

Comments by Prof. Andrew Saint on Revised Application for Woodlands Nursing Home site, October 2022 (21/04356/FL)

I write, as I have done before on three previous occasions, to comment on the current planning application for this site. I do so as a local resident living about 300 yards from the Woodlands site, and as an expert with many years' experience in assessing, judging and writing about architecture and planning schemes, notably in London.

Once again, careful study of the documentation shows that this fourth application to redevelop the Woodlands site falls far short of the standards of design which ought to be in evidence for this important site within a conservation area and adjacent to listed buildings. Instead of the entirely new scheme which the site requires, as was so clearly suggested by the Planning Inspector when the appeal for the last scheme was rejected, the developers have persisted with the fundamental scheme of a tall tower with lower peripheral blocks, which has already been shown to be a faulty and inappropriate scheme for this site. Very little new design work has been undertaken since the last application. The tower has now (for the second time) been reduced and now stands at 14 storeys, and the total number of units is now down to 126 units. These are marginal improvements, but they do not meet the fundamental objections which have been brought against the scheme from many experts and local protesters.

I shall confine the rest of my remarks to those matters in which I have most expertise and knowledge.

Tall building or so called mid-rise?

In this as in previous applications, the developers have sought to present the tower at the centre of the Woodlands site as not a tall building, and therefore one to which specific policies for tall buildings do not apply. To take first the common understanding of the term 'tall building', all the definitions I can find on the Internet for a mid-rise building (most of them American) suggest that between five and ten storeys is what is normally understood by that term, though some definitions go as high as twelve. Such UK sites as there are define tall buildings as 18 metres or over. By all such measures the new application at 14 storeys is still over this limit, and

that is confirmed by the report commissioned by the developers from the consultants Montagu Evans (THVIA), which at paragraph 4.25, in reference to the Lambeth Local Plan, clearly states:

‘Policy Q26 sets out the tall buildings strategy for Lambeth. The Proposed Development incorporates a tall building and is not located within a tall building zone. Policy Q26 b) states that proposals for tall buildings outside the identified tall building zones must demonstrate *“appropriateness of the site for a tall building having regard to the impact on heritage assets, the form, proportion, composition, scale and character of the immediate buildings and the character of the local area”*.‘

I am given to understand that the Local Plan may have been amended so that buildings in Northern Lambeth up to 45 metres in height may be classified as ‘mid-rise’. If that is so, it is against all common-sense definition of the term, and it has not been so construed by Montagu Evans, the developer’s own agents. Building A is now measured at 44.295m (or over 45m if the plant is included). The choice of this height is very clearly made to ‘game the system’. It has no rational connection with what is best for the site, and everything to do with what the developers think they may be able to get away with.

Architectural quality

The applicants have been keen to stress throughout that their development promises architecture of ‘high quality’ – a phrase several times repeated in their application. That in my view is not at all borne out by the submitted drawings.

To take first matters of internal planning layout, Building D continues to feature first-floor and second-floor flats which can only be accessed by the occupant taking the internal stair or lift and then going out to an external balcony along the back of the block in order to reach the front door. This is a highly unsatisfactory arrangement which clearly arises from the attempt to jam in as many small units as possible. Turning to Building A, the changes made to the plan of the tower in order to improve daylighting involve taking a slice off the west elevation. That causes some uncomfortable features in the corner flats on this side, notably an intrusive pier which breaks clumsily into the flats at the angles: A02-05, A03-04 etc. Such blemishes detract from the claim that the scheme is of ‘high quality’.

Now for the appearance of the tower. If there is to be a tall building on this site, which I contest, it is not unreasonable that it should be brick-clad. But a moment's reflection will show that to borrow the palette and other features from the Master's House – a gesture endorsed in the Montagu Evans report – really does nothing substantial to make the building fit better into its low-rise context. It is really a piece of tokenism. In particular, adding in arches from the Master's House in order to add some interest to the top and relieve the banality of the tower design. As these arches have no structural reality or mouldings of the kind found on the Master's House, they have an unfortunate pastiche or add-on look. That is compounded at the corners, where the arches are combined with recessed balconies. In architecture the usual view is that arches need to be (or at least to look to be) solidly supported, especially at the corners, where two arches abut in different planes. But in this design the corner piers seem to be no thicker than the others, which gives an appearance of weakness. The effect of the recessed balconies is to make these corners appear even weaker. These arbitrary arches also reappear at one corner of the base of the building, so as to draw attention to the corner entrance. It would have been more logical if the arches were taken right round the base rather than confined to a single corner. But in fact all the arches, top and bottom, are just a decorative gesture, introduced to compensate for the underlying monotony of the design.

These features were present in the last submitted and rejected design for Building A. Unfortunately, there are now additional objectionable features. The slice taken off the west side and the reduction in storey-heights does nothing to make the tower look better. It is just a bit stumpier and more angular now than before. A high-quality approach would have entailed a complete reconsideration of Building A's appearance, whereas we are now presented with a makeshift revision of the last design. Attention should also be drawn to the stepping-down attachments on the east face of the buildings, which the Montagu Evans report describes as 'shoulder blocks' (10.6). They have changed the storey-heights of these. It must be significant that none of the perspective views shows these shoulder blocks properly. Lower buildings shouldn't just be jammed against high ones – they need to join subtly. The tops of shoulder blocks are described as 'stepped communal terraces' and they appear to have safety railings all round but no detail of that is shown. They could easily be coarse and basic.

On the perimeter blocks, I note that extra height is contrived by sheet metal roofs. These are almost always clumsy and inelegant features and in the interests of 'high quality design' they ought to be reconsidered.

Appropriate development for the Woodlands site

I repeat the following comments from my remarks made in respect of the last scheme. 'It is very important that the Local Authority should not be worn down by repeated applications of a similar nature, when what is called for is a radical revision of the applicants' approach to the site. If they cannot manage that, then they should sell the site or their option on the site to someone who can. My own view is that Woodlands is an excellent example of a site which could be beneficially redeveloped for housing on a high-density/low-rise model. I note that there have lately been an increasing number of calls for that sort of approach to London sites earmarked for housing, following the recent rash of developers' towers which almost inevitably will cause problems further down the line.'

It is understood that the developers may have looked at an eight-storey scheme but concluded that this would not yield the requisite daylighting levels which have been such an important aspect of debate during discussions for the development of the Woodlands site. So much depends on the configuration of such a scheme that I believe any such claim must be treated with great caution. Eight storeys would be a lot if it was applied universally across the site. In judging this application, Lambeth should pay the closest attention to the Planning Inspector's remarks on what this site would bear. I am confident that a good scheme by first-class housing architects could result in a happy, acceptable and useful development of the Woodlands site. Unfortunately, Anthology have consistently failed to come up with the appropriate kind of scheme.

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