

Monday, 27 July 2020

Comment on planning application 2020/2486/P

I am a local resident with a personal interest in the amenity value of the area where I live. I was formerly a member of 4 different Design Review Panels, two in London and the others in Essex and the East Midlands.

I find a number of missed opportunities in this application:

1. MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE SETTING

A rigidly orthogonal approach to the context has assumed that the new building should align with the frontages and rooflines of the existing 19th. century houses on Belsize Road. There was no particular reason to make that assumption - not least because as proposed, the new building ends up having no meaningful architectural relationship at all with the existing houses, and indeed breaks with them completely in term of its proportions, fenestration, and materials. What may have begun as an intention to make the new building "fit in" ends by making it clash with its surroundings, severing all relationships with the context.

The assumption that every new building must always face the street is often misplaced and I find it unfortunate that the wider context has not been fully considered. In particular, the opportunity has been missed to exploit the very long view looking west, all the way along Belsize Road towards Kilburn.

In an alternative approach, that long view could have been exploited to the full by setting the new building to face in that direction, and re-planning it so that the most important internal spaces overlooked the new green space, giving them that long view and thereby enhancing the new building's civic presence, rather than just sitting on Belsize Road facing a busy, noisy, polluted street. The entrance to the new building (during its opening hours) would thus have been via the green space, rather than straight in off the street - giving mothers with children (for example) the opportunity to linger and chat, safe from traffic.

This alternative design strategy would have turned the main frontage of the building away from Belsize Road, which incidentally would have greatly reduced the traffic noise problem. The application adduces traffic noise, in fact, as partly the reason for designing an essentially sealed building that relies on mechanical air conditioning and (therefore) on very high energy consumption.

2. MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO USE SOLAR ENERGY TO THE FULL

In the 21st century, by conviction as well as by law and regulation, we are all working to minimise the energy consumption of new buildings. Bearing in mind that Camden Council itself is working to decarbonise, I find it unfortunate - and unnecessary - that this proposed new building for Camden appears to rely so heavily on mechanical air conditioning.

This (in my opinion) retrograde approach to building services is especially evident on the roof plan, much of which is occupied by the large, noisy, energy-hungry air-handling units that would operate the aircon system. The noise of these AHUs constantly turning on off would be a nuisance for the residents of Casterbridge, particularly in summer when the AHUs would be working hard to keep the building cool, and when the residents would have their windows open. I am surprised that these considerations do not

seem to have been taken into account. Incidentally, I note that these noise issues have also been raised in a detailed technical comment to this application.

It may also be worth noting that a sealed building which relies so heavily on air conditioning may be at risk of “sick building syndrome”: if a cooling system is left off for any lengthy period of time (e.g. during the winter), bacteria can accumulate and propagate in the system, and will then be distributed throughout the building when the system is turned on again. There have been recorded cases of deaths resulting from the re-activation of a dormant air-conditioning system.

I would add that the decision to use the roof as the location for the AHUs means that the residents of Casterbridge will not only suffer from the noise, but will also have to look down on an ugly roof for approximately the next 50 years (presumably the useful life of the building).

3. MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO MAXIMISE THE USE OF NATURAL LIGHT AND VENTILATION

Many internal rooms and spaces in the proposed building, including various lobbies, WCs, consulting rooms, offices etc. are completely enclosed with no natural light or ventilation. In my view this was unnecessary. A differently planned building could have given natural daylight and ventilation to every space, large or small.

That missed opportunity is most evident at the upper floor, where there were many ways of designing a solar roof with PV or solar hot water panels facing south, combined with extensive glazing facing north that would have eliminated solar gain whilst flooding the interiors with natural light. Instead, the plans and sections only show a few minimally sized flat rooflights, placed in seemingly random locations, where they could overheat the spaces in hot weather (which would then have to be countered by increasing the workload and energy load on the a/c system).

There were wonderful opportunities here to design an uplifting, light-filled upper floor, where all the most important healthcare workspaces would enjoy optimum conditions of natural lighting and ventilation - without requiring mechanical air conditioning.

4. HIGHWAYS ISSUES: NEW VEHICLE ACCESS POINTS AND DANGER FROM TRAFFIC

(a) The proposed new vehicle entrance ramp to the car park between the two tower blocks is located exactly at the point where families with children, coming and going from the existing bus stop, currently enter and leave Snowman tower. This entrance would also be used by refuse vehicles etc. I am surprised that this potentially dangerous conflict point was not spotted during the consultation process.

(b) I am concerned that the proposed new vehicle entrance in front of Casterbridge is far too close to the road junction, where vehicles arrive at speed from Abbey Road, accelerating to “beat the lights” as they turn left into Belsize Road. Even today it is almost impossible for pedestrians to see them until it is too late - as I can confirm from personal experience. This proposed new vehicle access point would be just a few metres from this dangerous crossing point (and it is surely not by coincidence that the existing vehicle access is well away from the road junction).

5. OVERALL: A SERIES OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Foreseeably for at least the next 50 years, this new Health and Community Centre will serve the residents of Snowman and Casterbridge, and a much wider catchment area. There was an unrepeatable opportunity here to provide a civic building of the highest quality.

Even at this late stage it is not too late to stop and think again.