

Blacket Newsletter: Tuesday 16th February 2010

Blacket Association Submission dated 16 February 2010 to City Planning commenting on Planning Application from S1 Developments for 5 Alfred Place

Given the importance of the Blacket site, at the heart of the Council's first-ever Conservation area, we trust the relevant Planning staff and members of the Planning Committee will be able to give full consideration to the comments which follow and which, for ease of reference, are also summarised on this page. Our comments relate to what we see as five key questions:

1. IS THE PRINCIPLE & SCALE OF THE DEVELOPMENT ACCEPTABLE?
 2. IS THERE ADVERSE EFFECT ON THE AMENITY OF ADJACENT PROPERTY?
 3. DOES IT PRESERVE THE CHARACTER/APPEARANCE OF THE CONSERVATION AREA?
 4. IS THERE ANY ADVERSE EFFECT ON TREES WITHIN/CLOSE TO THE SITE?
 5. IS INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY ADEQUATE TO COPE WITH THE DEVELOPMENT?
- The planned development is seen as over-dense: disallowing the area's characteristic balance between green space and buildings/paved areas; placing parts of the buildings too close to existing boundary walling; apparently making buildings on parts of the site rise above the roof lines of existing adjacent ones, e.g. on the western side where two Grade A listed houses are located; creating parking and allied traffic problems; and, endangering sections of a mature tree-scape.
 - There is no general opposition to employing more traditional-style villa architecture but, should an approach on these lines be passed, it is important that the use of stone is general - to match the surroundings - and that this should include boundary walls between and fronting properties. It is also very important to observe correct architectural detailing to help secure blending in with the environment.
 - The type of parking provision is, arguably, inappropriate for this setting and there is certainly an inadequate amount of on-site parking for this type of property which will create further problems in the two adjacent streets. Assimilating extra traffic on a route accessed through a semi-blind junction requires the installation of a suitable means of traffic restraint at the Alfred Place/Mayfield Terrace junction, and we request that this precede the starting of site works.
 - Given the restricted access to and within this residential site and the likely 20-24 month duration of any such development, there is a need for clear and enforceable rules for: working hours; the construction programme/traffic; keeping surrounding areas reasonably clear of dirt and building materials; and, protection of pillars and pavements.
 - The Blacket Association does not seek to block any development but to try and ensure that what is planned and erected respects and preferably enhances the special character of Edinburgh's first-ever Conservation Area and, at minimum, does not detract from it.

NB All our comments are based on the original (29 Jan 2010) documentation for this planning application. As we understand informally that the developers' proposals may have been modified in some respects, we shall wish to comment further if these modifications become part of the substantive Planning Application from S1.

PROTECTING EDINBURGH'S FIRST CONSERVATION AREA

Blacket forms a unique neighbourhood within Edinburgh's unparalleled urban environment: completed some 130 years ago, all in stone, as the City's first, very handsomely-designed, villa-based suburb. It was chosen by the City, one hundred years later, as Edinburgh's first-ever Conservation Area. This, of course, places an obligation on the residents and the City to help protect its essential character and try and ensure any developments are consonant and in keeping with the locality's special nature, on a site with a relatively generous area of green space, carefully planted over the years with a wide range of - now mature - trees.

THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPMENT AT THE CORE OF BLACKET

Against this background, it is not surprising that Blacket residents will wish to be reassured that any 2010 development plans for the Rowans site within its Conservation Area will be equal to the challenge of respecting - and perhaps even enhancing - this unique environment, since the results are likely to be with us for the next 100 years and beyond. And it is within this context, while acknowledging S1 Developments' efforts to make its plans for a development more consonant with the 'Blacket look' than those which have gone before, that the Association's views are submitted.

SOME PREFERENCES AND SOME STRONGLY-RECOMMENDED CONDITIONS

The existing uniform use of stone for house construction and for almost all garden walls should of course be reflected in this scheme: thus, external house and flat walls should be stone-constructed or, at minimum, stone-clad.. Similarly, masonry - not wood - should be used for garden/boundary walls within the site, as it is in surrounding properties. If stone cannot be used for the side/rear garden walls, boundaries should simply be marked by landscaped hedging and a clear requirement laid down that the subsequent erection of any wooden fences would be subject to planning permission which would be unlikely to be granted.

The Association while recognising the economic realities, has continuing concerns about the density of development proposed, given a not unreasonable expectation that the existing ratio between green and built spaces within surrounding properties in Blacket should be continued across new developments in such a Conservation Area. (and we note one of our members has provided the architects with an example of a less-densely-developed scheme). Also pertinent are the likely implications of the present plans for extra motor traffic generated.

As regards the proposed lay-out within the plans put to the Council, we believe it essential that, if something approaching this lay-out were to be permitted, there should be a movement north and westwards of Housing Units 14 & 15 to mitigate the indicated closeness to the site's southern boundary wall and adjacent property, as we regard the proximity of units 14 & 15 to the southern boundary wall in the original plans as un-necessary and unacceptable. Additionally, we would request an overall move of the planned development eastwards, so as to achieve an equivalence between boundary walls and housing units on the east and west sides of the site. Should planning permission be contemplated we believe such repositioning should be a condition of any assent, with an associated reprieve for the adjacent on-site trees which might otherwise have been lost.

Given the carefully-planted nature of Blacket overall, any mature tree removals should be absolutely minimal and, if allowed by Planning, should - given also that tree retention would aid screening of

properties - be subject to the requirement that any mature tree lost should be replaced by an appropriate new semi-mature one. We believe that, in this setting, a full tree survey should be one of the preconditions of such an application (We have advised that the application is based on outdated data in this respect). In addition, we have suggested to the developers a need for a quality landscape scheme, assisting with fitting the development into the surroundings and, likewise, providing a measure of screening,

As indicated above, there are considerable problems with levels and sight lines towards Arthur's Seat on the west side of the plot, where neighbouring villa properties include a pair of Grade A-listed houses. The plans presented so far do not take adequate account of the fact that the site's 'ground level', along the western boundary will, it appears, even after existing stone etc rubble is removed, remain significantly higher than those of adjoining gardens. Also, the drawings so far do not cover the elevations beyond the western boundary wall so as to include bordering houses in Blacket Place. Consequently, the plans as presently presented, fail to illustrate the likely interruption of view for those adjacent Blacket Place houses which may also become overlooked (most of those Blacket houses, incidentally, do not have the second floor dormer windows proposed for the new housing) This clearly indicates the need for some further reduction of ground level, particularly towards the western end of the site, even after the existing rubble masonry is removed. And it seems to be the case that this will, in turn, necessitate a more general lowering of levels across the site not simply across the area around housing units 1-4.

While recognising the architects' and developers' proposals may have been constrained by the Council's limiting formula where new housing is built, parking, in our view, is going to constitute a definite problem with this density and type of development. It is regrettable, for a start, that earlier notions of underground car parking on this site do not form part of the plans. It is also a severe problem in the making that the scheme presently provides, in general, for one designated on-site drive-in area per dwelling unit (ie 15 places plus 2 for 'visitors'). Yet this policy is being applied to a category of property where ownership of more than one car per household is likely to be the average, which in turn is likely to lead to further applications for limited residents' parking – and extra competition for the existing finite number of places in Alfred Place/Mayfield Terrace (where kerbside parking is already at a premium, particularly overnight/weekends). And even if such permits are not granted, the likely additional cars from the new households will not disappear but will simply be moved off-site, where they will disadvantage existing local residents for evening/overnight kerbside parking. Ignoring basic realities here is not in our view either useful or constructive. There must therefore be more and suitable on-site parking provision.

Inter-related with this are concerns about traffic volume and flows. The amount of vehicles using Alfred Place (via Mayfield Terrace) is likely to rise around four-fold if this development proceeds and given the already significant number of vehicles taking advantage of the exclusively residential Mayfield Terrace as a 'short-cut route', both amenity and safety will consequently suffer. Mayfield Terrace, of course, already has residents' or visitors' parking on both sides of the road with consequent almost 'blind exits' from Mayfield Terrace drive-ins and for Alfred Place exiting traffic. For this reason, we consider a condition of development should be the installation, to Council-approved norms, of simple but appropriate traffic restraints across the Alfred Place/Mayfield Terrace T-junction. We request that this be installed prior to the beginning of any site works.

according to the most recent - June 2009 – traffic survey by the Blacket Association, nearly 1,000 motor vehicles per 60 hour working week are estimated to ‘cut through’ Mayfield Terrace.

Reference has already been made to the fact we acknowledge the developers’ and their architects’ aspirations to build quality dwellings consonant with the visual style of existing surrounding properties. At a more detailed level, we would, therefore, also wish to have clear assurances of sensitivity to architectural features and finishes. e.g. matching to stone the colour of any non-stone external surfaces; ensuring stone used to be of smooth ashlar finish,; a more limited use of skylights/dormers; maintaining, instead of off-setting, the existing symmetry of the vehicle entry gate to the site; providing for less-obtrusive quoins and rybatts and, for non-projecting flues and correct treatment of roof chimneys; adjustment of the roof pitches etc - all features required to match the style elements of existing buildings. In the Conservation Area setting, these should not be regarded as details of minor - ie. dispensable - importance, but serious considerations to achieve consonance of the design with adjacent buildings. It is also suggested it would be appropriate, wherever possible, to source key materials such as appropriate stone and slate within Scotland.

On the services front, this would seem to be an ideal site for a single suitably-located and screened tele-communications source (whether dish-based or other) with underground cabling to houses and flats- rather than un-necessary multiple dishes across the 15 properties. Likewise, it would not be at all unreasonable to require an on-site landscape-treated screening area for waste bins.

MAINTAINING AMENITY DURING DEVELOPMENT

Once planning permission is granted for this site, there is the issue – a very real one, particularly for adjacent local residents – of disruption in the midst of a restricted, exclusively-residential area for a period which could approach two years, since we understand the developers would intend a phased, but continuous period of site preparation/ construction of twenty months or so. This is, of course, likely to involve a regular flow of heavy goods vehicles through streets which have parking on both sides and confined access. On this front and given the setting and duration of work, we would regard it as essential there would be clear enforceable commitments from the site developer to contain on-site activities to normal working hours (which we presently understand to be 08.00-17.00 weekdays and 08.00-13.00 on Saturdays), and to observe good practice by: keeping affected adjacent roadways clear of building deposits; ensuring incoming goods vehicles approach from the north with a right-hand turn into Mayfield Terrace, rather than attempting approaches from the south with a left-hand turn through the narrow entry (and that they, correspondingly, depart with a right-hand turn southwards into Dalkeith Road, and not via the restricted one-way exit at the western end of Mayfield Terrace), so as to maintain a measure of amenity during construction and to protect pedestrians, the paving and the historic octagonal site entry stone Pillars – of architectural as well as sentimental significance.

MAJOR ISSUES, KEY DETAILS AND LOOKING FOR A QUALITY OUTCOME

We have argued that Blacket, as recognised by the City’s designating it as Edinburgh’s first-ever Conservation area, is a special site, where any planning application for development must be treated with the maximum of care. Following on from that, we trust that the present planning application, will be the subject of a full examination by the Planning Committee, in addition to the close scrutiny it is likely to receive from Planning Officers. In this case we consider that issues of both principle and

detail are at stake. Beyond that, we should like to think that if Planning agrees with and provides firmly for our reservations or proposed conditions (for it is conditions we are talking about here, not outright opposition), we can work with the developers to achieve results of which all can be proud and which will not, therefore, be the source of un-necessary post-development problems and an adverse environmental legacy.

Ray Footman, Chairman BLACKET ASSOCIATION

Ian Carter, Secretary