

**Proof of Evidence for Covent Garden Community Association
re Loss of Amenity as a result of the development, in operation and during prior works**

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My name is Chris Baker.

I am a resident and property owner in 45 New Compton Street which is a 24-flat residential building nearby to the Odeon Cinema – the subject of this planning appeal. This street has been my home for more than 20 years and I am familiar with the area and local issues concerning its residents, visitors and businesses.

Whilst the cinema is towards the other end of the street to my building, it is close enough such that all planning matters related to it affect me, and affect my life, directly.

I have very considerable concerns related to the consequences of allowing the proposed development to take place, which are shared by a number of my neighbours within my building. In brief summary they are:

- Significant increase of traffic, parking and waiting on New Compton Street with attendant noise, pollution, disturbance and potential disruption to the flow of vehicles.
- Loss of light to Phoenix Gardens due to the height of the proposed new structure
- Inappropriate and architecturally damaging changes to a listed building.
- Loss of a historic cinema/theatre.

Traffic/deliveries etc.

Context

The street is narrow and largely residential. It consists of 4 residential apartment buildings and some further flats in two terraced houses. Significant commercial and office space is also present, but with access and frontage mainly to Shaftesbury Avenue and not New Compton Street. Therefore residential use of the street is the main feature, and the street remains one of the West End's very few remaining local communities. New Compton Street has been a largely residential neighbourhood street since the late 1600s.

Our area is already known to suffer one of the very highest levels of air pollution in London which frequently considerably exceed safe levels and are a source of medical concern.

Much traffic on our street is associated with deliveries and refuse disposal. The noise and disturbance from these is already excessive, affecting the normal healthy sleep patterns of residents – many of whose bedrooms face directly onto the street. This is known to have direct and damaging effects on health and is more than a trivial irritation. Delivery vehicles cause traffic problems almost every day. The road is not generally wide enough to permit the passing of stationary delivery vehicles such that there is the sounding of horns and sometimes altercations between drivers on a frequent basis. During pre-Covid times traffic build up around the end of the street occurred on most days, with many vehicles queuing due to refuse vehicles etc., backing up into St Giles High Street and disrupting the flow of buses there.

The street also offers resident parking and this is usually in use 24/7 with visitors arriving and departing at all times of the day and night, often with accompanying noise, shouting and with

engines left running for considerable lengths of time whilst drivers have phone calls amplified to the local area over the car speakers.

The street is also used as a rat-run for vehicles bypassing traffic on Shaftesbury Avenue. This results in drivers accelerating hard after entering the street at St Giles High Street and causing considerable risk to pedestrian safety. This is currently a subject of complaint to the Council.

The proposals being appealed

The key proposal is that a cinema be converted to a hotel with over 90 bedrooms and with bars and restaurant provision. It should be acknowledged that hotels have heavy requirements for deliveries of consumables, laundry, refuse collection and trades, and it should be anticipated that much vehicular traffic will be generated by any switch from cinema to hotel.

Impact

Local residents will bear the brunt of the impact were this appeal allowed. People who live in the area already suffer a degree of noise and disturbance that is excessive by any standards, as outlined above. Planning decisions should ensure that health considerations and quality of life of residents are not further damaged. These proposals would cause yet further disturbance and stress to many of the residents of New Compton Street.

The Phoenix Garden

Context

This community garden is a rare treasure and is supported by local volunteers and donors. It is essential because the area is so polluted and so lacking in vegetation and open space. It is also a fragile and unusual resource.

The proposals being appealed

With additional floors added to the Odeon cinema the height of the building will be such as to restrict light to the garden. Additional visitors might also be expected from the hotel, if developed, including staff and guests who might naturally seek a refuge there.

Impact

The garden could be reasonably expected to suffer from loss of light, reducing the health of this valuable ecosystem and have to cope with visitors from the hotel making use of a local community resource to which they contribute nothing.

Architecture and conservation

The plans and renders of the proposed development of this building for its conversion into a hotel show that this will compromise the appearance of the Odeon unacceptably, with its massive glass structure sitting uncomfortably on top. Of course, it's a matter of taste and trend. But by no-means all architects would see these plans with unalloyed delight, and it is – by some viewpoints – an abomination that only pretends to respect the concept and heritage of the existing structure.

Loss of another West End venue

Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, cinema was enjoying a resurgence that, it is surely to be hoped, will one day resume. If this cinema went, the West End would become a smaller place. Viable plans exist, I understand, to return the Odeon to being a theatre. With this opportunity lost and only another hotel gained, then the entertainment focus of the West End will be diminished further on the trajectory towards an eventual monoculture of only restaurants, bars and hotels. The loss of status of the West End as a prime entertainment and cultural centre might arguably result in the downgrading of London itself – a process those of the future might feel could have been averted.
