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bloomsburylives.co.uk

21st December 2020

2020/3880/P
Belgrove House (related): 2020/3881/P

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Objection to Redevelopment of Acorn House, Gray's Inn Road.

We were informed of plans to redevelop this site and responded to the initial pre-consultation pack on 22nd May 2020 (PDF attached for convenience). Our main feeling was that this site was suitable for comprehensive redevelopment, and that the proposed redevelopment was overall acceptable for a first attempt, but required some substantial refinements in terms of overall scale, massing, and design. We strongly encouraged the affordable housing use.

However our pointers on matters of scale, massing, and design have not at all been integrated with the proposed development and we fail to see how the development has evolved to integrate with the historic landscape. We therefore must object to this application.

Scale and Massing

The development evidently reaches the upper limit of would be acceptable on this site in terms of size. Buildings of this scale in this area typically have upper storeys set back to reduce the impact of the height, and also for stylistic reasons. The 'block massing' of the upper storeys is in strong contrast with the accepted precedent in this area, and for this reason has a much more negative impact upon the townscape than other similarly sized buildings in the locale, e.g. just opposite on Swinton Street. For these reasons, we believe the overall scale and massing to do a fairly significant amount to the historic environment and wider townscape. This is especially disappointing as relatively little would need to be done to mitigate this harm while sacrificing a minimum of floor space, and we raised this issue at an early stage.

The contrast in scale between Gray's Inn Road and Swinton Street required careful consideration to create a building which could integrate with both streets. While Gray's Inn Road forms the principal frontage of this building, Swinton Street is a particularly historic example of 18th century terracing, with the entirety of this long street preserving its original terrace form on the southern

side, giving a rare impression of the uniformity of development which once strongly defined this area. It is unfortunate that the contrasting development on the northern side of the street, the poor state of repair of the terraces, and blight of traffic impede upon proper appreciation of this street's significance. But in architectural and historic terms, this street is of exceptionally high significance, and demands much greater sympathy from the proposed development in terms of scale and design. Unfortunately, the proposed development fails by a great margin to meet these demands.

An important point is that there are ongoing development proposals at 330 Gray's Inn Road immediately to the south, while the Eastman Dental Hospital has begun construction on a major uplift in scale, and of course the Belgrove House proposal on Euston Road is nearby. One must carefully consider whether the cumulative impact of all these developments will have an unacceptable impact upon the historic environment of this part of King's Cross in the next decade or so, which up to this date has retained its historic character and scale for over two hundred years.

Design

The design of this development is in our view lacklustre, and fails to meet the high standard demanded of all development in Camden's most prestigious conservation area. While it is not particularly objectionable in any regard, it is simply entirely ignorant of local context and fails to relate to the historic environment in any tangible way. Disregarding the historic environment for a moment, even as a modern composition taken in its own right, the development is entirely undistinguished and does little to improve upon the current situation. We strongly believe that Camden should be demanding excellence in design from all development proposals, especially those in such a sensitive setting.

Conclusion

The feeling towards this development proposal is that it is simply disappointing, and falls far short of the high potential of this site. In our view the developers have concentrated their energies on Belgrove House while treating the design of Acorn House as an afterthought rather than something of importance. Every site in the Bloomsbury CA is of high importance and demands excellence in design and a robust understanding of the historic environment.

It is for this reason that despite the public benefits of affordable housing and regeneration of the site, we cannot support this application, as to do so would be to promote mediocrity in a conservation area which is internationally acclaimed for its excellence in historic design and town planning. It will be for LB Camden to carefully consider whether mediocrity is acceptable in return for affordable housing, even in such a renowned area as Bloomsbury.

We would encourage the developer to take our comments on board and return with a more well-considered development for this site.

Bloomsbury Conservation Areas

Advisory Committee

21st December 2020