
THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY
The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

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Your reference: 114664/FO/2016
Our reference: 2016/09/019

30 January 2018

d.brettell@manchester.gov.uk

Dear Mr Brettell,

RE: St Michael's Development, Manchester (affecting the settings of Grade I-listed Albert Memorial and Town Hall, the special character and appearance of the Deansgate Conservation Area, and the setting of the Albert Square Conservation Area); proposed 36-storey tower and 4-storey plinth range at the site between Deansgate, Jackson's Row, Southmill Street and Bootle Street.

Thank you for notifying the Victorian Society of the revised proposals for this site. The scheme was considered at our Northern Building Committee meeting in January, and the Committee's views are expressed below.

Impact of the Revised Scheme

The Society's letter of 15 March 2017 conveyed our strong objection to this extremely harmful proposal in considerable detail, and much of what was written then remains relevant. We would therefore refer you again to this letter for our full assessment of the significance of the site and surroundings, the impact of the scheme, and its relation to legislation, policy and guidance. A copy is enclosed below for ease of reference.

To bring the assessment up to date, the current single-tower scheme represents an improvement on last year's two-tower effort in the sense that it addresses some of the concerns raised by consultees including Historic England. A summary of the issues is offered in the Design and Access Statement (p.41), as follows:

- The demolition of all existing buildings
- Negative impact on the heritage assets and Conservation Area
- Density of the two towers
- The dark colour of the façade
- Lack of activation at street level
- The poor quality of design

It is certainly positive that the Sir Ralph Abercromby pub would be retained as part of the current proposals, although there remain residual setting issues. It is less positive,

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though a move in the right direction, that *G. Noel Hill's* Police Station would be retained only as a façade. It is disappointing that *Peter Cummings* and *Eric Levy's* Synagogue would not be retained in this revision. The density of the two towers has been addressed simply by reducing the scheme to one tower. The dark colour of the façade has been softened somewhat, but the form and reflectivity of the proposed bronze cladding still renders it objectionable and alien to its surrounding context. The lack of activation at street level has been addressed adequately via the proposed plinth range. In these senses then, it could be suggested that the current scheme improves to a degree on the poor quality of the Make scheme.

However, the revisions fail utterly to address the final outstanding – and most significant – issue of the scheme's negative impact on the surrounding heritage assets, which include both highly graded listed buildings and Conservation Areas. This failure is largely due to the fact that, fundamentally, a tower development of this scale on this specific site results in a very high degree of harm to a large number of highly graded listed buildings. As previously, designated heritage assets affected include but are certainly not limited to the Albert Square setting to Manchester's Grade I-listed Town Hall (also of course a Conservation Area), the Grade I-listed Albert Memorial, and the Deansgate Conservation Area.

This very significant adverse impact is demonstrated in the series of townscape views submitted for the current application, particularly of Albert Square, which shows the tower overwhelming the silhouetted form of the Grade I-listed Albert Memorial. It is further evident from the view that the primacy of the Grade I-listed Town Hall, as it is experienced within this important contemporaneous civic square and surrounding group of mostly Victorian buildings, would be completely eroded.

The scheme's absolute failure to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area can be read from the short-range views towards the site from Jackson's Row, Southmill Street, and Deansgate, where the loss of grain, inappropriate choice of materiality, and alien building forms contrast so uncomfortably with the surrounding streetscape, which is otherwise unified by a broadly common form, scale, massing, and materiality.

Unfortunately medium-range views are not provided in the application, which is a great limitation to understanding the scheme's full impact within the Deansgate and surrounding Conservation Areas. We are also disappointed to note the careful contrivance of some other townscape views, particularly two of the Central Library in St Peter's Square, which was one of the assets most obviously harmed by the previous Make scheme. Misleadingly they depict perhaps the only two fixed points in St Peter's Square from which the tower would not be so visible over the arc of the Library roof. While we defer to the Twentieth Century Society for their view on the impact on the roofscape of the Central Library, we would ask the Council to scrutinise the submitted views and to interrogate the impact of the proposals in situ or with a model, rather than rely on the submitted scheme documentation.

Legislation, Policy and Guidance

It is useful here to return again to Historic England's guidance note on Tall Buildings. It cautions that 'if the building is not in the right place and well designed a tall building, by virtue of its size and widespread visibility, can also seriously harm the qualities that people value about a place.'¹ Given the scale of our objection and the objections of many others to the revised proposals, it is apparent that the revised scheme would still seriously harm the qualities that people value about the buildings and streetscape surrounding the site.

¹ <https://content.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/tall-buildings-advice-note-4/heag037-tall-buildings.pdf/>, p.2

Historic England also reminds us that determining an application for a tall building should take the same approach as any other with heritage implications; that is it should have regard for the relevant legislative and policy frameworks:

'When considering any proposal that has an adverse impact on a designated heritage asset through development within its setting, 'great weight should be given to the asset's conservation', with any harm requiring a 'clear and convincing justification' (NPPF paragraph 132). In assessing this justification, and in weighing any public benefits offered by a tall building proposal, local planning authorities will need to pay particular regard to the policies in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the NPPF that state that economic, social and environmental gains are to be sought jointly and simultaneously in order to deliver positive improvements in the quality of the built, natural and historic environment. This may involve the examination of alternative designs or schemes that might be more sustainable because they can deliver public benefits alongside positive improvement in the local environment. If a tall building is harmful to the historic environment, then without a careful examination of the worth of any public benefits that the proposed tall building is said to deliver and of the alternative means of delivering them, the planning authority is unlikely to be able to find a clear and convincing justification for the cumulative harm.'² [Our emphasis]

Additionally, beyond the 'great weight' provision of the relevant national policies, due consideration must be given to the relevant heritage legislation. For listed buildings, it is the Council's statutory duty to have 'special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.'³ For Conservation Areas, the Council's statutory duty is to pay 'special attention [...] to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.'⁴

So the starting point of any assessment is the duty to have 'special regard' or to pay 'special attention' to the preservation of any designated heritage assets, and (for listed buildings only) the contribution made by their setting. This duty applies not just to the building or area that is most affected by a proposal, but to all of the assets that are affected in some way.

Returning to the integral assessment methodology of NPPF paragraphs 132-134, the next step is to identify a clear and convincing justification to explain the harm arising to any designated heritage assets or to their settings (N.B. this includes the settings of Conservation Areas). Given the sheer scale of cumulative harm arising from these particular proposals to numerous assets including to the setting of Manchester Town Hall, the Albert Memorial and the Deansgate Conservation Area, it is expected that any justification will be proportionate to this.

Further, it is also required that the public benefits arising from the scheme are of the required scale so as to weigh against any harm. In this case, the public benefits would need to weigh against the very high adverse impact – not just to one heritage asset but to many, and in some specific cases (such as the Albert Memorial) harm of the highest level. In accordance with Historic England's guidance, when determining a tall building application due consideration should also be given to alternative schemes for a site that would better meet the NPPF requirements for sustainable development.

In line with national policies then, the justification and public benefits for a scheme of this cumulative adverse impact should be of a level that would outweigh the above identified degree of harm. It is our view that the cumulative level of harm is such that this would need to be at a level approximate to, for example, essential infrastructure provision. The type of very robust justification required is quite simply not provided within the proposals.

² Ibid, p.10

³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/9/section/66>

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/9/section/72>

Indeed, we can find no clear or convincing reason – beyond the basic fact of site ownership – to justify this specific scheme in this specific location. If it is economic benefits that are wanted specifically, then these could be delivered with the same level of success on another, far less sensitive site within the city centre. The building density of Manchester's centre is not yet at such a level as to offer no other sites with the development potential to match this scale of ambition, as might perhaps be argued in the case, for example, of the City of London. Alternatively, if it is development of this site that is wanted specifically, a viable scheme delivering at least some of the application's stated economic benefits could still be achieved by a building or group of buildings of a dramatically reduced scale, massing, and form.

One of the major limitations to assessing this application and others within sensitive city-centre locations is that there is no adopted tall buildings policy; clearly, Manchester needs one desperately and we urge the Council to prioritise its creation. To be clear, it is not the Society's view that there is no place in Manchester for tall buildings, but rather that they should be managed properly by the strategic identification of appropriate tall building and cluster locations, instead of the current highly unsatisfactory piecemeal approach. An adopted tall buildings strategy would of course be of benefit to all parties engaged in the planning system, not least to investors looking to select appropriate development sites.

To conclude, it is ironic perhaps that, as the Council embarks on the final part of its three-stage, multi-million pound, publicly-funded project to conserve and refurbish this suite of highly graded civic buildings and spaces for the obvious benefit of the people of Manchester, the settings of these same buildings are being threatened so insidiously by a development that is almost wholly commercial and will therefore largely result in only private gain.

We request that Manchester Council acts to protect its most important historic buildings and spaces, as well as its own recent and on-going considerable financial investment in its civic buildings, by refusing this application in its current form. Given the scheme's evident failure to meet the requirements of the relevant legislative and policy tests, a refusal is wholly justified.

As previously, we recommend, if the Council is minded to grant consent, that the application be referred to the Secretary of State for their determination.

I would be grateful if you could inform me of your decision in due course.

Yours sincerely



Anna Shelley

Conservation Adviser

Enc Victorian Society objection letter (15 March 2017) to earlier scheme iteration

Cc Catherine Dewar, Historic England
Anna Boxer, Historic England
Lucie Carayon, Ancient Monuments Society
Paul Mason, Manchester City Council
James Darwin, Georgian Group
Tess Pinto, Twentieth Century Society
Mike Fox, SAVE Britain's Heritage

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15 March 2017

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Dear Mr Brettell

RE: Land bounded by Jackson's Row, Bootle Street, Southmill Street and 201 Deansgate, Manchester; application for demolition of Sir Ralph Abercromby Pub, former Police Station and Synagogue, and erection of 21- and 31-storey towers

Thank you for consulting the Victorian Society on this application. This case has recently been considered by the Society's Northern Buildings Committee, and I write now to convey our views. We strongly object to this application, which we consider to be one of the most destructive and damaging schemes we have seen proposed anywhere in recent years. In the event of the Council being minded to grant the application consent, we request that it is referred to the Secretary of State for his own determination.

Our response to last year's public consultation clearly articulated our in-principle objections to this proposal. Since that consultation – the usefulness of which must surely be questioned – the only apparent changes to the scheme (despite over 70% of respondents opposing the scheme) have been to increase the size of the taller tower and propose a different, bronze-hued, cladding material. While our views remain as expressed previously, given the additional explanatory information and submitted justification, a fuller response is here required.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

The site occupies about two-thirds of a large, oblong urban block bounded by Jackson's Row, Southmill Street, Bootle Street and, to the west, Deansgate. It includes three buildings, each of which is of historic and architectural distinction. The Sir Ralph Abercromby on Bootle Street is generally accepted as being a mixture of eighteenth and nineteenth-century fabric. It is an attractive, characterful three-storey building, indicative of the former scale and grain of development in this part of the city through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also has historical associations as reputedly one of only two remaining buildings that witnessed the 1819 Peterloo massacre. The pub sits forward of the prevailing building line and thus features

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prominently in views in both directions along Bootle Street, enhancing the setting of neighbouring listed buildings and contributing positively to the Deansgate Conservation Area, of which it forms an integral part.

The site's two other buildings are more substantial: the 1953 Jackson Row synagogue (*Peter Cummings* and *Eric Levy*), the subject of a recent listing application by the Twentieth Century Society, and the former police station by city architect *G. Noel Hill*, which is a particularly imposing edifice. Both buildings were included on the Twentieth Century Society's Most Endangered Buildings List and both, along with the Ralph Abercromby, are rightly adjudged to be non-designated heritage assets and positive contributors to the Deansgate Conservation Area.

While we ultimately defer to the Twentieth Century Society on the intrinsic significance of the synagogue and the police station, the importance of the latter and its role in the setting of the Albert Square Conservation Area and its civic group cannot be overlooked. The police station is clearly visible from Albert Square and the Heritage Statement notes that it is "*understood and appreciated as being part of the civic complex*". In terms of scale, character, civic qualities and architectural ambition the police station is in every way a continuation of those aspects that define the character and appearance of Albert Square and the setting of its civic group. Albert Square is of course dominated by *Alfred Waterhouse's* Grade I-listed, internationally significant Town Hall. The Heritage Assessment emphasises the architectural and visual primacy of this building and the need for any new development to respect it.

In addition to the Town Hall, the application site is surrounded by a dense and extraordinary array of listed buildings and conservation areas. The applicant's Heritage Statement identifies nine conservation areas within or partly within 250m of the application site and no fewer than seventy two listed buildings or structures. The international importance of the Town Hall is already noted, but the Town Hall extension, the Central Library, the Free Trade Hall (*Edward Walters*, 1853-6), the Midland Hotel (*Charles Trubshaw*, 1898-1903), the Lawrence Buildings (*Pennington and Bridgen*, 1874-6), the Memorial Hall, Southmill Street (*Thomas Worthington*, 1864-6), the Manchester Law Library (*Thomas Hartas*, 1885) and the Athenaeum, Princess Street (*Sir Charles Barry*, 1837, remodelled 1874) all stand close by and all, remarkably, are listed Grade II*. This is a site of the highest significance and sensitivity.

IMPACT OF THE SCHEME

The scheme has been in development for some time, has been the subject of a public consultation, to which the response was overwhelmingly negative, is the subject of critical petitions (with thousands of signatories) and has received heavy (and, again, mostly critical) coverage in national press: it needs no introduction. Its programme is simple: the clearance of the site, including the total demolition of the three historic buildings discussed above, and the erection of two skyscrapers of 21 and 31 storeys respectively.

Putting briefly to one side the proposed towers, the clearance of this large site and its historic buildings would essentially bulldoze a large portion of the Deansgate Conservation Area. The loss of three notable buildings that make a significant and positive contribution to the character, appearance and appreciation of the Conservation Area, to the setting of numerous listed buildings and, in the case of the Police Station, a building which plays a fundamental role in the setting of the Town Hall and the Albert Square Conservation Area, would cause a substantial level of harm to the fabric and setting of various designated heritage assets.

However, undoubtedly the most damaging aspect of the scheme is the proposed towers. The submitted splatter diagram goes only so far in demonstrating the enormous impact two skyscrapers in this location would have, not just on the immediate surroundings – the nine conservation areas and seventy two listed

buildings identified by the Heritage Assessment – but on the very character and identity of central Manchester and its skyline. Notwithstanding the far-reaching implications of the towers, of greatest concern to the Victorian Society is the profound and detrimental impact the towers would have on the setting and primacy of the Grade I-listed Town Hall.

We are unconvinced by the Heritage Statement's attempts to assess the level of harm of the proposed towers. In assessing viewpoint 5, for example, it defines its level of importance as 'regional', and heritage value as 'medium'. Given the context and significance of the buildings in the view we question the accuracy of this assessment. On the left of the view stands the nationally-important Grade II-listed Friends Meeting House of 1828-30 by *Richard Lane*, on the right is the II*-listed Lawrence Buildings; beyond, to the right, is 1-5 Central Street, also listed Grade II and, at the end, Noel Hill's distinguished former Police Station. The photograph is taken from the boundaries of both the Albert Square and St Peter's Square Conservation Areas, and looks directly into the Deansgate Conservation Area. This is an area not of a regional, but of an exceptional level of importance and heritage value. Even using the Heritage Statement's own gauge of impact (the table included in appendix 1) it is incorrect: with medium value significance and a high magnitude of impact, the effect should be calculated as both major and detrimental.

Notwithstanding the inadequacies of the Heritage Impact Assessment, it is telling that it asserts that in every kinetic view, and several key views, harm would be caused to the area's rich historic environment and its listed buildings. In all but one the Impact Assessment considers that the towers would cause either a moderate or a major adverse level of harm. The ultimate conclusion of the Impact Assessment is that the development would result in "*major adverse impact*" on the setting of the Grade I Town Hall, the II*-listed Town Hall extension, the II*-listed Central Library and the Grade I-listed church of St Ann. Given that the report is notionally submitted to support the application, this is a damning indictment of the scheme. There is no point in discussing matters of cladding or detailed design when the fundamentals of the scheme are so profoundly insupportable. We object in principle to such extensive and unjustified loss of important historic buildings and to the construction of towers on this site.

LEGISLATION, POLICY AND GUIDANCE

In determining this application, sections 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 oblige Manchester City Council to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving and enhancing the character of conservation areas, and place great emphasis on the preservation of listed buildings and their setting. Similar emphasis on the protection and sensitive treatment of the historic environment is stipulated in the NPPF. In addition to paragraphs 126 to 138, paragraphs 58 and 64 are also applicable to this case. Central to national policy is the delivery of sustainable development, at the heart of which is a requirement to protect and enhance heritage assets and their setting. Where a development, as here, would cause substantial harm, paragraph 133 of the NPPF states that it should be refused consent unless "*it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss*", or all of four tests can be satisfied. Either way, the submitted documentation fails to satisfy national policy.

Historic England's Tall Buildings Advice Note 4 warns that "*there have been many examples of tall buildings that have had a lasting adverse impact through being unsuitably located, poorly designed, and inappropriately detailed*". It goes on to state that "*if the building is not in the right place and well designed a tall building, by virtue of its size and widespread visibility, can also seriously harm the qualities that people value about a place*". The St Michael's scheme would surely fall into this category. The Advice Note stresses the need for new development to understand and respond to the nature of the area around them and to carefully consider the impact they would have

on “*both specific features of the historic environment and its general character*”. Page 8 of the Advice Note lists those things with which a scheme involving tall buildings will have a ‘positive relationship’: these include topography, character of place, heritage assets and their settings, height and scale of development, urban grain, streetscape, important views and impact on skyline. Assessed against these criteria the St Michael’s scheme must be considered a failure.

Assessing it against these criteria, and with an appreciation of the significance and defining qualities of the surrounding area, one must conclude that this is not an appropriate location for tall buildings. In finding suitable sites for tall buildings Historic England’s guidance recommends utilising Local Plans. It is surely to be regretted that Manchester City Council has thus far avoided identifying in any detail sites that may or may not be appropriate for tall buildings, something that clearly needs to be addressed. Nonetheless, Manchester’s Local Development Framework Core Strategy (adopted July 2012) does include advice on tall buildings. As far as siting is concerned, it recommends that “*particular encouragement*” is to be given to non-conservation areas. Policy EN 2 asserts that tall buildings will be supported only when it can be demonstrated that they are “*of excellent design quality*” are “*appropriately located*” and “*contribute positively to place making*”. It continues: “*a fundamental design objective will be to ensure that tall buildings complement the City’s key existing building assets and make a positive contribution to the evolution of a unique, attractive and distinctive Manchester, including to its skyline and approach views*”.

Other relevant policies in the Core Strategy with which the scheme fails to comply include Policy EN 3 (“*throughout the City, the Council will encourage development that complements and takes advantage of the distinct historic and heritage features of its districts and neighbourhoods, including those of the City Centre*”), Policy EN 1 (developers are “*expected to consider the City’s heritage*”), Policy CC 2 (“*proposals for new development... must respect existing built heritage and public realm*” and Policy CC 9 (“*Design of new buildings will need to be of the highest standard in terms of appearance and function. The standards and guidance explained in other LDF policies should be the basis for the approach to design, with particular attention to be given to the City Centre context and character. Development in Manchester City Centre should preserve or enhance the heritage assets that have been identified, including listed buildings, conservation areas and scheduled ancient monuments*”).

Historic England advises that “*if a tall building is harmful to the historic environment, then without a careful examination of the worth of any public benefits that the proposed tall building is said to deliver and of the alternative means of delivering them, the planning authority is unlikely to be able to find a clear and convincing justification for the cumulative harm*”. The applicant presents the public benefits as being threefold: economic, social and environmental and, cumulatively, as being substantial. Largely because of the visual and heritage implications of the scheme, environmentally the scheme would be disastrous. The applicant emphasises the need to respect key views, the desirability of high quality new design and active frontages, and boasts that St Michael’s will represent an “enhancement” of the urban green. It is clear, however, that it achieves none of these things. The social arguments are also decidedly weak. As far as the economic arguments are concerned, we leave it to the Council and, ultimately, to the Secretary of State to assess the benefits of the 1500 new jobs the scheme would deliver. However, even if this is deemed to constitute substantial public benefits, we do not accept – and the applicant fails to establish – that equivalent benefits could not be delivered by a more contextual and considerably less harmful scheme, one that retains the most significant elements of the existing site. Particularly in light of Historic England’s advice Advice Note 4 it fundamentally undermines the applicant’s case that alternative means of delivering equivalent public benefits have not been explored.

In light of the above we strongly object to this application and recommend that it is refused consent. If, in spite of our advice, the Council is minded to grant the

application consent, then we request that it is referred to the Secretary of State for his own determination.

Yours sincerely

James Hughes

Senior Conservation Adviser

cc Catherine Dewar (Historic England)
Anna Boxer (Historic England)
Lucie Carayon (Ancient Monuments Society)
Paul Mason (Manchester City Council)
James Darwin (Georgian Group)
Tess Pinto (Twentieth Century Society)
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