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Sent by email: tplan@elmbridge.gov.uk

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Our ref: 96 08 01

Dear Ann Biggs,

2017/0928 Development comprising 375 residential units and mixed use units and listed building consent for the demolition of all existing buildings at Walton Court, Station Avenue, Walton-on-Thames, Surrey KT12 1NT

Thank you for consulting the Society on the above application. This seeks permission for the total demolition of Walton Court, a Grade II listed building designed by Sir John Burnet, Tait and Partners, and replacement with 375 residential units and associated facilities.

The Twentieth Century Society **objects** to the application in the strongest terms. The proposals were discussed at our April casework committee, and the letter below sets out our views.

Significance

Grade II designation classifies the building as being of special, national interest. It should be noted that the criteria for listing are far stricter for younger buildings and there is a particularly careful selection process for buildings from the post-war period. Walton Court's designation should be understood in this context.

Walton Court was designed by the long-standing and highly renowned architectural firm Sir John Burnet, Tait and Partners for Birds Eye. It was completed in 1962 and extended sympathetically in 1967. It is a bespoke three storey office building set around two open courtyards and set within grounds landscaped by Philip Hicks. Upon completion Walton Court was written up extensively in the architectural press where it was lauded as a 'prestige' office building, and celebrated as one of the first in a suburban location. It was designed to accommodate future expansion and to still appear aesthetically modern twenty years after completion - and it has had success on both counts.

Comprised of plate glass curtain walling, and bold geometric facades of blue vitreous enamelled panels and repeating hexagonal aluminium sections, the building speaks of optimism and modernity, and was a key part of the formation of a cutting edge corporate identity for Birds Eye. Highly effective

and crucial to the significance of the site is the contrast between the bold 'op-art' inspired textural elevations and the tranquillity of the landscaped setting. A long pool runs along the main frontage which gently reflects the repeating pattern of the facade; the internal courtyards also contain smaller sunken pools and fountains. The eastern courtyard is punctuated by concrete menhirs, whilst the western is striated with raised cantilevered slabs. The use of water features extended into the building itself, with a small marble-lined pool to the base of the main stairs in the entrance.

This statement building is not something which stands apart from its surroundings - the landscape is integrated and enriches the overall significance. Both will be completely lost in the proposals, with the exception of the bird sculpture by John McCarthy which was designed to stand next to the entrance and is listed at Grade II independently.

The building has been vacant since 2007. In 2008, previous owners applied for planning permission to undertake refurbishment and to construct a new three storey annex extension for office use. This was not implemented.

Policy

Paragraph 132 of the NPPF states:

'When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, **great weight should be given to the asset's conservation**. The more important the asset, the greater the weight should be. Significance can be harmed or lost through alteration or destruction of the heritage asset or development within its setting. As heritage assets are irreplaceable, any harm or loss should require clear and convincing justification. **Substantial harm to or loss of a grade II listed building, park or garden should be exceptional**'.

Paragraph 133 of the NPPF states:

Where a proposed development will lead to substantial harm to or total loss of significance of a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss, or all of the following apply:

- The nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site
- No viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation
- Conservation by grant-funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible
- The harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use

The applicants have conceded, and we agree, that there are no substantial public benefits to the proposed scheme which would outweigh the demolition of the heritage asset. Therefore, each of the above tests must be incontestably and fully met in order to demonstrate the exceptional circumstances where total demolition could be justified. The applicants seek to do this in the 2017 Montagu Evans Heritage Statement, and each point will be considered below.

Twentieth Century Society Comment

The nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site

Reference to the asset's 'structure, condition and poor performance' as an office building has been made by the applicant in an attempt to satisfy this first test. It is claimed that because of fundamental structural shortcomings the building cannot be adapted to accommodate a new occupier. These will be refuted in turn.

1. High Alumina Cement

Firstly it should be noted that there are many tens of thousands of HAC buildings throughout the country which are safely occupied.

The AECOM report (September 2016) effectively gives the structure of the building, which contains some HAC beams, a clean bill of health. It states that 'over the lifetime of the building, approximately 55 years, historic testing and reports have described the HAC as fully converted with no apparent loss in strength or significant deterioration...'. It goes on to state that there are 'no structural defects' and that **'the property is suitable for residential re-development, offering maximum internal planning opportunities and set within spacious and attractive surroundings'**. Floor strength has been tested and found excellent, and some areas of poor concrete cover and carbonation are usual and can be easily addressed with conservation-based repairs.

The report goes on to state that 'the existing building is capable of being converted to residential use without major changes to the structure'. It states that 'there is no sound reason why they should not remain in place, or stay in sound and stable condition, providing the building is maintained in a warm and dry condition', although it recognises there may be practical difficulties in maintenance if the building was divided up into residential apartments. The report therefore offers a simple solution which would provide secondary support to HAC beams and so render them redundant, and this would also resolve potential issues with NHBC warranties.

An expected 30 year life span is referred to. We contest this as being conjectural; providing the building has the usual levels of maintenance and repairs there is no reason why the lifespan should not be significantly longer.

It is quite clear that there is no structural justification for demolition based on the presence of HAC.

2. External cladding

The 2016 AECOM façade report observes the aluminium frame extrusions are in robust condition and praises the rigour and accuracy of the initial installation. The presence of asbestos is common in buildings of this age and can be removed, however this is a moot point as it is accepted that the façade requires replacement. The 2008 Arup report submitted with the previous application demonstrated that more extensive intervention is required than simple refurbishment, and the AECOM façade engineering review supports this, recommending a replacement of the curtain wall with a modern and fit-for-purpose new cladding, to match the design aesthetic of the listed building. The Society considers that this would be an appropriate solution, and would have the benefit of enabling an easier conversion to new use through the possible introduction of openable windows and double glazing. The AECOM report begins to set out a number of potential options for the replacement envelope which are not explored in the current application.

The Society therefore does not consider that the presence of asbestos or the replacement of the façade would prevent a reasonable use of the site. This first test has therefore not been adequately met.

No viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation

This test concerns the search for viable uses that will enable conservation. The site has been empty for ten years and in this time it has been marketed mostly for office use. There has been interest, but the key reason for businesses choosing office space elsewhere has been because of location (Commercial Market Analysis report by Strutt and Parker). On two occasions set out in the report, the presence of HAC has been stated as a deciding factor. It is not clear whether or not the prospective tenants/owners were aware of the possibility of a secondary structural support system at the time they were considering occupation.

Committee members commented that the building would be entirely appropriate for higher education use, given that universities nationwide and globally are looking for a London base. Large, stylish and well connected to central London; Walton Court could be a fine flagship university building. Members were surprised that it had not been marketed as such.

The applicants have also carried out a viability report which looks into various options of converting the existing building and finds them all to be financially unviable. This conclusion is used to justify the proposed demolition. However, the applicant purchased the site with a full knowledge of the challenges of the building, and these should have been factored into any initial assessment of profit. If at this time the conversion of the building was found to be unprofitable, the applicant had every opportunity not to proceed with the purchase or to offer a lower price. Berkeley considered purchase of the site in 2012-13, and after assessment decided not to proceed on this very basis.

If, as the applicants argue, all reasonable options for conversion are financially unviable, then we would posit that the applicants paid too much for the site. Demolition of a listed building cannot be granted simply because anticipated profit figures are lower than initially anticipated - nor because conversion would yield less profit than demolition. This ruling would make a mockery of the listing system.

The second arm of the applicant's response to the above criteria is to argue that the nature of the works to the façade in order to bring the building up to current standards would fundamentally undermine the authenticity of the listed building, and for this reason enabling development has been dismissed as there would be no 'clear and meaningful heritage benefit for the designated asset.' We strongly refute this. There is a long, well established and uncontroversial precedent for this type of work to listed assets of all ages within conservation practice. The replacement of a façade is a reasonable and appropriate solution to ensure a listed asset has a continued productive life. This has been the case with the Grade II* listed Great Arthur House (Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, 1957) at the Golden Lane Estate, where the aluminium curtain wall system has recently been replaced like for like. The Grade II listed Manchester CIS Tower (Sir John Burnet Tait and Partners, 1962) was also entirely re-clad in 2004 with the support of English Heritage. At Walton Court, there is also the possibility of retaining the original half-hexagons in a new façade. This would lend a further aspect of material conservation.

Regardless, the Twentieth Century Society considers that there is a clear and meaningful heritage benefit to the replacement of the original cladding as it would allow the core structure to survive including the surviving original entrance lobby, the retention of the integrated and listed landscape, and the essential form and ideas that the building embodies. We consider that this assertion by the applicants is spurious and the dismissal of enabling development on these grounds is unfounded.

Conservation by grant-funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible

The Society recognises that opportunities for securing charitable funding for an office building will be extremely scarce, but we query the veracity of the list of organisations which the applicants claim they have engaged with in order to explore this. We are listed here as one such organisation, but have not been approached by the applicants. A meeting took place after the application for demolition had

been submitted, and was as a result of our own request for consultation regarding development plans. The prospect of grant funding has never been discussed with us.

The harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use

The Society is wholly unconvinced of the 'benefit' of bringing the site back into use through demolition not only for the above reasons, but because the proposals are for a housing development which we consider to be underwhelming in its architectural quality and which would be a major overdevelopment of the site in both scale and density. The relocation of a listed work of art is being framed as a scheme 'benefit' but this should be a matter of course. The applicants also make reference to public benefit, although they concede earlier in the same report that there are no substantial public benefits. We note that the many objections on the local planning authority website indicate major concern regarding increased pressure on infrastructure and local amenities. This should also be taken into account in weighing benefit.

We therefore are entirely unconvinced that a case has been made for the benefit of bringing the site back into use in the way the applicants propose – and certainly not one which can counter the loss of the heritage asset.

Conclusion

The Society has demonstrated above that the relevant tests have not been met, as is an absolute requirement of the NPPF (paragraph 133). In line with national policy, the Society urges that Elmbridge Borough Council refuse consent. The alternative would fundamentally undermine the purpose of the listing system and could set a devastating precedent.

I trust that these comments are of use to you in your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further queries.

Yours sincerely,

Tess Pinto
Conservation Adviser
Twentieth Century Society

Remit: The Twentieth Century Society was founded in 1979 and is the national amenity society concerned with the protection, appreciation, and study of post-1914 architecture, townscape and design. The Society is acknowledged in national planning guidance as the key organisation concerned with the modern period and is a constituent member of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies. Under the procedures set out in *ODPM Circular 09/2005*, all English local planning authorities must inform the Twentieth Century Society when an application for listed building consent involving partial or total demolition is received, and they must notify us of the decisions taken on these applications.