

## LETTER TO CAMDEN PLANNING DEPARTMENT 10 AUGUST 2023

Dear David Fowler & the Planning Department

### Consultation process

It is 10th August 2023, two days before the official “cut off” date for comments to Camden Council regarding the proposal to redevelop One Museum Street by Labs Selkirk House Limited (as Applicant).

In a meeting of SMS campaigners with Camden’s planners on 28 July, there was assurance that comments can be made right up until the Planning Committee meeting. But how seriously are these comments taken? As objections from residents rarely make a dent in the Planning Department’s armoury of acceptance of planning applications (particularly when there are financial benefits from CIL and Section 106 agreements) there is a feeling that Camden’s whole consultation process is fundamentally flawed.

“Is it worth the effort?” say residents, jaded by experience. “It’s summer; we have work and family commitments - what’s the point?”

But not all residents are apathetic. A great many have already written to object to this proposal, and it is hoped you will read, respect and not simply ignore the opinions of those who really do care about their environment.

I’m a member of Bloomsbury CAAC and founder member of BRAG (both groups have already sent in written objections) but what follows are my PERSONAL comments as a long-term resident of South Camden (where ward boundaries have been shifting recently). I am a passionate advocate of community wellbeing and the retention and preservation of heritage assets.

### The development’s harm to Bloomsbury

Yes, change happens in London, it always has – from the days of the Great Fire to the aftermath of the second World War. Bomb sites encouraged redevelopment; people needed housing and businesses wanted modern offices; concrete framed buildings emerged, and some high-rise blocks were built in central London – most notably Centre Point, an edifice which – like the Post Office Tower – was considered worthy of Grade II status.

The Selkirk House tower is not. It’s a shame that it pre-dates (only just) the creation of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area - which might have prevented its construction in the first place. But its location is critical – and whatever happens to the building will impact, for good or for bad, on the setting of nearby listing buildings within the Conservation Area. This is called HARM. It is a Camden policy consideration.

To design an even taller, bigger and bulkier tower in its place is simply wrong. From the heritage perspective, this is not the right location for an overbearing, bulky, 19 storey office block.

A question: Will those who make decisions on this application leave their desks (now so often distant, due to the opportunity to work remotely at home) to walk around the fine-grained streets nearby, and observe the Victorian mansion blocks that house many residents within 4, 5 and storey buildings? Will they appreciate the **character** of the neighbourhood? Will they join with the thousands of tourists to wonder at the preservation of the Grade 1 listed British Museum? Or marvel at the beauty of the St George’s Church? There’s a reason it is Grade I listed. Likewise, the perfectly preserved Georgian Bedford Square. I know about the need to 'Follow Policy' (results of which are often inconsistent) but do those who make decisions really “**see**” and appreciate the “**sense of place**” which is the very essence of Bloomsbury?

## **The stable block in West Central Street**

There is a former stable block in West Central Street. Has this been assessed properly within its heritage context? Surely this building is worthy of retention and re-use rather than demolition?

Why can't there be an imaginative design which makes the most of an interesting historic block of buildings to provide an asset for the future that the community will welcome, not resent.

Camden has a policy of enhancing and protecting heritage. So why, in this application, is the historic block at the south end of Museum Street to be blighted by additional height and residential units that lack the most basic of amenity – light? Many of these buildings are now Grade II listed. Where is the creative response from the Applicants' architects?

Why is re-development simply an exercise in fitting the maximum number of square feet of built form into a specific area defined by the red line of ownership, to maximise an "investment asset" owned as a vehicle to create maximum profit for a specific person or company?

I have read a detailed and well researched report on the historic stable block. It describes the internal "grooved concrete floor created for the ease of drainage and grip of shod horse hooves", where "rainwater goods are recessed into the façade, so that the regularly passing horses did not catch themselves on protruding ironwork."

Cars may have replaced horses as a means of transport, but these historic stables have an authenticity – which is precisely why preserving heritage assets is important.

To continue from the report: "Internally the horse ramp is entered opposite the carriageway for the ease of the blinkered horse, it is constructed with a concrete surface, timber treads have apparently been removed. The ramp does however retain glazed bricks and rounded surfaces including bullnose bricks on covered openings.

At first floor level there remains the back of a set of stalls with sockets into which stall rails would have been attached. The positioning of these stalls is likely original, highlighting the turning circle of a horse at the top of the ramp. The scale of this space and high positioning of the windows is illustrative of the original function of the building. The stalls were manufactured by the St Pancras Ironworks who were the 'original inventors, patentees and manufacturers of improved stable fittings' and supplied royalty."

Reading this creates an image of a building which had a life that suited the Bloomsbury of its time and could suit a Bloomsbury of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as long as respect is given to its heritage status, and architectural imagination comes into play. There are other options, Have these been explored?

## **Objection to application**

Yes, the empty and abandoned development site at One Museum Street needs attention, serious attention, and yes, it's currently a sad example of neglect and dereliction, a blot of the landscape – which impacts on the conservation area too.

But the whole site is far too important, too special, to be allowed to be re-developed as this application proposes.

As a resident of Camden, I am given the opportunity to comment as part of the Council's statutory consultation process.

- I object strongly to the redesign of Selkirk House which ultimately is dictated by the purpose of changing a hotel premises into a speculative office block.

- I object strongly to the demolition of the existing tower, especially when the debate about the impact of carbon on climate change is high up on the National and local political agenda.
- I object strongly to the demolition of 16a and b West Central Street, originally built in 1864 from a design by Charles Fitzroy Doll (1850–1929).
- I am mindful of the impact of years of demolition and rebuild on the quality of life of the very many residents who live in very close proximity to the development site. Harm from impact on residential amenity is a key element of the planning process.
- I am dubious on how demolition and rebuild will be carried out in relation to the engineering challenges regarding the underground Post Office train line that must be retained.
- I am disturbed at the impact demolition and rebuild will have on tourism and the local economy. Will visitors keep away from Bloomsbury?
- How will the local historic streets actually deal with the impact of construction traffic?

### **Is this a Titanic disaster in the making?**

The design of the former stable block was by Charles Fitzroy Doll, JP, FRIBA (1850–1929). A glance at his Wikipedia entry tells us that he was "an English architect of the Victorian and Edwardian eras who specialised in designing hotels. He also designed the dining room on the RMS Titanic, which was based on his design for that in the Hotel Russell in Bloomsbury."

The English author EM Forster inspired the idea of "Only Connect". If Camden's Planners haven't yet made up their mind about this application, perhaps they should reflect on the connection this proposed development has (through the link with Fitzroy Doll) with that ill-fated ship. Does historic Bloomsbury deserve the same fate? Do the owners who have bought the site as an investment for their shareholders realise the significance of the connection? Are they also willing to tempt fate?

Perhaps the best outcome would be for the whole project to be re-thought and for the owners and their architects to go back to the drawing board.

As far as the planning process goes, this requires the Applicant to Withdraw the application. It requires Camden's Planners to admit the design is flawed and for Camden's Planning Committee to agree.

It does happen, sometimes. Reasons for refusal could indeed be the height, density and bulk of the proposed development; the impact on views, particularly the British Museum; the impact on amenity; the impact on light to neighbours (the quality of housing on site looks particularly grim).

Another relevant reference is the very recent decision on a development site in Bristol, as reported in the Architect's Journal today, on August 10th. Like here in South Camden, critics from various local groups accused the developers of having 'failed spectacularly to understand the area's values, needs and priorities.' The Bristol committee's eight councillors however voted unanimously to throw out PRP's designs. The vote confirmed planning officers' recommendations to refuse the application on the grounds of its 'overbearing' nature, which they said would be 'harmful' to the site's existing heritage and identity, and would 'fail to provide a high-quality living environment for future occupiers'.

There's a resonance in these words which could apply to the One Museum site. One speaker apparently described the revisions as 'no more than a desperate attempt to rearrange the chairs on the deck of the Titanic'.

Another Titanic reference – it must be today's zeitgeist.

I urge everyone to think again.

**Debbie Radcliffe**