

Barbican Association Proposals for Management of Planning Issues affecting the Barbican Estate.

1.1 The objective of the following proposal is to secure a fair balance in the assessment of planning applications between the needs of business and the needs of residents of the Barbican Estate. Although prepared with the Barbican Estate in mind, the principles would apply in any area in which there are significant residential populations, such as the Golden Lane and Mansell Street Estates in the City.

1.2 The key elements of the proposals are as follows:

- Planning matters affecting residential areas within the City should be handled with particular sensitivity.
- The existing Policy gives insufficient guidance to Officers of the Planning Department in assessing planning proposals affecting residential areas. As a result, it can appear that there is an “institutional bias” favouring development in Planning Officers’ assessment of planning proposals.
- The Grade II Listing for the buildings of the Barbican Estate and Grade II* Listing of its gardens require that planning proposals have due regard to the effect of development on the setting of the Estate. As noted at para. 4.21 of the Barbican Listed Building Management Guidelines:

‘The spaces between buildings were as important to the design as the buildings themselves. The use of brick to surface the walkways, flower beds and minor structures ensures that the minimal palette of materials used at the Barbican is further emphasised. Other important planned features of the landscaping include the lakes and gardens - designed to give aspect to every flat on the Estate.’

- The Highwalk access into the Barbican Estate at Podium level is an integral element of the design of the Estate. Proposals involving further removal of Highwalk-level access onto the Barbican Estate are incompatible with the Listing and must not be permitted. As noted at para. 5.5 of the Barbican Listed Building Management Guidelines:

‘It [the Barbican] also combined the key planning themes of highwalks and megastructure, both favoured planning solutions of their time.’

See also the booklet ‘Barbican Estate A Listed Building Guide for Residents’ which states in the section headed “The Vision”:

“Chamberlin, Powell and Bon rejected traditional planning ideas and sought to create an urban centre with high density housing and a clear definition of planned spaces: private, public, transport, pedestrian, retail and community facilities. The elevated walkway system, designed to separate pedestrians from vehicles, was an important part of the planned rebuilding of the City in the post-war era.”

Why Present these Proposals Now?

1.3 Over the last 18 months planning issues in and around the Barbican Estate have been very much to the fore. The proposals have included:

Milton Court;

the car park issues associated with Milton Court;

the proposed St Alphage redevelopment;

the Lauderdale car park redevelopment;

the Aldersgate St turret redevelopment;

Frobisher Crescent;

Commenting on the proposals for a new Local Development Framework (“LDF”).

1.4 All of the above are continuing issues of relevance to residents, either because planning permission has yet to be applied for, or because (where permission has been granted), demolition and/or reconstruction has yet to take place. The consultation regarding the LDF will continue into 2008.

1.5 One very obvious point that has arisen in dealing with all this development activity is the absence from the formal planning requirements of adequate guidance to address the consequences of development affecting the predominantly residential Barbican Estate. This problematic and potentially dangerous lacuna needs to be filled by appropriate guidance for future development in and around the Barbican Estate.

Assessing Development around the Periphery of the Barbican Estate

1.6 It is through an accident of history that the Barbican Estate (one of the largest residential estates in the country comprising over 2,000 homes) is located on the edge of what is now acknowledged to be the world’s financial centre. The grand vision underpinning the Barbican’s development now finds many more admirers than detractors. Formal recognition of the architects’ and the City’s achievement is now accorded through the Grade II listing of the buildings and Grade II* listing of the gardens. The City has been rightly proud of what it helped to create, but now seems to be pursuing policies that threaten this architectural heritage.

1.7 Now that the Barbican Estate is home to several thousand people, it is reasonable to expect that fact to have due bearing on how development in the immediate vicinity is pursued. Residents in the main rightly accept that since they live in the midst of a global financial centre, development that might be totally unacceptable in the context of a suburban location cannot be dismissed out of hand in the City of London. Conversely, however, the mere presence of large buildings in the vicinity ought not support any expectation that it is either right or inevitable that in future there will be yet more similarly large, or even larger buildings.

1.8 This observation naturally leads to a discussion of “balance” and “reasonableness”. These worthy and commendable concepts require explanation if they are to have meaning in the planning context. That follows not least because developers and residents are likely to have very different ideas concerning what, as a practical matter, is balanced and reasonable. It is suggested that the most effective manner of addressing “balance” and “reasonableness” is to have regard to the impact that a proposed development will have on those living close by. If a development is proposed that will have detrimental effects upon a residential area following completion of construction, the developer will need to address:

- A. why the development could not have been pursued in some alternative location;
- B. the improvements to flow from the development, firstly to the residential community, secondly to the business community and thirdly to the City;
- C. what measures are proposed to mitigate (and to remove where possible) the detrimental effects to local residents;
- D. what compensatory arrangements are proposed, including payments to local residents and, in the most severe cases, purchasing homes affected, in the event that permission for the development is granted.

1.9 Defining a “residential area” should be capable of resolution through discussion with the City Planning Department. In advance of such discussion, what can confidently be stated is that the Wards of Aldersgate and Cripplegate, at least, are predominantly residential in character. These Wards contain the Barbican Estate and the Golden Lane Estate. Approaching two-thirds of the City’s residential electors are to be found in the Wards of Aldersgate and Cripplegate. The other significant concentration of residences is at the Mansell Street and Middlesex Street estates. Together these two areas comprise nearly all of the City residences.

1.10 Defining “detrimental effects” in an exhaustive manner is difficult to do. It would be unwise to proceed as if these are somehow fixed categories. Examples of detrimental effects include:

- Overall bulk and mass causing overshadowing, overlooking and loss of sightlines;
- Overall bulk and mass causing loss of light, including sunlight to flats and common areas including gardens;
- Overall bulk and mass causing a loss of public amenity space;
- Overall bulk and mass causing excessive movements of people and vehicles, creating excessive noise or other nuisance;
- Loss of connection to the city. The Barbican Estate is intended to be accessed via Highwalks, not the street level.

1.11 It is important to note that there is no objection to development as such; indeed, development on the periphery of the Barbican Estate (as opposed to within its curtilage) is to be welcomed, so long as it is appropriate. As the references to overall bulk and mass indicate, more very large or very tall buildings are certainly not appropriate around the periphery of the Barbican Estate.

1.12 What amounts to “appropriate” development around the periphery of the Estate? Quite simply, new buildings which in overall scale are equivalent to the buildings they replace. Development based on such an approach is unlikely to cause the problems associated with overdevelopment outlined above.

1.13 In cases of proposed development involving detrimental effects, the expectation should be that permission for the development is refused. The onus would be upon the developer to demonstrate why permission for the development ought nevertheless to be granted, notwithstanding the detrimental effects involved. In such a case, the developer should address in particular the factors at 1.8 above.

Assessing Development within the Curtilage of the Barbican Estate

1.14 In relation to development within the curtilage of the Barbican Estate, it is suggested that the following principles apply:

“Development enlarging the built environment within the Barbican Estate, or the uses to which existing space is put, is not to be encouraged. If such proposals are put forward, a clear justification and rationale must be presented that is consistent with the context of the Estate as a collection of largely coherent residential Listed Buildings and Open Spaces. There will be a presumption against development that cannot meet that requirement.”

Difficulties with the existing Policy/Process

1.15 The proposals make explicit what should be implicit in any balanced approach to development in and around predominantly residential areas. Members of the City’s Planning and Transportation Committee are clearly alive to the dangers of overdevelopment in “sensitive” areas, as demonstrated by the referral back of the initial application for the redevelopment of the Milton Court site. Nevertheless, Officers in the Planning Department assess applications in a manner consistent with a predisposition to permit development.

1.16 By way of example, the Officer’s report on the initial proposal for Milton Court stated:

“179. The commercial blocks in the City, including City Point and those in London Wall, Wood Street and Silk Street are visible in many views from within the Barbican and help to place it within the urban context of the City. The ‘house’ blocks of the Barbican have a strong horizontality and distinctive roofscape character, and together with the three Barbican towers, define the extent of the Barbican in relation to its surroundings.

180. In views across the Estate the proposed tower would appear as a dominant element alongside other existing tall buildings and towers, in particular City Point and the commercial blocks in Silk Street. It would be some distance away from Cromwell Tower. The strongly modelled form of the proposed tower helps to accentuate its verticality and reduces its apparent bulk, in contrast to the slab-like character of City Point.

181. It is therefore considered that the proposed tower would not affect the setting of the listed estate as it will be seen in the context of other tall buildings.”

1.17 If this “analysis” is followed, any building no matter how large or how tall may be built abutting the Barbican Estate since any such building “will be seen in the context of other tall buildings”. The rationale deployed in an attempt to dismiss the objection that the development would have an adverse effect on the setting of the Barbican Estate is self-defeating. It is the equivalent of saying “this building will not affect the setting of the listed Estate because other tall buildings already do so.” Such a rationale is nonsense.

1.18 The tortured intellectual process continued as follows in relation to the objection that the proposal would contribute to an unacceptable walling-in of the Barbican Estate (sometimes called “canyonisation”):

“182. In views along the edge of the Estate, such as from level 7 of the west end of Speed House and from Gilbert House, the proposed tower would be a very dominant element with its verticality contrasting and merging with the slab-like form of City Point.

183. A number of consultees have commented that the proposal would ‘wall in’ the Barbican Estate to an unacceptable degree. The design of the Estate is characterized partly by the way in which it backs onto the surrounding streets as a fortified and elevated structure, linked to the surrounding area at a limited number of points. The lower parts of many of the street frontages, including Silk Street have a ‘protective’ character turning their back on the street. The terraced blocks above the podium level look out into the quiet and spacious gardens and spaces within the Estate and back onto the surrounding streets with their commercial buildings. It is inevitable that as sites are redeveloped with larger buildings, the relationship between the Barbican and surrounding commercial buildings will change, and that this juxtaposition has always been part of the character of the Estate.”

1.19 Translated, this amounts to saying 1) that the Barbican has walled itself in, 2) the flats look inwards into the gardens and 3) the relationship with surrounding buildings has changed, so change is intrinsically acceptable. The first point is not relevant, as the material consideration is not the Barbican’s design but the effect of development on the Estate. The second point is incorrect, since many flats on the south of the Estate look outwards from their living rooms, while all flats above podium level also look outward to the surrounding streets from some windows. There is almost an insinuation that the Estate has a windowless outward face, as if residents would not notice being walled in. The third point repeats the flaw in paragraph 181 of the report, and is the equivalent of saying “this building will not affect the setting of the listed Estate because other tall buildings already do so.”

1.20 While one may always hope that Members will strike a fair balance, the above example clearly demonstrates that Officers need more explicit guidance in addressing planning issues in “sensitive” areas such as the periphery of large residential estates.

1.21 There are further issues relating to Officers’ involvement. Firstly, the risk that certain “bread and butter” issues of concern to residents in connection with proposed development affecting the Estate will be classified by Officers as planning issues that are inappropriate for discussion by the BRC, but are in turn dismissed by the Planning and Transportation Committee as “landlord and tenant” matters for the BRC to address. Secondly, a concern that Officers may seek to discourage development by expressing opinions regarding “appropriate” use even though proposals thus discouraged may make perfect commercial sense and may also be supported by residents of the Barbican Estate.

1.22 The observations made in the above paragraph ought to concern anyone wishing to ensure that local democracy works in an effective manner.