

**London Borough of Camden Design Review Panel**

**Report of Formal Review Meeting: Selkirk House**

Friday 22 November 2019  
5 Pancras Square, London, N1C 4AC

**Panel**

Richard Lavington (chair)  
Abigail Bachelor  
Harriet Bourne  
Sarah Featherstone  
Stuart Piercy

**Attendees**

Richard Wilson	London Borough of Camden
Edward Jarvis	London Borough of Camden
David Fowler	London Borough of Camden
Victoria Hinton	London Borough of Camden
Elizabeth Martin	London Borough of Camden
Vilhelm Oberg	London Borough of Camden
Neil McDonald	London Borough of Camden
Deborah Denner	Frame Projects
Angela McIntyre	Frame Projects

**Apologies / report copied to**

Bethany Cullen	London Borough of Camden
Kevin Fisher	London Borough of Camden

**Confidentiality**

This is a pre-application review, and therefore confidential. As a public organisation Camden Council is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), and in the case of an FOI request may be obliged to release project information submitted for review.

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## 1. Project name and site address

Selkirk House, 1 Museum Street, 10-12 Museum Street, 35-41 New Oxford Street and 16A-18 West Central Street, London WC1A

## 2. Presenting team

Henry Mace	Lab Tech Investments Limited
Will Rimmel	Lab Tech Investments Limited
David Hills	DSDHA Limited
Lemma Redda	DSDHA Limited
Nathan Humfries	DSDHA Limited
Dan Thomson	Peter Stewart Consultancy
Anna Snow	Iceni Projects

## 3. Planning authority's views

The site is split into two parts by West Central Street. The southern part of the site is bounded by High Holborn to the south and Museum Street to the north and is occupied by a Travel Lodge hotel and car park. The Travel Lodge tower consists of 17 storeys and was built in the 1960s. There is a three-storey podium around the tower. The northern part of the site is bounded to the north by New Oxford Street and to the east by Museum Street and features lower, more historic buildings.

The northern part of the site is in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. There are no listed buildings on the site, but there are a number in the vicinity, and there are buildings in the northern block which are positive contributors to the conservation area.

The planning authority would like the panel's views on the height of the proposed tower and the proposals which will form the West Central Street block. The authority would also welcome comments on architectural expression and the quality of public realm and open space.



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## 4. Design Review Panel's views

### *Summary*

Whilst constrained and challenging, the proposed site offers a unique opportunity for positive change on a prominent site in this part of Camden. The panel acknowledges that designs are still at an early stage, and highlights aspects which should be the focus of further work as the scheme evolves. At a strategic level, the panel asks for justification as to why little of the existing buildings are retained – and highlights the 'carbon cost' of removing one concrete frame and replacing it with another. The limited views presented make it difficult for the panel to assess the impact of the proposal's height, but initial assessment suggests that the tower appears overly tall within its context. The panel encourages the design team to explore massing which is lower and wider. It is also concerned by the way the building relates to Museum Street, with a sheer vertical face extending beyond the line of the existing building. This risks making Museum Street feel canyon like, and damaging existing trees. The new route between Building A and Building B requires further thought in terms of its architectural language, public realm, and the impact of the servicing strategy where it connects to West Central Street. The panel encourages urban greening especially at street level to soften the hard urban context. Residential proposals require further work to deliver high quality homes – including high quality amenity space. In particular, the panel queries the decision to adopt a façade retention strategy for the block on the corner of New Oxford Street and Museum Street. Whilst appreciating that there may be residential quality arguments for doing this, this strategy may result in awkward mismatches between interior and exterior. Elsewhere the architectural expression is still evolving, and the panel makes some preliminary comments on the design approach. These points are expanded further below.

### *Sustainability*

- Robust justification is required to explain why little of the existing buildings are retained. There will be a 'carbon cost' involved in demolishing the existing structure – especially given that the proposals remove one concrete frame and replace it with another.
- The panel commends the design team's statement that they will significantly improve on Camden's sustainability targets but would like to understand how they will do this and would urge carrying this ethos all the way through the project.

### *Height and massing*

- The limited amount of views presented make it difficult for the panel to assess the impact of the height of the proposals.
- The panel would like to see studies which show how the design's massing has evolved to understand the rationale for proposing such a tall building.



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- Based on the information shown the panel finds the height of the proposed tower problematic. Compared with the existing building the proposals show a significant increase in height which will make the scheme very visible in this sensitive context, especially in long views from Bedford Square and the British Museum steps.
- Concerns about height but could potentially be addressed with more information and more views, including long views, views from the south and street views especially along Museum Street.
- The panel would encourage the design team to test different proportions against rights of light constraints.
- Buildings in the local context have more squat proportions. The panel suggests it could be beneficial for the scheme to reference these proportions, making the tower shorter and wider, this massing may be more appropriate to the identity and character of the area.
- The panel is concerned about the sheer vertical face of the building onto Museum Street. This will have a negative effect on the street blocking out a large portion of sky view for pedestrians, narrowing the width of the street, and risking damage to the existing trees.

### *Architectural expression*

- Proposals require further development before the panel can fully comment on architectural expression.
- Drawings show heavily glazed elevations – whereas greater solidity is likely to be needed. It is important that building facades are developed with rigour, in response to the context and the activities that will occur behind them.
- The panel welcomes architectural cues taken from the language of Grape Street and reinterpreted in the proposals.
- The panel questions why only the facades of the West Central Street buildings are retained. Façade retention is a difficult process and could end up with awkward mismatches between the interior and exterior.
- The panel would like to understand the design rationale of the set back new residential block within the West Central Street buildings. This will be overshadowed by the tall building, and the panel is not convinced by its 'jazzy' design behind the retained historic facades.



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- The team should consider whether they intend the route between Building A and B to be an 'arcade' with unified architecture or a 'passage' with different architecture on each side – in which case it should arguably be open to the air.

### *Public realm*

- The panel urges the design team to carry out a tree survey as soon as possible, to ensure the designs protect the existing site trees.
- The impact of proposals on Museum Street is problematic. Moving the building line east narrows the pavement and jeopardises the existing trees.
- The panel would encourage further thought about how to create generous, high quality public space on Museum Street.
- Urban greening will be vital in this context to help soften the hard urban environment. The panel encourage the design team to integrate urban greening on the street where possible – not just at upper levels.
- While the panel thinks opening up the new route between Building A and Building B could be successful, it cautions that the quality of experience when moving through this space is important and must be carefully designed.
- What will make people come to and move through this space? It is important that the quality of the space draws people to the route and that it does not rely solely on bars / restaurants etc.
- The panel feels the space between Building A and Building B appears quite narrow and the width may limit its success as a piece of public realm. If the space was wider and less covered it could feel more like a courtyard which may encourage the public to spend time there.
- The wider area of public space in the center of the route between Building A and Building B is likely to be overshadowed and dark. Creating a more generous south facing public area at the opening of the space between Building A and Building B could be more successful, and provide a green offering to the city.
- Back of house functions take up a substantial portion of the façade along West Central Street. This will reduce active frontage as well as increasing servicing traffic along this route.



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- The panel encourages the design team to explore if back of house facilities could be located along the already busy road at High Holborn, this would free up space along the new route for active frontages and encourage pedestrian activity.
- It is vital that microclimate and wind analysis is undertaken to understand the comfort factor of inhabiting all proposed areas of public realm.

### *Residential proposals*

- While the panel understands the challenges of accommodating new homes on this site, it feels much further work is needed to ensure high quality homes are created.
- While it is beneficial to separate the housing from the other uses, the panel questions if the proposed location in the shadow of a tall building is the most appropriate location for homes.
- As proposals will consist mainly of affordable housing and it is important to understand the quality of the homes being created for those with limited options.
- Residential amenity requires a rethink. The ground floor courtyard will be dark and overlooked and the panel would urge the design team to explore other options to provide more joyful amenity space.

### *Next Steps*

The panel would welcome the opportunity to review proposals again at the next stage of design development.

