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## **Objection to Planning Proposal for Howitt Close, NW3 2021/3839/P**

I am resident in Howitt Close and have been a leaseholder for 17 years. I strongly object to the planning proposal on the grounds that it will damage a well-preserved, unique 1930s building of considerable architectural merit and significance. The bulking-up of the building by the addition of a mansard roof and an extra storey will destroy the architectural integrity of a heritage asset, adversely affect the visual appearance of the neighbourhood and profoundly damage the conservation area.

Howitt Close was very carefully designed in 1932 to suit its specific location and, internally and externally, it remains fundamentally undamaged and unaltered by changes over the ninety years since construction. It has maintained its architectural integrity over the best part of a century and is unspoilt by major additions or changes. After surviving intact the second world war, unlike some Howitt Road properties, and escaping infelicitous developments in the post WWII era, it would be deeply ironic if the building were to be desecrated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whilst defined in the The Belsize Conservation Area Statement (2003) as a building making a positive contribution to the special character and appearance of the conservation area, and apparently subject to the protections of a conservation area.

### **Aesthetic appeal of Howitt Close within its location**

This L-shaped building was clearly designed to make optimal use of the space available, but without dominating its prominent position at the junction of Howitt Road and Glenilla Road, with Belsize Park Gardens a stone's throw away. Aesthetically it was designed to blend with the earlier Edwardian terraced housing in the neighbouring streets that predated it, whilst proclaiming its era of construction through its overall form and Art Deco flourishes. The proposal to add a fourth level and mansard roof would destroy the proportions of the building and make Howitt Close, at present perfectly adjusted to its vicinity within streets of terraced Edwardian houses, an over-prominent and jarring presence.

Camden Council in its 12 May 2020 preplanning advice to the developer acknowledges the architectural skill, integrity and appropriateness of the building in its present form:

"The existing building is constructed as two brick storeys topped with a white roughcast one. This two-plus-one composition, with the use of a pale storey above a darker mass below, combined with the topography of the street which gently declines towards the site, means that although at three full storeys above ground it technically contains a storey more than the surrounding houses, it does not appear more bulky. In addition, the scale has been carefully designed, with the use of setbacks and tripartite "bay windows", giving a plot width akin to that of a house, and through the use of domestic materials – red brick and roughcast – as seen on houses across the street. As it stands, it is considered to be a complete composition of considerable charm which, through good design suits its context well."

The same document goes on to describe the adverse effect of any alterations to the building's height:

"The site is prominent, being adjacent to a T-junction and addressing a curve in the road. This means that it is visible in long views along Howitt Road from the north-

east and along Glenilla Road from the north-west. It is also freestanding, set apart from surrounding buildings, particularly to the south-west, and this means it is highly visible. Any alterations to its height would therefore be visually prominent from various points in the streetscape. The building is terminated with overhanging eaves and a flat roof; a unique feature of the building...

Any extension would also have to be mindful of the prevailing height of surrounding buildings. The relevant streetscape to the building, is less the larger buildings of Belsize Park Gardens as shown in the drawings, but the smaller scale of Howitt Road which the building addresses."

The Belsize Conservation Area Statement states that "Roof extensions and alterations, which change the shape and form of the roof, can have a harmful impact on the Conservation Area". Such extensions "are unlikely to be acceptable where:

- It would be detrimental to the form and character of the existing building...
- The roof is prominent, particularly in long views".

The Heritage Statement commissioned by Daejan Properties Ltd implies that the flat roof of Howitt Close is something of an aberration in Howitt Road but, rather than an aberration, the flat roof should be seen as a conscious choice by the architect to restrict the height of the building. As described by Camden Planning above, at three full storeys above ground the building technically contains a storey more than the surrounding houses (two storeys plus an attic level within mansard roofs) but, due to the flat roof coupled with other design features (such as two brick storeys topped with a white roughcast one – i.e. a pale storey above a darker mass below) described above, it does not appear too tall. But, at three storeys, Howitt Close is already at the maximum height to blend in aesthetically with the neighbourhood.

Daejan's Heritage Statement downplays the architectural uniqueness of the building and makes no mention of the excellent state of authenticity and preservation of the building. It is unlikely that the highly debatable view expressed in the Heritage Statement that "the addition of the mansard storey would be considered to represent an overall enhancement to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area" would be shared by those without a financial interest in the project. Most would consider the flat roof, coupled with the deep eaves, distinctive and attractive features of Howitt Close. The building in its present form is highly valued in the neighbourhood and the addition of a fourth storey and mansard roof is likely to be widely considered as inflicting substantial harm on a heritage asset. Howitt Close is the only mansion block in its immediate vicinity and the extra storey would add bulk to what is now a well-proportioned and not over-dominant building. The closest visible mansion block to Howitt Close is Sussex House, a short distance away on Glenilla Road, which is singled out in the Conservation Area Statement as a negative feature: "an oppressively large block" and "an overbearing flat block significantly larger than the other buildings in the street". The current proposal to bulk up Howitt Close into an oppressively large block should be firmly rejected.

Daejan's Heritage Statement discusses the blocks (Glenloch Court, Wimborne Mansions, Banff House and Moor Court) on the junction of Glenloch and Glenmore Roads, although these are completely out of sight from Howitt Close and its surroundings. These blocks are four storeys high with flat roofs. The implication is that these blocks are classified as "neutral contributors" to the conservation zone as a result of their flat roofs. In reality it is not the lack of a mansard roof that makes these blocks less attractive and emphasises each building's bulk and height but the fact that they are four storeys high and tower above the surrounding

terraces - as Howitt Close would do with the addition of a fourth storey. Part of the visual unattractiveness of these blocks in their context is because they are disproportionately tall for the width of the streets in which they are located. An extra storey on Howitt Close would have a similar effect at the bottom of Howitt Road: the block would loom above the street making it over-dominant in contrast to its current harmonious presence.

Daejan's Heritage Statement attempts to downplay the impact of the additional storey on the views towards Howitt Close from the north-east, south and north-west but it does not go so far as to suggest that there would be no adverse effect on these views. Howitt Close is already visible for the length of Glenilla Road as far as Belsize Avenue but in its present form it could be taken at a distance for a terrace of houses. Closer up, it is an imposing presence and the height and width of an extra storey would make it over-dominant. Daejan's Heritage Statement refers to the "utilitarian style of the western elevation" but this is highly subjective and unjustified. This façade is entirely in harmony with the rest of the building and its slightly simpler design complements the glimpse of the front and view of the eastern wing, which can be seen simultaneously from the north-western approach. Again from the north-east Howitt Close can be seen from a considerable distance up Howitt Road but, as from the north-west approach along Glenilla Road, it could be a view of terraced houses until one approaches fairly close to the mansion block. From Belsize Park Gardens and the southern approach along Glenilla Road, Howitt Close is already an imposing presence and an additional storey would spoil the streetscape along this stretch of the road.

### **Historic significance of Howitt Close**

Howitt Close was constructed between 1932 and 1934. A 'Notice of new buildings, drainage works, and apparatus in connection therewith'<sup>i</sup> dated 27 October 1932 was filed with the Borough of Hampstead. This Notice was signed by Henry F Webb & Ash and the same business is shown as the owner of the site/building. Howitt Close first appears in the General Rate book for Belsize Ward made 6 April 1934<sup>ii</sup>, which shows that the 46 flats in the building were fully occupied by tenants as at April 1934, by which time the building was owned by London Mayfair & District Properties Ltd.

The Daejan Heritage Statement incorrectly dates the property ("represents a 1920s addition," "constructed in a single phase, between 1920 and 1935" and "possibly indicates that the building was constructed in the early 1920s") and, as such, the statement cannot interpret correctly either the individual significance of the building or its importance within its historical context.

A construction date between 1932 and 1934 means that Howitt Close was contemporaneous with the (Grade I listed) Isokon flats, located less than half a mile away on the east side of Haverstock Hill. The design of the Isokon flats was developed 1929-1932 and they were officially opened in July 1934, shortly after Howitt Close was first occupied. A huge amount has been written about the Isokon building – a project "to design an apartment building and its interior based on the principle of affordable, communal and well-designed inner-city living... But it was not a working class building – it was aimed at intellectual, working middle class people."<sup>iii</sup> The Howitt Close flats were also intended to provide compact living spaces for the middle classes. The original plans<sup>iv</sup> for the building were titled 'Proposed Block of Small Type Flats.' Howitt Close had a restaurant from the very beginning in the lower ground floor, with 'Ash & Fitch' (presumably the caterers) occupying the restaurant and associated accommodation at April 1934<sup>v</sup>. The famous Isobar restaurant in the Isokon

building was not opened until 1937, when the communal kitchen in the block was converted into a restaurant. The impetus behind Howitt Close was similar to that of the Isokon building and, with its contrasting architectural style, it provides context for a modernist building like the Isokon flats. Without good comparable examples like Howitt Close, which remains very close to its 1930s state, the significance of the Isokon flats is diminished.

It is notable that the business 'Henry F Webb & Ash' was the original owner and developer of Howitt Close. There can be no doubt that the Henry F Webb concerned was the architect Henry Frederick Webb (1879-1953) who designed Elm Park Court, Pinner, constructed in 1936 and now Grade II listed. Elm Park Court is considered one of the icons of the form of modernism which took hold in 'Metro-land' in the 1930s, a form of modernism which owes more to Art Deco than to the later 'brutalist' strand of modernism. Whilst the green and white colour-scheme of Elm Park Court gives it a very distinctive character, its Art Deco heritage is apparent and the development has a number of features in common with Howitt Close. Over and above its intrinsic architectural merit, Howitt Close is significant as another building designed by HF Webb, an architect important to north-west London as the designer of the iconic Grade II-listed Elm Park Court.

In contrast to the well-publicised and dramatic history of the Isokon Building with its celebrity tenants – “Very few pre 1945 tenants do not have a Wikipedia entry”<sup>vi</sup> - Howitt Close has had a quiet history, and remarkably little has been written about it. It is understood that it was used as residential accommodation for civil servants at some point and further research could reveal an interesting story of an early example of inner city, partly communal living for the middle classes. In contrast to the Isokon Building, which fell into an appalling state of disrepair under Camden Council's ownership and required total refurbishment, Howitt Close has remained in a reasonable state of repair over the past 90 years, partly because it lacks some of the structural design faults which contributed to the Isokon's deterioration. It is fair to say that Howitt Close, as a pleasing presence in its location, has been taken for granted over the best part of a century, at least until the threat to the architectural integrity of the building posed by the current planning proposal. In my opinion, it is only a matter of time before Howitt Close becomes highly valued and rightly appreciated for its distinctive architecture and its well-preserved authenticity, leading to listed status – unless, that is, the current planning proposal succeeds in desecrating the building before then. It is vital that the building is preserved unviolated for posterity.

It would be a perverse planning decision, and nothing less than cultural vandalism, to allow this building, a heritage asset which makes such a positive contribution to the special character and appearance of the Belsize conservation area, to be violated for the sake of the addition of a mere seven flats in private ownership and a payment in lieu of affordable housing of less than £250,000. It would be a breach of the underlying principles of the conservation area if a unique, extremely well-preserved architectural gem like Howitt Close is wantonly desecrated for the sake of a few additional flats.

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<sup>i</sup> Available in Camden Local Studies & Archives Centre

<sup>ii</sup> General Rates made 06.04.34, available in Camden Local Studies & Archives Centre

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ignant.com/2016/04/04/the-secret-history-of-londons-isokon-building/>

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