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Our Ref: **Q2022/3991/DRP**  
Date: 26/01/2023

Dear Jamie,

**ISLINGTON DESIGN REVIEW PANEL**

**RE: Edward Rudolf House, 69-85 Margery Street, WC1X 0JL (Q2022/3046/MJR)**

Thank you for attending Islington's Design Review Panel meeting on 16 December 2022 for a first review of the above scheme. The proposed scheme under consideration is for Demolish the existing office building and redevelop the site for a new office building up to 4 storeys (including lower ground/ ground) and associated works.

**Review Process**

The Design Review Panel provides expert impartial design advice following the 10 key principles of design review established by Design Council/CABE. The scheme was reviewed by Dominic Papa, Cordula Zeidler, Alec Forshaw, Jeremy Foster, and Thomas Lefevre on 16/12//2022 including a site visit, presentation from the design team followed by a question-and-answer session and deliberations at the offices of the London Borough of Islington.

**The views expressed below are a reflection of the Panel's discussions as an independent advisory body to the Council.**

**Panel's observations**

Thank you for consulting Islington's Design Review Panel. If there is any point that requires clarification please do not hesitate to contact me and I will be happy to seek further advice from the Panel.

A question and answer session commenced after the applicant presentation followed by a commentary on the scheme provided by the Chairs.

Each section is recorded below.

**Questions & Answers:**

Q) What are the existing and proposed NIA and GIA?

A) Proposed:

NIA: 3,600 sqm

GIA: 5,000 sqm

Existing:

NIA 2,100 sqm

GIA 2,500 sqm

Q) About the affordable office space, can you tell us the dimensions, how deep does the office space go?

A) 6m.

Q) The courtyard is a play space. Why would the offices be overlooking into a play space?

A) It wasn't there when the project started. It may be a mean while use. We are in touch with Islington management side of that space and there would need an agreement made to agree windows to exist there.

Q) Is there a section across the courtyard and play space?

A) Page 133 of pack full height, but not full length.

Q) Are the windows all fixed or are they openable?

A) The windows are fixed. The plan is too deep to cross ventilate. The air quality is not great.

Q) The long elevation has four bays. The end is five bays wide. Why is that the module?

A) This is to keep a window dimension that relates to the surroundings, not as a rational grid. This gives us an additional bay at the end of Margery Street, terminating the building in a meaningful way.

Q) The 4 and 5 bays don't relate to the context. Why not 3, or 2?

A) We studied all, and we thought this was given a good balance of horizontality and verticality.

Q) Is the aim that the building works on its own logic?

Yes. It needs to be seen as a single building, it does not want to pretend to pay reference or be inspired by others. It is an office building on its own right.

Q) What type of structural investigation has been done to assess reuse of the building?

A) We put together a report. An appraisal of the existing structure, load bearing strategy, it's a mixture of masonry, the external walls are load bearing. You have to do steelwork structure to add new floors to the top. All you are retaining is the façade.

Q) Can the existing structure not take one more floor?

A) No.

Q) What is there on top of the roof?

Air handling unit. VRF condenser unit.

Q) What is the existing level?

A) The fall is 3.5m across the site.

Q) About the dimensions of the floor plates. They show as being thicker at the end, middle and cross the wing. What are those dims?

A) 13m across the narrow part, reduces to 11.5m central portion and the full depth 28m, and then different levels oscillate between 18-20m depending on the level. Mid span columns were introduced because 20m span being too far for a single span, but there is no middle column in the Farringdon Road end.

Q) Is the top story higher? What is the floor-to-floor height of the top floor?

A) No, it is consistent across, except the upper ground where another 400mm are added to give a grander experience in respond to appeal comments. Every level is 3.85m floor to floor.

Q) What are the height changes?

A) At Margery Street there is a slope, with a different height at lower level. There is a slight additional height parapet.

Q) Top floor windows look taller. Is it a 3.5m – 3.7m tall in section?

A) This is an optical illusion to make it look taller. The glazed dimension is the same.

Q) Are there railings at ground level?

A) Metal vertical ones, representing the railings of the square. Ribbed metal.

Q) Is the office outdoor roof terrace screened?

A) No changes to the terraces, no further impact on rear gardens has been identified.

Q) But when there is outdoor use by the office users there is potential for annoyance of the nearby residents?

A) That can be controlled by planning condition(s) and operating hours.

### **Panel Commentary:**

The Panel understand that the scheme has been in development since 2018, however, there remains fundamental problems with it. An approach that is focused on tweaking should not be continued, instead focusing on more holistic changes. There is a key matter of reuse and the justification for demolition that needs to be addressed:

### **SUSTAINABILITY:**

A key question is the justification for rebuilding over refurbishment.

Since 2019, there has been a cultural revolution regarding the use of existing buildings. This panel can't decide for the project team which route is appropriate, but a thorough appraisal must be undertaken considering whether the building could be reused.

There is a change in emphasis, a duty as designer to consider reuse very seriously. The previous attitude which was one of "I want to do this on this site so I can't reuse, therefore I have to demolish" has changed into one where you start by considering what the building can be used for and then add to it. The Panel would want the retrofit option to be looked at carefully again. A more detailed assessment on the existing structural frame and a rigorous exploration of retention options for a deep retrofit, covering aspects of foundation, columns, and slabs, is advised.

The existing building is not an architectural gem, as the inspector said in the report: it is innocuous, it is not damaging in the street scene, it has been there a long time. Is it possible to reuse with a lightweight additional structure?

The Panel understands that work has been done to explain the approach. The structural engineer, however, must do more work: what can be retained, what can you partially demolish?

The Panel understands why two floors would be complicated but reusing the building with one additional storey should be explored. The carbon balance needs to be examined by the council and work with a presumption to retrofit.

In terms of the windows, the building is quite deep and would suggest that keeping the windows closed is an optimum solution for internal air control. Throughout the year, and especially in the summer it is unfortunate that there is no option for opening the windows, particularly as the neighbourhood is so residential. Your approach freezes the decision to only use mechanical ventilation. It is uncomfortable to validate as a principle, a sealed building in that neighbourhood. It does not feel right especially as the the design team's judgement that the area has bad air quality hasn't been validated.

This should not be an issue with a relatively small office building, yet somehow it is designed as larger speculative office block, which has been setup to be fully air conditioned and sealed. This also leads to issues with townscape: a building with no openable windows becomes an issue of appearance as well.

### **LAYOUT:**

Celebrating the corner point is the wrong thing to be doing here. It is not an important corner site; it doesn't need celebrating. It is a very quiet residential street with no traffic. The square itself is very quiet, so celebrating the corner and turning it into a grand public space is misplaced. I think it needs a major rethink, almost start again with a few key principles.

The corner entrance also lends itself to abuse of access. Worried about a situation, where one must retrofit gates in it to control access. This is likely to happen. The corner location also creates a repetitive long elevation down the street because it doesn't have an entrance along the Margery Street frontage, impacting the street scene negatively. Also, if have in your own demise as open space, you are inviting anti-social behaviour. You can do something architecturally that ties the corner to the street. Easily and successfully with an architectural device.

### **MASSING:**

The corner entry at Yardley Street is taking a bite out of the building. This is not necessarily the best place to have an entrance. The corner is rather overwhelming.

The loss of the cube, which was an unattractive feature, has been replaced by something that is too out of scale with Yardley Street. The previous scheme which added the parapet line throughout was more successful.

The changes at the Attneave Street side still results in impact to the adjacent residential units, despite the scheme being one storey less tall. This harm needs to be weighed with the gains of the scheme.

### **APPEARANCE:**

In terms of the overall treatment down Margery Street, there is a problem of a long frontage sloping site without a break in the floor slabs. There is an issue of the experience at the street scene of walking down to Farringdon Road. The existing building has a middle entrance for a reason: it activated the building on the street.

The rhythm your proposal sets up seems remorseless even when tried to be broken down. It does not reflect the local context and seems rather dull.

Charles Rowan House is a masterpiece of how one can work with its context in a sloping site. It brilliantly takes queue from the Conservation Area.

The Yardley Street elevation is broken into two. From the square, views along the shorter elevation, you don't need to break it up and have two fake town houses. This needs to work as one. The length is too little to take this breaking up. The step-in height might work best with a horizontal emphasis at GF and 1F from the terraces and balconies that carries your eye across.

The Yardley Street elevation is pronounced, celebrated and a positive change, however, must be handled more sensitively. It could be closer with the appeal scheme, carrying through the corner with string courses and with the façade's materials.

The use of Juliet balconies to echo the railings are making the whole elevations of the building read disjointed. The top reads as if it is taller than the other floors. The top spandrel of the window could be thicker and white material, rather than black.

The Margery Street elevation on the previous scheme, took the rusticated stucco as a plinth for the whole façade, which was visually more successful rather than taking it to ground. You don't have enough differentiation between base and pilaster. It doesn't need rustication necessarily, but just you have a solid base that provides differentiation.

### **Chair Commentary:**

Across the many DRPs, the issue of overlooking has always been stated. A way in which the windows on the rear work in terms of lighting and overlooking to the gardens and residents themselves needs to be addressed.

There are lots of ways to achieve this such as screens and angled windows, partially obscuring them, etc. As a panel we need to see work that shows this has been explored.

The ambiguity of the play space in terms of its permanence is also problematic. If this has been provided on a temporary basis, then this needs to be clarified and confirmed.

There is an opportunity to activate the street ideally using the office space as an activation device. You could access from both ends, bottom and top of Margery Street instead that from the corner. The split of market and affordable offices could be provided this way, rather than trying to squeeze both in a single corner. There is a lot of pressure in that location in terms of bins, affordable entrance, bike and having a main entrance.

The shared lobby approach is understood; however, it results in affordable workspace users coming into a door, then into a lobby and then splitting again to go down the stairs. There is an opportunity to make the western entrance work more in a full way rather than fire exit.

The natural lighting and outlook to the affordable workspace is also problematic as it clashes with the courtyard to the residents.

### **Chair Summary:**

There are key concerns to the approach to demolition versus retrofit. There has been seismic shift in the cultural landscape in favour of retrofitting and this needs to be explored properly.

We agree that the scheme shown has made improvements from the appeal, but the changes happen need to look at the scheme in a broader picture, not just as a box ticking exercise.

There are concerns with the design of the corner; scale and transition down Yardley Street are an issue. The scale onto Yardley Street needs to be looked at.

There are also issues with the bays and with the diagrammatic principle or ordering of horizontal and verticality, because you can mix that in many ways. The elevation can be designed not to make it look residential, but at a scale, grain and dimension that doesn't make it less an office building but is positioned in concert with its context. Greater differentiation has been mentioned. Hierarchy is important to work with and it is not clear in the current scheme. For example, the top being too big as well as issues with the rhythm of the façade are examples of this.

Affordable workspace: Its lighting and quality of space are of great concern especially if the play area remains a play area.

The terraces and how they are controlled with private gardens being so close to resident's private open spaces are also problematic. How is overlooking managed?

The lack of openable windows is also of concern. AHMM project on the Old Guardian building, as well as the White-Collar building had openable windows and had deeper floor plates. There are ways of making it work. There must be the option you can open the windows, get fresh air to people that will work there.

Fundamental issues remain, and they need to be tackled. You are working in the right direction, but issues that remain from 4th DRP - massing and elevation still need to be improved, plus new things regarding the broader cultural shift.

### **Confidentiality**

Please note that since the scheme is at pre-application stage, the advice contained in this letter is provided in confidence. However, should this scheme become the subject of a planning application, the views expressed in this letter may become public and will be

taken into account by the Council in the assessment of the proposal and determination of the application.

Yours sincerely,



**Fabrizio Matillana**  
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Design & Conservation Deputy Team Manager  
Islington Council

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