



Re: One Museum Street, LONDON WC1A 1JR

Ref: 2021/2954/P [FIRST APPLICATION – BY LABTECH]

OBJECTION by Bloomsbury Residents Action Group (BRAG)

The Bloomsbury Residents Action Group was formed in 2016 to remind decision makers that the concerns and aspirations of residents’ “matter”, with our area of engagement with local people being the three wards of South Camden, in particular the historic streets and squares south of the Euston Road.

We fully support the detailed, well-researched, professional work that has been carried out by the Save Museum Street campaign group to justify their ongoing objection to the current proposals for the redevelopment of Selkirk House. The owners may have changed, but the principle of development at this scale, in this particularly sensitive location, is still fundamentally unsound.

Sustainability

In 2019 Camden Council declared a climate and ecological emergency. It is inconsistent with these well publicised intentions to permit the demolition and reconstruction of a building whose scale and massing is much greater than the existing Travelodge tower and whose impact on the local community is completely unsustainable.

The recent decision by the Secretary of State to refuse M&S’s application for demolition and rebuild needs to be considered in relation to Selkirk House.

Why has the option to refurbish not been seriously considered?

Why the intractable desire for office accommodation when – with imagination – the building could be retrofitted for a purpose more suited to current needs?

The Future of Work

Why create a brand-new office block on this massive scale? Where is the justification, the real **need**? Don’t forget the tower at Centre Point was built for office use, a short distance away. Less than ten years ago (2015-2018) it was converted to residential flats.

The existing tower is only 58 years old, a mere ‘child’ in the context of neighbouring Georgian and Victorian buildings that create the historic context of the site. To actively promote demolition seems absurd.

The world of work has changed. The pandemic shifted expectations of how and when we work. And, in particular: WHERE?

There was an expectation that hordes of office workers would exit the newly-opened Elizabeth Line at Tottenham Court Road station for a destination such as Selkirk House. That was then, but now?

Respect for heritage

The hugely important Bloomsbury Conservation Area was first designated in 1968, just a year after conservation areas were created with the Civic Amenities Act 1967. Bloomsbury is so often referred to as an internationally significant example of town planning, with its garden squares, Georgian terraces, and grand, world-famous buildings such as the British Museum. Residents matter, but heritage matters too.

The proposed new tower will be clearly visible from the steps of the British Museum, however cleverly the designers try to manipulate the computer-generated images. It will be equally visible from historic Drury Lane, and provide a grotesque background to the Shaftesbury Theatre, a popular tourist venue built in 1911. It will create an incongruous symbol of 21st century aggrandisement in the context of historic fine grain streets that make up most of the nearby urban landscape.

Residential Amenity

The lengthy demolition and construction process, including the presence of construction traffic negotiating its way through local streets will have a huge negative impact on the health, wellbeing and quality of life of the many residents who live nearby.

Camden has been running a 'Safer streets for schools programme', removing motor vehicles from certain streets; many streets are now cut off to reduce through traffic; Camden promotes active travel, with residents urged to walk or cycle. Yet, in the same breath, more and more large-scale developments are receiving planning permission whose demolition and construction require a flow of HGVs and articulated lorries. Construction materials do not get delivered by cargo bike.

It is these inconsistencies of approach to local roads which lead to residents' cynicism and despair.

What about the impact on tourism?

In this vibrant part of central London, tourists rub shoulders with residents on a daily basis: they too will be inconvenienced. As London's theatres and commercial enterprises still struggle to gain momentum following the Pandemic Years, and the Cost-of-Living Crisis makes "going out" difficult for many Londoners, is the creation of an ugly building site in an important part of Bloomsbury really such a good idea? Tourists regularly walk from Covent Garden to the British Museum and vice versa – they will be confronted by Heras fencing and tipper trucks. Hardly the London welcome they expect.

Conclusion

Should the development go ahead in its current form, the question will be asked in years to come. How was this possibly allowed? And why?

We trust that Camden Officers' and Members have enough common sense and integrity to see for themselves that the developer's justification for demolition and rebuild for office accommodation, on this scale, in this location, is simply not acceptable in an age of financial uncertainty, in an age of climate change, in an age when residents matter.

BRAG objects strongly to the proposal.