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2020/2470/P

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Our consultation response to application 2020/2470/P.

The BCAAC is the advisory committee for Camden's Central London conservation areas, with the exception of Hatton Garden. This application concerns large scale redevelopment at the former Central St Martins site, sandwiched between the Kingsway and Bloomsbury Conservation Areas. Given the proximity to Red Lion Square, we have prepared this consultation response with the Friends of Red Lion Square Gardens (FoRLSG).

We were consulted with during the pre-application stage and were generally pleased with the plans but said that we would raise an objection on grounds of increased height regarding the 'roof lantern' at consultation stage. Having seen the application, our position is still that the plans are overall beneficial for the Bloomsbury and Kingsway Conservation Areas, but that the increased height represented by the rooftop lantern is unnecessary and detrimental. We also have some concerns to raise about particular choices of material and relationship to the Lethaby Building which could be fairly easily resolved.

Overall it is clear that the developer has a robust understanding of the history and architectural vocabulary of the area, and has used this to design a development which successfully enhances the historic environment. The architecture of the development is appropriate, and succeeds in grounding itself firmly in the architectural context of development along Theobald's Road and New Oxford Street. It relates appropriately to the street, is of a fairly appropriate scale and massing, is proposed in fairly appropriate materials, and imitates the uniformity and symmetry of surrounding development while retaining interest with varying heights, materials, and detailing. The Theobalds Building echoes the appearance of Commonwealth House and the so-called 'Bloomsbury Building' to the west, adding further interest and historic associations to the streetscape.

The development certainly represents an improvement on the current situation.

We do however have concerns about the scale of the development which we believe represents a slight overdevelopment of the site. While the scale of the surrounding

area is fairly large, proper regard should be had to the scale of the Lethaby Building in particular. While the discord in height is not apparent from Red Lion Square, it is prominent in views east from New Oxford Street, particularly in the following image taken from the views impact assessment.



The main problem shown by this image is the lack of regard to the vertical hierarchy and materials of the Lethaby Building by the Theobalds Building. A particular feature of the Lethaby Building is its prominent parapet line and change in materials and massing above that line, which at the corner lends particular emphasis to the roof lantern. The Theobalds building interrupts this feature reducing its significance. This could easily be resolved by introducing a parapet to the Theobalds Building and/or an associated change in materials to reflect that of the Lethaby Building. This would also help to provide a more inviting entrance into the newly formed Orange Street.

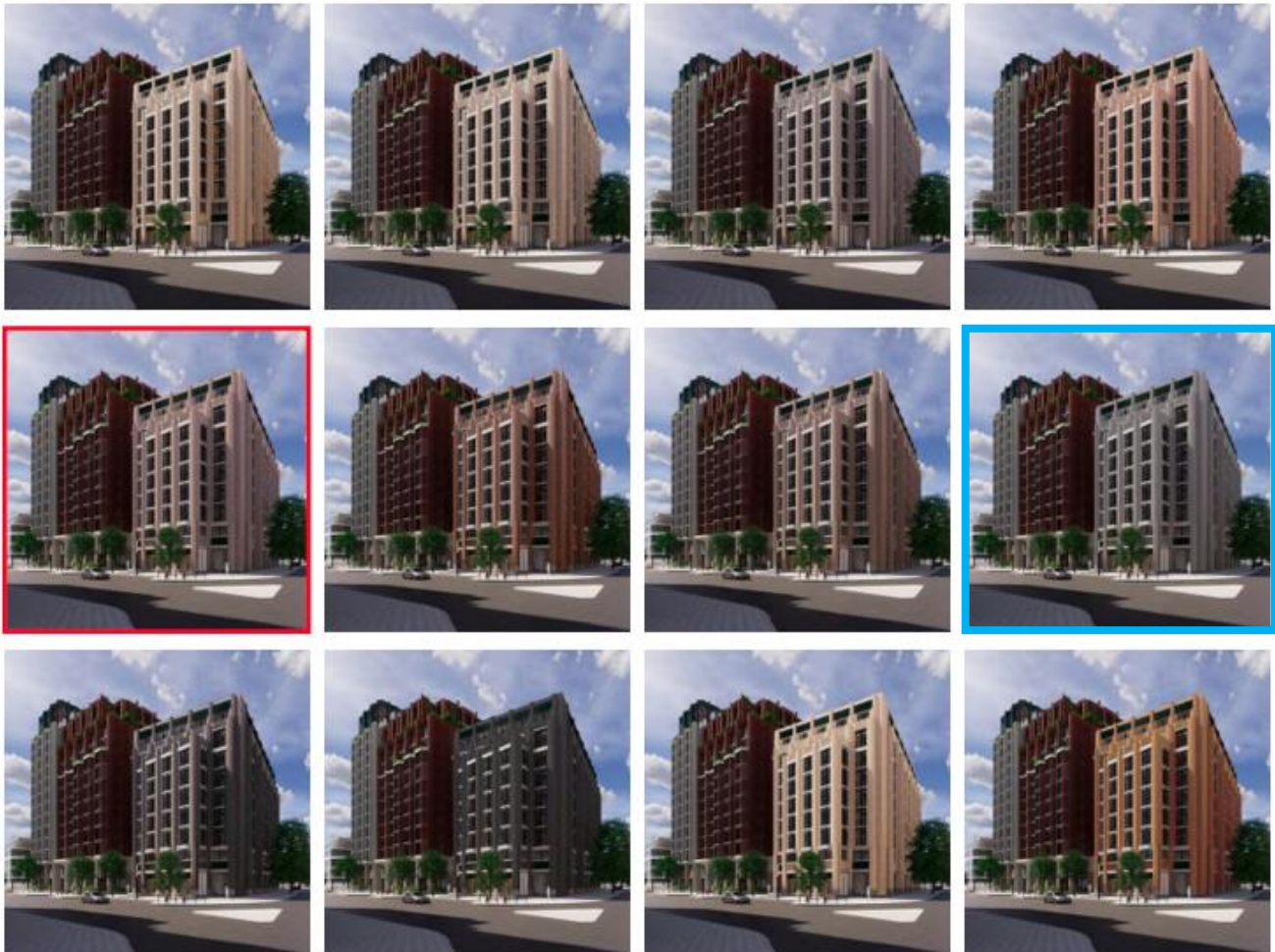
The above view also shows significant discord in the appearance of the materials used between the Theobalds and Lethaby Buildings. It is noted in the application that following consultation with Camden the developer chose the light pink colour for the Theobalds Building as a compromise between the grey/brown of the Lethaby Building and the red brick Red Lion Building. In our opinion, the colour fails to complement either building and instead offers a strange contrast to both and also to the wider environment. The choice of light pink as a colour for a façade is most unusual under any circumstance and should be questioned.

This could easily be remedied by having the Theobalds Building faced with concrete to imitate the Portland stone à la the Red Lion building, with upper levels above the parapet line in a darker material to match the Lethaby building. Alternatively a light

grey/brown brick could be used, or simply London stock. In any event, we strongly believe the choice of pink brick to be a mistake.

This would also accord with advice given by the Victorian Society.

Studied options matrix



Current choice

More appropriate

Moving onto Red Lion Square, as indicated we object to the 'roof lantern'. On top of the already tall building, this extra increase in height represents a fairly significant departure from the scale of buildings around the square, and although it is stepped back to mitigate its visual impact it still appears inappropriately large and obtrusive. It is likely to block evening and afternoon sunlight to the square, impacting upon an essential aspect of Bloomsbury's special character, this impact likely being especially noticeable during the winter months. The design of the lantern itself does not sit comfortably with the rest of the composition in our opinion, and takes on the form of a post-hoc rooftop extension, similar to that of the Standard Hotel. This is especially accentuated given the departure in materials and dark colouring. In our opinion, the associations with the historic roof lantern of the Lethaby building are simply not apparent. The development would be much better in appearance and the historic environment better preserved if the lantern were removed. If it cannot be removed, it should certainly be constructed in much lighter materials, perhaps to mimic those of the roof lantern of the Lethaby Building.

To add a further point, we would also strongly recommend that street lighting around the development is provided by means of historic wall-mounted lamps attached to the development rather than by traditional street lamps. This is an effective way to prevent the scourge of fly-posting in this area while also reducing clutter on the streets, something mentioned as requiring improvement in the Holborn Vision.

We have also noted comments from the Metropolitan Police regarding the possible gating of the courtyard to prevent antisocial behaviour. We strongly recommend this proposal, so long as the gates are only closed as appropriate and are left open during the day. A similar scenario occurred recently at a major development in the King's Cross area, which eventually ended up with the entire development being gated after consistent complaints of ASB. It is best to prevent this sort of occurrence rather than address it after the event.

If this application is to be granted, we would like to suggest a number of ways in which planning obligations could be used to further enhance the historic environment. These are contained in a separate document.

In summary, we lend our support to the application, but believe planning obligations should be used to control the materials used for the Theobalds Building and/or for its design to be slightly altered, to help it better relate to the Lethaby Building, and consideration should be had to the removal of the roof lantern, and certainly control of its materials using obligations.

Bloomsbury Conservation Areas

Advisory Committee

Friends of Red Lion Square Gardens