

Planning application I9/04164/FULL

The Soho Society objects to this application under four main headings, heritage, design, environmental and economic grounds.

Heritage

The current building which housed Twentieth Century Fox is an unlisted building of merit within the Soho Conservation area. It sits well within its context Soho Square, an important and historic London Square, in terms of the scale and massing of it and the neighbouring buildings. Soho was in many ways the heart of the UK film business and Twentieth Century Fox played an important and often innovative part in that industry and is therefore an important part of Soho's distinctive heritage and culture. Soho is still the centre of the UK post production industry with many internationally renowned companies. Recent moves by the tenant, landlord or others, the facts are unclear, to remove evidence of that heritage as it might stand in the way of development tarnishes development's image in the eyes of the local community and the public more generally. Evidence of heritage and character in our view should be protected wherever it is reasonably possible to do so.

The amount and scale of development involving loss of character in Soho led Westminster City Council to declare its intention, in its November 2018 first draft of a revised local plan, that Soho should become a special policy area to better protect its character and restrain large scale development. Although that policy has been slightly amended in the Regulation 19 draft published in June 2019, now going to independent examination, the policy remains. These proposals were brought forward with knowledge of the impending policy and produced and the application submitted just before just before this policy could become a material planning consideration.

We understand from Westminster's policies that the demolition of an unlisted of merit in a conservation area should normally be resisted unless there are substantial public benefits in the new building which outweigh the loss. The proposed new building even with a partially retained façade does not deliver significant public benefits to justify its demolition. It may be argued that the improvements to Dansey Place are a public benefit but this could be achieved without demolishing the T C Fox building which is of historic and cultural significance.

Design

Although in the latest version of the application a partial facade-retention scheme has been proposed it has really serious flaws that make it an unacceptable design for this site and context. Only five of the eight bays of the existing elevation to Frith Street facade are retained and then only at ground, first, second and third floor levels. The existing, stone-faced, 'attic' storey at fourth floor level is proposed for rebuilding and upward stretching which is an inelegant solution leading to an overbearing bulky and uniform mansard roof. A distinctive feature and indication of authenticity is the variety of heights, shapes and styles of roofscapes of buildings within the conservation area and this heavy mansard 'plonked' on top of a partially retained façade and other new facades is not the right solution. First in terms of massing and scale it is too large and over dominant. It also sets an adverse precedent to building heights within the square and its context where the newer buildings have gradually risen in height and increasingly leave the remaining original or largely original buildings as small reminders of the square's original scale and character.

Therefore, we do not believe this partial retention of the façade works and do not support it as the right solution. We would prefer to see a retrofitting approach applied to this building as described under our comments on the environment below. However, this scheme might be improved if the full height of the existing brick and stone street-elevations to Soho Square and Frith Street (i.e. the ground, first, second, third and fourth floor storeys plus the lower mansard-storey - at fifth floor level - were retained, rather than stretched upwards, and external alterations minimised – i.e. no dropping of the window-cills at ground floor level except where absolutely necessary. To help retain the façade's character confirmation should also be sought by the council that the existing, subdivided, painted-timber sash-windows would be

retained and reinstated as double glazed at each floor level, together with the subdivided casement-windows in the projecting dormers at fifth floor level. There should be no reduction in the depth of projection of the existing portico. It is possible it could be reused at the proposed archway for the pedestrian route into Chapone Place. There may be other internal features such as the staircase that could be retained within the building as well.

Most importantly, the upper storeys of the proposed development (at roof level) need to be contained in a series of roof-slopes relating to the divisions between the proposed street-elevations below, and not in one, fused-together, over-sized 'mansard'-slope extending across all three street-frontages on to Frith Street. The proposed upper storey (at sixth floor level) above the retained facades and mansard-slopes to Soho Square and Frith Street should preferably be removed or needs to be contained in either mansard roof-slopes rising from a modest set-back behind the ridges of the retained mansard roof-slopes at fifth-floor level or in shallow-pitched upper slopes rising from an intermediate ridge, and not treated as an unbroken continuity of the steep, retained, mansard-roof slopes at fifth floor level. The proposed use of diamond-patterned natural slate is completely unnecessary. It would be more easily sourced and maintained in conventionally-laid natural-slate as commonly found in the Conservation Area.

Environment

This last point about diamond-patterned slate completely illustrates the way design for this scheme is seen as more important than thinking through the environmental consequences of development. Not just in the fine detail implications of cutting slate in non-conventional ways but in the whole comprehensive redevelopment approach. Knocking down a perfectly good and long lasting building to rubble and dust, wastes all the heritage, character, care and craftsmanship in that building which is capable of standing for decades and centuries more. The nuisance and emissions in the demolition process, the lorries carting it all away, the air quality implications. Then construction, grinding out new foundations, lorries bringing back new resources, including cement and concrete (which are hugely energy intensive to make), a host of other materials, more noise and transport disturbance, a longer development period and disturbance to other business occupiers. To eventually, at all this environmental cost, produce a bland, slightly larger and bulkier building (even if we leave aside that post Covid 19 no one knows what the demand for new office space will be).

All this is proposed when the Council has declared a climate emergency and aims to move the City towards a low carbon future. Westminster cannot cover itself in trees to be green; what it can do is think through the environmental consequences of commercial activity and see if things can be done in a more sustainable way to help us towards that goal. The property and development industry has a huge part to play in this transition. We need to keep adapting the city to meet genuine commercial needs but we must do it in future with as light a touch as we can in terms of the cost to the environment.

It is clear from 1,500 response to a survey of people by the Soho Society that the TCFox building is loved, so it is a good place to start in encouraging a retrofitting approach from land owners and their consultants. Yes, the building will need remodelling internally to make it fit for new occupancy and facilities will need to be upgraded. Improving Chapone Place and the walkability of Soho is welcome, but comprehensive development of an unlisted building of merit is not.

We have spoken to the developers about the comparison between the existing and proposed new building in terms of CO2 plus that released by demolition and rebuild. They have confirmed that they done no calculation to assess the CO2 impact of redevelopment. The document that they did prepare only compared the 'in use' efficiency of the new build with a standardised model of the current building. This may be seen as an assessment but without calculating the demolition and reconstruction impacts fully and including them it does not properly assess the sustainability of redevelopment as opposed to a sensitive upgrade.

Economic Grounds

We also asked what efforts had been made to find a new tenant for the building in its current form but had no response to show that this possibility had been properly investigated. We are aware that other buildings in the square have been refurbished and tenants found at a good rent

When asked why demolition was the option chosen the applicant has said that it is to allow “flexibility” in letting the building plus a need for more natural daylight, more space for cycle storage and showers, more lift space and some external space. But all these would be achievable within a carefully thought through refurbishment scheme. They may be potential benefits to the let ability and rent levels for the applicant but they are not public benefits which outweigh the need to retain an unlisted building or merit in a conservation area.

There have been many similar property development applications over the years. The argument is always that demolition is the only financially viable option vs uneconomic conservation/refurbishment. The acknowledged climate crisis in Westminster has created an additional dimension. Below are some examples of successful refurbishment with the details attached as an annex. In each case the arguments made locally for retention on economic grounds were implemented and proved to be both accurate and economically sound.

1. Earlham Street West and Monmouth Street South: Proposed demolition now refurbished
2. 35 Shelton Street: Proposed demolition now refurbished
3. Drury Lane, Arne Street, Shelton, Dryden Streets: Proposed Demolition with some Partial Façade Retention. Propose redevelopment now refurbished

In each of these examples it was reasoning and pressure from local groups to conserve existing heritage and culture that led applicants to re-appraise their demolition approaches.

We ask that this application is refused consent on the above grounds.

Matthew Bennett

Chair of Soho Society Planning and Environment Committee

ANNEX 1

The images below by Guy Archard are from the forthcoming *Seven Dials-Covent Garden Renaissance Study* web edition.

1. Earlham Street West and Monmouth Street South: Proposed Demolition.

In 1990 P&O Properties applied to demolish large parts of Earlham Street West and Monmouth Street South and replace with new build; recommended by officers at both Camden and English Heritage. Many of the 17c-18c properties had recently been restored with grants via the Seven Dials Housing Action Area. P&O argued that the houses were unsound and uneconomic and had to be demolished. The Covent Garden Community Association (CGCA) and the Seven Dials Trust (SDT) made a deputation to Camden's Development Control Committee each of whose members were given a copy of the Trust's *Seven Dials Renaissance Study* published a few days before. The Committee of 15 councillors unanimously rejected the application and the applicant lost the subsequent Planning Appeal where the Inspector quoted the Study which played a key role in the decision.

These properties were then acquired by Shaftesbury Plc who implemented all of the Study recommendations. They are still owned by Shaftesbury 30 years later.



Monmouth Street South West.



Earlham Street North East.

2. 25 Shelton Street: Proposed Demolition.

In 1992 Allied London Properties acquired this ex Brewery building and proposed demolition and new build (interestingly without any mechanical ventilation). The Seven Dials Trust objected and at a lengthy meeting between David Bieda, trust chairman, and Jim Inglis their CEO, they agreed to reconsider. The Trust's case argued that retention and refurbishment of this well preserved brewery with original cast iron columns would be cheaper and yield as much or more than demolition and a new building. Allied implemented these proposals and sold the building at a substantial profit.



No 25 Shelton Street is the second on the left with the pitched roof.

Historic brewery to be renovated instead of torn down

Company backs down over demolition plan

A MAJOR West End landlord has shelved plans to demolish a historic Covent Garden building after pressure from residents and Camden Council.

Allied London filed plans with the Town Hall last year to demolish number 25 Shelton Street - part of the old Woodyard Brewery complex in Seven Dials - and replace it with a five-storey glass-fronted office block.

But the company has now backed down and instead plans to renovate the building for office use.

Even though the building was damaged by fire in 1999, the Seven Dials Monument Charity, Camden Council, English Heritage and the Covent Garden Community Association were against demolition.

A spokesman for Allied London said: "The renovation will retain the historical and architectural character of the building, as well as providing a modern commercial office environment."

But he added: "We haven't finalised the design yet."

by AMANDA MCGREGOR

Allied London is planning a meeting with residents and the Covent Garden Community Association to discuss how they will renovate the building.

Seven Dials Monument Charity chairman David Bieda told the West End Extra: "We will be very relieved if the developers can achieve their objective of creating a modern office environment, and that the historic fabric of the building can be maintained and refurbished."

Allied London's decision not to demolish 25 Shelton Street comes as the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has agreed to consider listing 50 buildings in the Seven Dials area.

In 1999, a study published by the Seven Dials Monument Charity recommended the listings.

English Heritage is now considering listing the buildings, many of which make up the old brewery complex in Covent Garden.

An English Heritage spokeswoman told the

West End Extra: "We are considering a number of properties in Seven Dials for listing."

Mr Bieda said: "We are pleased that the DCMS has taken on

board consideration of the recommendations. The protection for historic buildings has not been comprehensively reviewed in the West End since the mid-1980s and is out of

date. This is a thorough review of a small part of that area, which hopefully might be extended to cover the rest of the Seven Dials Conservation Area and that of Soho also."

3. Helical Bar site: Drury Lane, Arne Street, Shelton, Dryden Streets: Proposed Demolition with some Partial Façade Retention.

In 2015 Helical Bar presented the above to the Covent Garden Area Trust (CGAT) via CGI's and the Trust was minded to approve. However when existing and proposed elevations were requested the CGAT emphatically rejected the proposals and over two years worked with the CGCA and the SDT to oppose this largely demolition led proposal. The freeholder, the Mercers' Company, showed the SDT a conservation led scheme which Helical Bar would not make public. Two schemes were approved by the City Council, however following a change in chairmanship at Westminster a third was rejected and Helical Bar then proposed their conservation led scheme which was approved. This scheme retained the historic fabric and provided the same amount of space as the demolition schemes.



Existing left and proposed right.



Arne Street.



Dryden & Arne Streets.

4. The Mercers' Company

The Company proposed a very expensive scheme which involved raising ceiling heights and associated cast iron columns in this ex brewery building. Both the Trust and the CG Community Association objected as did many others at a public meeting. The two groups presented the basics for a conservation led scheme and Westminster City Council granted the Company's scheme. A year after Michael Soames arrived as the new Company Surveyor David Bieda from the Trust was surprised to be invited out for lunch where he was told that the Company had looked more carefully at the arguments of the two local groups, and in fact, they made more sense financially than the much larger approved scheme. Mercers' re-applied and implemented a more conservation led scheme which has been a great commercial success.



The building on the left and down the street.

