



Photo: Malcolm Dawes

The future of The Alex

THE
MONTPELIER
AND
CLIFTON HILL
ASSOCIATION
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A Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association report

The future of the Alex

In May Taylor Wimpey's plans to demolish the much-loved Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital and build a purpose-built block of flats were decisively rejected by a government planning inspector, John Papworth, after a four-day public inquiry. The Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association presented a substantial case at the public inquiry. Our evidence was instrumental in defeating the proposal to demolish the Alex.

The inquiry followed the planning committee's decision in December 2008 to reject Taylor Wimpey's plans for wholesale demolition of the Alex. At a special meeting of the planning committee on 30 June 2009 councillors said very clearly that they wished "to protect as much of the hospital buildings as possible"(1).

None of this should be greatly surprising. In 2006 the association organised a public consultation on the future of the site. The council, which then analysed the results, found that 96 per cent of respondents wanted to keep at least some of the buildings.

Conversion and not demolition is now the only show in town. But how many of the buildings should be kept? And what can they be used for? And what else can be done with the site? This report spells out the association's view.

What we should keep

Five blocks on the site stand out as being suitable for conversion. They are:

the main block, which was built by the noted local architect Thomas Lainson in 1880-81, the administration block, which was built before 1867 and a trio of red brick buildings, the old nurses' home, the old laundry block and the Elizabeth ward, which were all built between 1896 and 1909. These blocks are marked on the site plan.

What we should also keep is the green space between the front of the main block and the junction of Dyke Road and Clifton Hill. In his report the inspector said that his space was "a significant positive feature". "This space...provides a pleasing openness to the area and setting for views across it from various vantage points both within this conservation area and the adjoining West Hill Conservation Area."

The main block

In October 2005 the NHS, which was then still running the hospital, commissioned a leading firm of conservation architects Giles Quarme and Associates to assess the architectural quality of the buildings on the site. "The building is undoubtedly of historic and architectural interest and contributes positively to the conservation area," said Quarme adding with considerable prescience "any justification for its demolition, total or partial will be extremely difficult...."

English Heritage also lavished praise on the main block, although it declined to list the building. "The east elevation, in particular the terracotta porch, is notably intact and of high quality design and construction. The carved detailing on this and the eastern part of the south façade is particularly handsome. The cupolas to the west end are elegant additions to the skyline."



Papworth praises both the southern façade and the skyline. “These cupolas and the chimneys are a major feature on the skyline...On balance I consider that the main block and particularly its southern façade and the southern end of the Dyke Road frontage contribute positively to the character and appearance of the conservation area,” he said.

But this building also has considerable historic interest. Brighton appointed Arthur Newsholme as its first Medical Officer of Health in 1888. Under Newsholme, Brighton became one of the pioneers of community medicine in this country. Newsholme was keenly interested in child health and the open-air treatment of TB. Although Newsholme left Brighton to become the country’s chief medical officer of health his ideas continued to flourish in Brighton and in 1913 the Alex added a two open-air TB wards, in the form of two-storey concrete balconies on the south frontage. “The addition of these balconies and even their glazing in has been sensitively done,” said Papworth, adding that these alterations were part of the history of the site.

In 1927/8 the main block was extended with the addition of an east wing fronting onto Dyke Road. Although this was built half-a-century after the main block it is hard for passers-by to spot the difference. “This wing was designed with great respect and deference for the original hospital block,” said Quarme. The transition from the old to the new is seamless.

Jack Warshaw, a leading conservation architect, was asked by the council to give expert evidence to the public inquiry. He concluded: “architecturally this element (the main block) could with a little ingenuity be retained and restored...”

The association thinks that the main block, together with the balconies, the roofline with its cupolas and the east wing, must be kept in any conversion scheme. Some interesting internal features still remain and the developers should aim to preserve these.

The only exception to this is the second floor balcony, which has been added later and is crudely glazed. The association would like to see this removed and the gables, which can still be seen from Dyke Road, restored. The council should be sympathetic to any proposals on these lines.

The admin block

“This was one of the most important and oldest private houses on Dyke Road...It is a characteristic building typical of the surrounding conservation area. Its demolition or development would not be permitted as it makes a positive contribution to the conservation area,” said Quarme.

The admin block, or northern lodge, was built sometime before 1867 when it first appears on a map of the area. Between 1867 and 1875 a side extension was added to its northern flank. This is now partly obscured by a modern extension on the front. It remained as a private house until the hospital bought it in 1945.

“One of the few villas to retain its original, unpainted stucco elevations, its original form is easily read...This building is manifestly capable to restoration and reconditioning for a variety of uses,” said Warshaw.

The association thinks the admin block must be kept in any conversion scheme and developers should be encouraged to restore the remaining cornices.

A red-brick trio

The three red-brick buildings that lie behind the main block are best considered as a single unit. All three of these buildings are capable of being restored and converted.

The nurses’ home is the oldest of the three and dates from 1896. Quarme describes it as an “attractive two-storey building crowned with a series of four tile-clad triangular gables.” The building has been little altered and Warshaw said “the exterior could be restored with little removal of later alterations, such as the metal fire escapes and first-floor access doors”.

The laundry block, which dates from 1902, “remains an attractive building. It is likely that the local authority conservation officers will consider that this contributes positively to the conservation area and should be preserved,” said Quarme. Warshaw too thinks this building could be conserved. “Less prominent to public view due to its smaller size and location within the site there is no



Photo: Malcolm Dawes

Top notch: the distinctive cupolas



The Royal Alex mews: the laundry (left) and the nurses’ home at the end of the street

technical reason why it could not be reinstated," said Warshaw.

The third building of the trio is the Elizabeth ward, which dates from 1904. "When first designed it must have been a striking building," said Quarme who goes on to say that it is likely that the council will want to keep part of it. And certainly that was the view of the council in its planning advice note of March 2006: "It is expected that both the 1881 and the 1904 buildings would be retained and reused..."

The three buildings are tucked away behind the imposing main building. Taken together these three buildings form an interesting almost concealed cluster of mews-like streets running between the buildings. All of these building can easily be converted into interesting and pleasant homes.

The layout of these buildings also gives an opportunity to create a new routes within the site for pedestrians and cyclists, but these would have to be carefully designed to meet the needs of security and privacy.

Because these buildings are largely hidden from public view it is easy to overlook their importance. Yet with their mews streets and human scale buildings, walking round this part of the site feels like being in the middle of an urban village. ***The association thinks these three buildings should be conserved and converted.***



Ripe for restoration: The Elizabeth ward

Conservation and conversion

All of the five main blocks have been altered over the years, some more than others. Some of the poor quality later alterations, such as the glazing and roof of the second storey balcony on the main façade should if possible be removed. But conversion of these blocks is also likely entail building some new extensions. ***As long as this work is sensitively done the association will be happy to see these changes.***

The other buildings

In total these five units occupy rather less than half of the built-up area of the site. The other buildings are mostly a collection of portakabins and scrappy post-war development. ***Demolishing these building will make a positive contribution to the conservation area and the association has no wish to preserve these.***

So the scope for new buildings on the rest of the site is considerable. The main constraints are the need to keep the green space in front of the façade and the need to avoid tall buildings. It would be desirable for new building to continue the idiom of the existing mews-like cluster, possibly with a courtyard form of development behind the Admin building.

New uses for old buildings

Many of the existing buildings can be converted to elegant and attractive homes. The sea views from the top balcony of the main block are probably the best in Brighton and flats on this floor would be bound to attract a premium. A home in the new "Royal Alexandra mews", would be highly attractive and have obvious marketing potential. And this would only be enhanced by sensitive new development at the rear of the Admin block.

The hospital site could be used exclusively for homes. But it could equally be developed with mix of uses with residential as the primary use. Other uses that might be included are office (B1) and a large GP surgery to meet the current requirements of the local health trust. The Montpelier surgery has to move in a couple of years' time. It currently has four doctors, two part-time. Taylor Wimpey wanted space for seven doctors and a pharmacy, which is consistent with health trust requirements. Another option would be using the site might for a boutique hotel as long as that is compatible with keeping all the early buildings. Such a use is proposed on the site of the former ice rink 300 metres down the hill.

Conclusions

The Alex site is a tremendous opportunity both to preserve the city's heritage and to create an exciting new development alongside the existing buildings. All it needs to combine these twin goals is a little imagination.

Reference

1. Letter from the council to Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association, 3 July 2009

About us

This report is produced by the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association. The association is the official conservation organisation in the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Conservation Area. It is a registered charity (number 267889) with the aim of enhancing and protecting the integrity of the conservation area. We currently have about 440 paid-up individual members and we estimate that around 5 per cent of the adults in our conservation area are members of the association.

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