

Minutes of a meeting of the Conservation Areas Advisory Group held on **Monday 17th May 2021** at 3:00 p m – 5pm by Zoom.

Present

Michael Tsoukaris	London Borough of Southwark
Benedict O’Looney (Chair)	The Victorian & Peckham Societies
Elizabeth Borowiecka	Camberwell Society
Robert Holden	Landscape Institute, London Branch
Jason Leech	Camberwell Society
Anna Ludwig	Nunhead CA

1) Apologies for absence were received from:

Bill Morris, Diana Cochrane, David Stephens

2) Minutes of Previous Meeting & Matters Arising.

3) Update on Previous Cases:

4) New cases

21/AP/1361, 21/AP/1364 New City Court 4-26 St Thomas Street London Southwark SE1 9RS

Redevelopment to include demolition of the 1980s office buildings and erection of a 26-storey building (plus mezzanine and two basement levels) of a maximum height of 108.0m AOD, restoration and refurbishment of the listed terrace (nos. 4-16 St Thomas Street), and redevelopment of Keats House (nos. 24-26 St Thomas Street) with removal, relocation and reinstatement of the historic façade on a proposed building, to provide 46,851sqm GEA of Class E(g)(i) office floorspace, 360sqm GEA flexible office E(g)(i)/retail E(a) floorspace, 592sqm GEA Class E(b) restaurant/café floorspace and a public rooftop garden, and 5,190sqm GEA of affordable workspace within the Georgian terrace, Keats House and part of the tower, associated public realm and highways improvements, provision for a new access to the Borough High Street entrance to the Underground Station, cycling parking, car parking, service, refuse and plant areas, and all ancillary or associated works. (Associated listed building consent application ref. 21/AP/1364).

Listed building consent for restoration, rebuilding and refurbishment of the listed terrace (nos. 4-16 St Thomas Street) including: Demolition of 1980s fabric across the rear elevation and demolition of the attached 1980s office building, reinstatement of the rear elevation of the terrace, and recladding and partial rebuilding of rear walls. Rebuild roof and chimneys, reskin the side façade and front façade at top floor level of 1980s extension. Rebuild the roof and chimneys of no. 14. Removal and replacement of roof slates with natural slate to nos. 4-16. Opening up the ground floor passageway between nos. 8 and 10 by removing 1930s door, and reinstate two adjacent door openings on front elevation. Replacement of two second floor windows on front elevation. Replacement of secondary glazing to front elevation. Alterations to the front elevation of the lower ground level and vaults beneath the pavement. Internal alterations within the terrace to reinstate the plan form and the internal features, rearrange the

circulation between the lower ground and upper levels (with reinstated stairs in between) for office use. Cleaning the brickwork, repointing, works to repair sash windows, restore the railings and first floor balconettes of the north façade. (Associated planning application ref.

21/AP/1361) Scheme Architects: AHMM

Case officer: Victoria Crosby

The CAAG group reviewed the first iteration of this large project a year ago. We thought it was quite a good building very much in the wrong place. Proposed was an architecture and building type which would fit in well at Canary Wharf but would do a great deal of damage to the Borough High Street and St Thomas Street Conservation Areas.

We did not like the way the 37 storey tower's base eroded the grain of the narrow ancient burgage plots to the High Street, The scale of the tower had a disastrous effect on the setting of the 18th century Guy's Hospital, the High Street, Borough Market and Southwark Cathedral. It might be considered a great spear into the heart of the most historic part of Southwark. The CAAG group firmly recommended that proposal's refusal.

Astonishingly this new project is even worse. The revised proposal is a 26 story lump. With 11 stories remove from the tower, the building's massing is redeployed as a squat, fat building. A project equally out of scale with the historic environment and perhaps even more damaging to the townscape setting than the previous proposal. Certainly more sky exposure would be lost. This proposal must be resisted.

For the previous scheme, the CAAG group joined with Historic England, SAVE Britain's Heritage and the Victorian Society to make clear the New City Court development would do permanent damage to Southwark's environment, historic and otherwise.

I hope a similar wall of disapproval meets this project.

Application site is a modern block sitting behind St Thomas' Street Georgian frontage and close to London Bridge underground station, for which the proposals intend to create a new entrance on Borough High Street. Proposals will also see the 'Bunch of Grapes' retained, as will be the Georgian listed buildings. The modern buildings fronting St Thomas Street will be demolished and north-south permeability introduced.

Site lies within the Borough Conservation Area, the special interest of which MT and CAAG in general describe as

- the oldest high street in London
- benefits from a series of developments; Roman (in the approach of London bridge station); medieval / Chaucerian; early modern (Shakespeare)
- distinctive trades: hop trade, wine and spirits trade,
- distinctive spatial form: medieval burgage plots (ie. long, thin plots combining retail and industry) and characterful yards which are defining features of the form of the area.

Background:

MT explains the applicants are Great Portland Estates. MT makes reference to pending refusal of live application for 1st scheme which BOL describes as 'an elegant tower in the wrong place'.

BOL asks: Is this scheme even worse?

MT agrees it's worse. Less London-wide impact than precursor scheme (which impacted on views of important churches in the City, including St Paul's) but this 2nd scheme is still a 'big blob' and has impact on Southwark Cathedral etc. MT describes style as 1930s-1950s Flat Iron

style building with muscular, masonry finish, rising precipitously, right in the middle of the conservation area and within the setting of numerous listed buildings.

David Stephens (DS) has sent apologies but also provided comments. These are shared by BOL.

Group discussions revolve around the height and density of the 2nd scheme, as well as its design merit. BOL expresses concern about the further impact on the urban environment of the King's Head Yard, particularly the delicate grain of the narrow 'burgage plots' off both sides of Borough High Street which are rare and of international significance.

Visuals show that the proposed scheme does not relate well to the other nearby tall buildings, and certainly not to the rest of the significantly lower-lying townscape, dominating it because the proposed tower is so isolated it stands out and towers over everything. Views from 'one of the most amazing quadrangles in London' (viz. Guy's) show a Pinocchio nose poking upwards above the quadrangle, utterly spoiling the setting. Perhaps art imitating the applicant's assessment of heritage significance? BOL considered DAS to be really pejorative about the condition and value of the heritage assets in the vicinity.

Noted that even though many of the constructed street views in the DAS are perversely positive, some betray the harm the building will cause.

Robert Holden (RH) calls the style 'giganticism' and expresses concern over shade. BOL is further concerned about wind strength.

MT relays that Historic England's comments on the 1st scheme impact on the conservation area was 'harm bordering on the substantial' (ie. to be allowed only exceptionally).

Some consensus that the existing 1980s building has no architectural merit but also does not have any of the proposed oppressive density.

Discussion turns to what sort of scheme might be acceptable in that location. BOL indicates something in the order of medium density (6-7 storeys). **Jason Leech (JL)** suggests that higher may not be bad provided that the design is world-class and worthy of standing within the context of exceptionally rich history and architecture as a testament of artistry of its time. Comparisons are made to the other scheme by AHMM over Southwark LU station (recently consented), and the Fosters scheme for Colechurch House. Other AHMM scheme was superior but not for such a sensitive site. Fosters scheme equally inappropriate for this location as prime example, along with the proposals, of 'grandiloquent mediocrity'. Comments made at the time that, while modern architecture should/could not be discouraged, the quality of modern design ranged; and mediocre design should not be allowed to obscure higher quality design (eg. the Shard's) because that would devalue the overall quality of townscape.

Previous application was reviewed by CABE. The 2nd app will be going to Design Review Panel.

MT expects both 1st and 2nd scheme will go to joint appeal by public inquiry. JL notes that the public inquiry will likely set design parameters and legitimate expectations, so it may be good for CAAG to be carving out a pathway now.

