regeneration. The main issues revolve around the bulk of the Murray Street elevation, the treatment of the front gardens and boundary walls and the decision to place the main entrance in Murray Street towards the corner of Murray Mews. This throws up a number of concerns



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- 13.1. The introduction of the main entrance will inevitably result in more activity on Murray Street and cause disturbance for residents directly opposite. (Whereas the current entrance is opposite the open space of Camden Square).
- 13.2. Murray Mews is clearly a much smaller street than Camden Square, and emphasis on this corner is incongruent to the statement of Main Entrance.
- 13.3. The proposed elevation to Murray Street is monolithic and bulky, and yet the entrance itself low and cramped looking.
 - 13.3.1. The adjacent double height glazing in what could be termed the central zone appears visually more like the main entrance. The perspective view of Murray Street (page 71 of DAS) clearly demonstrates this issue.
 - 13.3.2. The existing building on the corner of Camden Square is still the dominant feature and the new elevation down Murray Street looks very much like a "side elevation" with large blank expanses of brickwork.
 - 13.3.3. It is likely that the visitor would still be drawn in the direction of the original building from the visual signals given.
- 13.4. One of the statements in the DAS describes this elevation as balanced, with "*two white corner buildings and an intermediate earth-toned block to break down the scale.*" and a "*generous and welcoming threshold to signify the entrance*" Though the description sounds plausible, this does not come across in the visual where the new white corner block is not clearly defined, merging into the intermediate block and vice versa. There does not appear to be any attempt to break down the scale and the result is fairly brutalist and monolithic.
- 13.5. In addition, as stated previously, the resulting entrance does not appear particularly generous and will potentially just add to the confusion of where to enter the building and result in crowding on the narrow pavement at the end of functions held there.
14. It is noted that the comments on the application by the Camden Design Review Panel, which mirror those of the CAAC, appear to have been ignored. Although these comments may have been based on earlier proposals and the submitted application drawings may have been developed further since 8 November 2019, they still appear valid on the drawings as they stand. Pertinent comments include



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- *The proposed external elevation and single new entrance give the new building an institutional feel: the panel's view is that designs should aim to retain more of the informal nature and domestic scale created by the existing combination of buildings from different eras on the site...*
 - *The panel questions the proposed internal level changes at Nos. 50-52 Camden Square and considers the existing front door should remain active. It suggests setting the new Murray Street building volume away from Nos. 50-52 Camden Square, and that different functions of the interior spaces might be expressed externally.*
 - *Much of the character of the existing building lies in the incremental way it has been developed. Piecemeal additions give the building a domestic feel, and this element of its character should be preserved as far as possible in the new development.*
 - *The current designs for the Murray Street frontage seem too institutional and uniform. Reflecting the internal functions of the building more clearly through the elevation design could help retain an essence of informality.*
 - *The panel suggests that the character of the new buildings should take more direct inspiration from the character, appearance and attributes of the surrounding conservation area, and that streetscape analysis would help to develop the design approach further in this direction.*
 - *The panel feels the design of the new entrance should be reconsidered. The desire to consolidate functions is appreciated, but there is concern about the architectural and functional impact of a single entrance into the building.*
 - *The panel considers the new Murray Street building could be more clearly separated from Nos. 50-52 Camden Square, to allow the existing building to retain its presence and character.*
 - *Further consideration is needed on how to maintain the status of the current front door to No. 50 Camden Square. Its prominence means it is important that it continues to be actively used, and it should not be allowed to become a dead entrance.*
15. This redevelopment presents an ideal opportunity to upgrade and rationalise the current facility and the internal planning has gone some way to do this. Serious thought, however, needs to be given to the concerns raised both by the CAAC and the Design Review Panel particularly with respect to the fundamental decision to relocate the main entrance. As it stands we feel the scheme should be refused.
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Signed:
David Blagbrough
Chair
Camden Square CAAC

Date: 26 April 2020



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The Irish Centre: Planning Application Reference PEX 0300215

1. The Camden Square Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC) held a consultation meeting at the Irish Centre on Thursday 22 May. The meeting was addressed by the management of the Irish Centre and the architects Brady and Mallalieu. Whilst the views expressed below are those of the CAAC Executive they also represent the views of Camden Square CAAC members.
2. The Camden Square CAAC welcomes the move by the Irish Centre to improve the outward appearance of the building and thereby enhance the conservation area. We also strongly commend the Centre for its efforts to improve disabled access.
3. The planning proposal consists of two elements
 - The **infill** between no 51 and 50 Camden Square
 - The **ramp** in the garden of no 50.
4. Our recommendations are as follows

4.1. The Infill: No objection

We believe that the infill will enhance the conservation area and be a considerable improvement on the current structure. We would, however wish to make the following comments

- 4.1.1. The height and prominence of the infill compromises the visual integrity of the individual buildings and interferes with the detached and semi-detached villas. To overcome these problems
 - The glazed infill should be set deeper than 800mm
 - The proposed solid extension should be removed as it conflicts with the glazed enclosure reading as a 'void' between the villas
- 4.1.2. To reduce the impact of the infill consideration should be given to using smoked or coloured glass.

4.2. The Ramp: Objection

We object to this aspect of the proposal for the following reasons

- 4.2.1. Building up the front of the garden of no 50 interferes with the general slope of the square, a significant element of its character, and one already eroded by the raised terrace of no 46. In relation to the raised area of no 46, the draft conservation



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Area Statement notes that "the soil-retaining front boundary wall and car parking are particularly out of character and harmful to the square's integrity."

- 4.2.2. Raising the garden level of no. 50 blocks the windows of the half-basement, conflicting with the expression of upper ground floor as raised 'piano nobile'
- 4.2.3. Adding external steps adjacent to the existing main entrance stair interferes with the repeated characteristic of individual entrances to each property as well as confusing access
- 4.2.4. If the ramp is not set against the building then the proposed ramp would be unsupported at the side. In such a case, handrails would be necessary and would have a further negative impact on the rhythm of the buildings and gardens

We would therefore like to make the following recommendations

- 4.2.5. The disabled entrance be relocated elsewhere or be set at ground level in its existing position
- 4.2.6. A new lift be purchased that is capable of moving to two levels thus providing access to both buildings. It is estimated that the cost of a new lift would be offset by the cost of the ramp – with its probable need for a retaining wall, damp proofing of the building etc.

24 May 2003

