

HERITAGE, PLANNING, DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

Extension to Flat B on land behind 13 Circus Street OX4 1JR

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

This application is for the extension of the remaining un-refurbished flat (Flat B) of no. 13 Circus Street. The works involve the demolition of the 1970's garage and single storey lean-to to the back of the flat and its replacement with a two-storey extension housing two bedrooms at first floor level and living accommodation on the ground floor. In addition to the greatly improved living space, there will be private amenity space, bin and bicycle storage, none of which has been formally provided in the past. The three flats within the terrace are being sold; only the outshot and land to the rear of the terrace relate to this application.

The land in question lies behind no. 13 Circus St and was the amenity space and car parking serving the smallest dwelling of the four that together used to occupy this address. For practical matters of access and management it is not intended to treat the proposed development as a further refurbishment of the Circus Street terrace building, but as an extension to the now completely independent dwelling and land that lies to the rear of 13 Circus Street and which is accessed from Alhambra Lane.

PLANNING HISTORY:

The planning history of the site, which of necessity includes no. 13 Circus St, is complex but of the several applications that have been made over the past twenty years, three are significant and have a bearing on the present application. The first is Ref: 11/01546/CEU which confirmed the lawful use of no. 13 as four single dwelling units. Three of these units (those that occupy the main body of the Victorian end-of-terrace house) have been completely refurbished. The fourth unit, which occupies the two floors of the rear outshot and that relies on the common stair for vertical circulation, is no longer viable, hence its proposed extension.

The second planning decision to have a bearing on the present application is Ref: 12/03252/FUL which gave consent for a two-storey extension that occupied the whole of the land to the rear of no. 13. The proposed accommodation consisted of 1 one-bed flat and 1 two bed flat. This consent was varied in 2015 by Consent 15/00859/VAR, but neither were implemented before the statutory time limit expired and thus have lapsed.

The third is Ref: 19/00818/FUL, which was for another two-storey block housing two

one-bedroom flats, though smaller and differently laid out from the 2012 application. The application was refused on the grounds of overdevelopment and lack of amenity for the residents of both flats. The decision was appealed but was dismissed by the Inspector.

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM PLANNING HISTORY:

First, the three flats within the main body of no. 13 do not require any further upgrade in amenity space, refuse or cycle storage as they pre-exist the establishment of these requirements. It should be noted now that there was a major error in the Council's evidence to the Inspector, viz: that the sunken area outside the fourth flat was amenity space for the three other flats. This was never the case as access to it would have been through the kitchen of the fourth flat; it was reserved solely for the use of that flat's resident, in part as compensation for the poor internal layout. The photograph on the right, taken over three years ago when all the flats were occupied, shows that the space was not used for bin or bicycle storage. Bins were kept against the gable and bicycles, where used, kept in the flats. In consequence there is no loss of amenity for the three flats as a result of this development and this application can deal solely with the policy requirements for new dwellings.



The second conclusion to be drawn is that the principle of development of the land to the rear is acceptable. The planning arguments relating to this point have been made several times in the past and were clearly accepted by the Council. The grant of consent in 2012 and 2015 demonstrates this point conclusively, and at no point in the Inspector's decision, made on 15 April 2020, was the suitability of the site for some sort of development brought into question.

THE INSPECTOR'S REPORT:

The main issues identified by the Inspector, and by the Council in their original decision was whether the proposal would preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the St. Clements and Iffley Road Conservation Area, and the quality of the amenity space. The Inspector concluded that the harm to the CA caused by the proposals he reviewed were 'less than substantial'. The present application has been developed with continual reference to the Inspector's views, to ensure that no harm is done to the CA as a result of the development.

Character and Appearance:

The application site is the last plot on the south side of Alhambra Lane, immediately before the lane exits between no. 13 and no. 14 Circus St. It is therefore a significant location in terms of the local character of Alhambra Lane, and because it will be visible, albeit briefly and obliquely, from Circus St it also has the potential to affect the character of that street.



Alhambra Lane: In the Conservation Character Appraisal mention is made of Circus St and, without specifically identifying it, Alhambra Lane, which is the service road referred to in the text. Apart from this brief mention, no other reference is made to the lane in the document.

We have undertaken a brief character assessment using the Oxford character assessment toolkit, and the predominant feature of the lane identified by this method is the extraordinary number and variety of garage and workshop doors and gates opening directly onto the lane. Normally the impression created by so many doors in such a small area would at best be monotonous and at worst impersonal and inhospitable. Here, however, the effect is almost charming due in large measure to the range of buildings into which the doors are set, and the informal manner in which they are distributed within the backland behind the rear elevations of the taller buildings fronting the Iffley and Cowley roads. The other key characteristic is the degree of vertical and horizontal articulation afforded by the mix of two and single storey individual elements, be they garages, dwellings, halls, or boundary fences and gates.



Close behind, in character terms, are the trees, which though few in number, soften both light and streetscape and which bring a maturity to the scene it would otherwise lack.

Finally the buildings; none are taller than two storeys, almost all sit directly on the lane with no landscape buffer, and the variety of alignments, roof pitches and materials between them ensure that the scene provides interest however far one ventures. The unifying effect of the brick pavers helps tie these disparate forms into something approaching an harmonious whole. From the Victorian simplicity of no. 13 Circus St to the mid 20C garages halfway down the lane, with the Edwardian workshop (now converted to a dwelling) that forms the stop-end to the lane, no single architectural style dominates or dictates possible solutions for future development.

The Inspector considered the Alhambra Lane elevation of the 2019 proposal to be too long and thus disproportionate with regard to the other buildings in the lane and inclined to dominate views of no. 13 from the lane. He also considered the building's proximity to the plot's boundary with the lane to be an issue, together with the proposals for concealing the refuse bins for both no. 13 and the extension.

Application 20/01325/FUL:

The above application was made in response to the Inspector's comments and conclusions, but was withdrawn when the Case Officer informed the applicant that, in their opinion, the rear elevation was not considered to be in keeping with the original building or the row of terraces and the application was in consequence going to be refused. The current application seeks to address both the Inspector's and the Case Officer's views.

This Application's Response to the Inspector's Comments and those of the Recent Case Officer:

The last application was due to be refused because it 'is not materially different to the previous scheme.' The elimination of one dwelling and the 30% reduction in volume of the new development is, we submit, a material difference. We still need to demonstrate that the proposal does not harm the character of the Conservation Area, as well as dealing with the Inspector's concerns.

The Conservation Area was established on 25th July 1977 but since that date there have been numerous developments to the rear of the terraces bounding the Cowley and Iffley Roads that have materially altered the character of the area. It is therefore apparent that development *per se* is not discouraged, but that it must be demonstrated that any proposal will not materially harm the Conservation Area.



As stated above, the Inspector did not consider the 2019 application to 'substantially harm' the Conservation Area.

The applicant has considered the Inspector's key points and the views of the Case Officer for 20/01325/FUL and sought to address them by retaining the original two-storey outshot from 1 Circus Street and the single dwelling this structure represents, and by articulating the resulting elevations to reflect the complexity of the Alhambra Lane streetscape.



Eliminating one dwelling from the development proposals reduces the pressure on the plot and allows a clear separation between the original terrace element and the new extension. It creates a small courtyard that reflects the 'crenellated' style of the lane (evidenced in photograph on the right).

We feel we must take issue with the Inspector's opinion that the siting of the building close to the lane's edge is problematic. The mews quality created by the close proximity of the gables to nos. 13 and 14 at the start of the lane establishes a street scape whose principal feature is the absence of any buffer zone between street and building. The photograph on the right shows this particularly clearly, where building, fence and gate are all directly in touch with the lane's surface.

We have therefore retained this feature as we consider it to be a contributor to the character of this part of the Conservation Area and thus a necessary feature in any new development, as much as respecting the existing material palette would be.

The Inspector stated the link with the original terrace '...introduces expanses of brick-

work with limited articulation which would appear particularly uncharacteristic.' Although we consider his point to be moot, this revised proposal has genuine articulation, picking up on the theme that runs the whole length of the lane and is its most important feature.

The Inspector stated that the building as originally proposed 'would be unduly prominent compared to most of the buildings along Alhambra Lane...' Application 20/01325/FUL sought to address this point, but the current application has gone significantly further, through the divorce of the extension from the gable of the original terrace. The terrace and extension now read as two individual buildings, with the gable of the extension being only slightly more than half the visual area (58%) of the Victorian gable end.

In terms of height it is similar to the garage/studio unit halfway down on the western side, the converted garage marking the end of the lane, and the rear extensions to nos. 38 and 46/48 Cowley Rd, most of which are also sited hard on their respective boundaries with the lane.

The charm of the lane comes as much from the articulation created through the rise and fall of the roofs and gables as one views them from a static position, or as they appear and disappear while passing down the lane or passing along Circus St and glimpsing the extended perspective of the lane beyond nos. 13 and 14. The new addition will not harm this dynamic, it will add to it.

As has been described earlier in this document, the character of the backland that is bounded by the buildings facing the Cowley and Iffley Roads, and Circus Street to the east, is varied in the extreme. Pre-fabricated 20C garages blend with Victorian workshops, 20C retail storage and blocks of flats to create a character that has very little to do aesthetically with the buildings that they are connected to, but which nevertheless work together to create a lively, characterful and visually stimulating urban environment.

Storage Provision and Amenity Space:

The Inspector considered that the originally proposed enclosures for bins and cycle storage to be 'uncharacteristic of the area and highly prominent in views from both Circus St and Alhambra Lane.'

The majority of the enclosures in the earlier applications were intended to deal with the bins and bicycles associated with the pre-existing flats. Since no additions or extensions are being proposed to the existing flats, these ancillary spaces are no longer required. Provision for cycle storage for the extended dwelling is now off-street and therefore no longer an issue. One 240 litre recycling and one 240 litre refuse bin are adequate to serve the development and are proposed to be housed behind a painted timber screen that echoes the doorway theme already identified as a key characteristic of the area. Thus, though clearly visible, the solution is an appropriate response to the area's character.

Providing amenity space was difficult in the earlier schemes, but the new design releases significant external area for use by the extended dwelling, area that comfortably exceeds the Local Plan requirement.

The larger amenity space in the courtyard behind 13 Circus Street faces north-west, so will be prone to shading except at the end of the day in summer. However, the space facing south-west is also available to the occupiers and will gather direct sunlight from before midday to the time when the sun sets behind St. Clements. To ensure that a good balance between privacy and daylighting is achieved, the upper 1.2 metres of fencing between the surgery carpark and the ground floor terrace will be trellis - there should be no need to add trellis on the garden wall between 12 and 13 Circus St, so there will be a sense of openness in a southerly direction.

CONCLUSION:

The scheme now before the Council for consideration is a considered response to the Inspector's comments and views, as expressed in his Decision issued on 15 April 2020 and the Case Officer's advice given in her e-mail of 25/11/20. We consider that this proposal addresses all of the criticisms and comments and as such now meets every relevant aspect of local and national planning policy.

Not only will the development enhance the character of the Conservation Area, but it will add an additional dwelling to help offset the pressure on the city's housing stock. We commend the application to the Council.