



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 7 September 2020

by Robert Parker BSc (Hons) Dip TP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 1 October 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/E0345/W/20/3254293

39 Brunswick Hill, Reading RG1 7YU

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Mr Eric Benjamin against the decision of Reading Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 191915, dated 29 November 2019, was refused by notice dated 5 June 2020.
 - The development proposed is conversion and extension of existing property to form 9no. flats.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matter

2. The above description of development is taken from the application form but during the course of the application the proposal was revised down to 8 flats with a corresponding reduction in the size of the parking area at the rear of the site. The Council made its decision against the amended plans and I have determined the appeal on the same basis.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the building and the wider area.

Reasons

4. Brunswick Hill contains a variety of residential properties in a mix of age and style. No 39 is an Edwardian villa and is one of the largest and most notable buildings in the street. An earlier appeal decision¹ notes the interesting composition of well-detailed architectural elements, which include a distinctive curved oriel window, a four centred arch over the entrance, stone dressings around windows, and a background of crisp, red brick in which diapering and bands are picked out in blue headers. The building's exuberant scale is part of its character and distinguishes it from Victorian houses further down the street.
5. The building is unlisted and has been rejected for inclusion on the Council's local list. Nevertheless, I concur with previous Inspectors² that it possesses

¹ APP/E0345/W/18/3200081

² APP/E0345/W/19/3237799

more than sufficient architectural significance to warrant its treatment as a non-designated heritage asset. Paragraph 197 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) confirms that the effect on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining an application. A balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.

6. With any proposal it is also important to take account of the Framework's imperative for good design. Policy CC7 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (RBLP) (2019) requires all development to be of high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located. Various components of development form are identified, including scale, height and massing. The Council has also cited RBLP Policy H9, but I note that this relates principally to house extensions.
7. Past applications for this site have sought the demolition of the building and its replacement with a purpose-built apartment block. Appeals against refusal of those schemes were dismissed in part due to the complete loss of the heritage asset. The latest proposal is to retain the building and extend it to the side and rear in order to create 8 flats. The extensions would comprise a 2-storey addition to the southern gable of the host building, together with a further extension off the back wall. The latter would involve a reduction in site levels to provide a pair of flats within a lower ground floor.
8. The proposed extension on the southern gable would be modest in width and set back from the principal façade with a lower ridge height. It would be a subservient addition which maintains the legibility of the original building. The retention of the substantial chimney stacks, both prominent features within the local area, would assist in this regard. Although the extension would close the gap with 41 Brunswick Hill I do not share the Council's concern that this would be read as an awkward relationship. Overall, I find that this component of the scheme would cause no material harm to the street scene.
9. The proposed rear extension would be significantly larger. It would project from the existing back wall by more than 10 m and the depth of the building, measured along its most prominent northern flank, would more than double as a result. Attempts have been made to articulate the mass of the extension by stepping it in and setting down the ridge height. The northern wall would also be broken up using fenestration and patterned brickwork. However, these design measures do not go far enough to mitigate the excessive bulk of the development.
10. No 39 is already one of the largest buildings in the street and its scale is part of the character. Nevertheless, the addition of a disproportionate rear extension in the manner proposed would overwhelm the building to the detriment of its significance as a heritage asset, notwithstanding the lack of any formal local or national designation. Furthermore, the resultant depth of the building would jar with surrounding residential properties which are of more domestic scale.
11. Accordingly, I conclude that the proposal would be materially harmful to the character and appearance of the host building and the wider area. It would conflict with RBLP Policies CC7 and EN1 insofar as these seek high quality design which protects the historic environment.

Other Matters

12. The Council has sought contributions towards affordable housing, in line with Policy H3 of the RBLP, and the costs of a Traffic Regulation Order to amend parking restrictions in the Controlled Parking Zone on Brunswick Hill to allow the creation of a vehicular access. The appellant has agreed the contributions with the Council and has indicated that a unilateral undertaking under s106 of the Act will be submitted during the appeal process. No such undertaking is before me. However, as I am dismissing the appeal for other reasons, the decision does not turn on this matter.
13. I note that the appellant engaged positively with the Council's professional officers to agree on a scheme which they could support. The application was recommended for approval by officers but refused at planning committee. The decision on whether to grant permission in this case was a matter of judgement which the committee was entitled to exercise. Whether or not the authority's statement was prepared by officers is not a matter which has any bearing on the appeal. I have determined the case solely on its planning merits.
14. I have taken account of the concerns raised by residents, including in relation to parking/traffic, living conditions, drainage and loss of an existing outbuilding. However, based on the information before me none of these matters would be grounds to dismiss the appeal.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

15. I acknowledge that the proposed development would make efficient use of land to deliver a mix of small homes in a sustainable location which is well served by public transport. However, these public benefits are outweighed by the harm to the character and appearance of the building and the wider area. There are no material considerations of such weight or significance as to justify a decision otherwise than in accordance with the development plan.
16. For the reasons given above, and having regard to all other matters raised, including the density calculations put forward by the appellant, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Robert Parker

INSPECTOR