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Conservation Adviser

THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY
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David Fowler
Planning Department
Camden Reception
5 Pancras Square
London
N1C 4AG

Your reference: 2021/2954/P
Our reference: 167248

15th July 2021

Dear Mr Fowler,

RE: Redevelopment of Selkirk House, 166 High Holborn and 1 Museum Street following the substantial demolition of the existing NCP car park and former Travelodge Hotel to provide a mixed-use scheme, providing office, residential, and town centre uses at ground floor level. Works of demolition, remodelling and extension to 10-12 Museum Street, 35-41 New Oxford Street, and 16A-18 West Central Street to provide further town centre ground floor uses and residential floorspace, including affordable housing provision.

This scheme was discussed by our Southern Buildings Committee at the public consultation stage, and we offered comment then. We have reviewed the submitted documents and note that our previous concerns have not been assuaged. We therefore reiterate our strong objection to the proposals which would harm the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

Selkirk House

Selkirk House is positioned immediately to the south of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, Sub Area 8. It is noted in the appraisal that "neighbouring buildings immediately outside the boundary [of sub area 8] are of a scale and design which harm the setting of [West Central Street] buildings and the wider Conservation Area." Selkirk House is clearly one of these buildings, unsympathetic in design and looming over the designated and non-designated heritage assets to the immediate north. The redevelopment of this site is a once in a generation opportunity to rectify this issue and reduce harm to the conservation area. However, the current scheme not only fails to take advantage of this opportunity but would in fact increase the harm to the conservation area by constructing a building even taller than existing Selkirk House. As demonstrated, this would be highly conspicuous in views within the immediate sub area, as well as the wider conservation area. There is the further danger that it would set a dangerous precedent for additional tall buildings in this area of Bloomsbury which would, in time, significantly erode its character. A building lower than the existing Travelodge would be the optimum outcome, but failing that, the existing height of Selkirk House is the absolute maximum acceptable in this location to prevent further harm.

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We moreover continue to question the rationale behind the total demolition of Selkirk House and its replacement with another, taller building given the current Climate Crisis. Camden have acknowledged this threat and declared a climate emergency in 2019, and we therefore hope that they will be of a similar view.

Remainder of proposed site

We welcome the refurbishment of facades on New Oxford Street, and West Central Street, as well as Museum Street buildings. However, we are concerned by some of the associated works. The introduction of one and two storey roof extensions to the New Oxford Street buildings seems excessive, and these should be removed from the scheme, and the impressive facades kept as designed to reduce the harm. Similarly, the roof extension which appears to be proposed for the southernmost Victorian building (no. 11) on Museum Street would be incongruous with the existing building, and insensitive to the scale of this part of the conservation area.

The demolition of all but the facades of the West Central Street buildings (and wholesale demolition of the single storey structure) is an inappropriate approach to take within the conservation area especially as these are marked as structures which make a positive contribution to the CA. The justification provided for their demolition is moreover unconvincing. This cites the condition and colour of these facades, their poor composition, and limited openings. However, it should be emphasised that the 'haphazard' character of these buildings, identified as a negative aspect, is consistent with their location on a secondary street, and a characteristic feature of the area. Whilst the demolition of these buildings would cause harm in itself, this would be increased by the proposed infill building would destroy the legibility of the small street scale, and impose an alien uniformity, completely out of character with this kind of development.

Finally, whilst the reinstatement of Vine Street appears positive, benefit from this would be negated by proposals for the new residential building flanking the Cuban Embassy. As with the West Central Street infill building, the scale of this is inappropriate for the location, and the design would compete, rather than complement, the Embassy itself. The development of this area of the site is not objectionable in principle, but it seems that a more sympathetic design is needed.

Policy

Paragraph 200 of the NPPF states that;

Local planning authorities should look for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and World Heritage Sites, and within the setting of heritage assets, to enhance or better reveal their significance.

The above scheme has clearly failed to do this, and instead proposes a development which includes the demolition of buildings that make a positive contribution to the Bloomsbury Conservation Area, and the construction of an inappropriately tall building in its immediate setting. This should not be seen as acceptable, and we urge the council to refuse consent.

I would be grateful if you could inform me of your decision in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Olivia Stockdale

Conservation Adviser