



Appeal Decisions

Site visit made on 3 October 2024

by H Porter BA(Hons), PGDip, MSc IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 09 October 2024

Appeal A Ref: APP/X5210/W/24/3347704

Alhambra Hotel, 17-19 Argyle Street, LONDON, WC1H 8EJ

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant planning permission.
- The appeal is made by Alhambra Hotel Ltd against the decision of the Council of the London Borough of Camden.
- The application Ref is 2023/4429/P.
- The development is erection of foliage wall panel to front elevation at ground level (retrospective).

Appeal B Ref: APP/X5210/Y/24/3347708

Alhambra Hotel, 17-19 Argyle Street, LONDON, WC1H 8EJ

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant listed building consent.
- The appeal is made by Alhambra Hotel Ltd against the decision of the Council of the London Borough of Camden.
- The application Ref is 2024/0054/L.
- The works are erection of foliage wall panel to front elevation at ground level (retrospective).

Decisions – both appeals

1. Appeal A is dismissed. Appeal B is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The appeal site forms part of the Grade II listed building known as 'Numbers 7-19 and attached railings', which, as an entity, is comprised of a terrace of seven townhouses fronting Argyle Street in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. In reaching my decisions, I have borne in mind the statutory duties under sections 16(2), 66(1) and 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, 1990 (the Act).
3. The appeals concern the same site and the same scheme. Although the remit of planning permission (Appeal A) and listed building consent (Appeal B) regimes are different, to reduce repetition, I have dealt with both appeals together in a single decision letter.
4. I saw during my site visit that the foliage wall panel is in situ and have dealt with the appeals on the basis that they seek to regularise the works and development that have already been carried out. The descriptions in the above banner headings have been taken from the Council's decision notices, which more accurately describe the works and development than the application form.

Main Issues – both appeals

5. The main issues are whether the works and development i) preserve the Grade II listed building 'Numbers 7-19 and attached railings' (Nos 7-19) or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses; and, ii) preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area (the CA).

Reasons

6. Nos 7-19 is a terrace of seven three storey townhouses fronting the east side of Argyle Street, set back from the pavement edge behind basement lightwells and area railings. Each house within the terrace is two bays, of yellow stock brick above ground floor level with either brick, pebble dash or stucco ground floors. The first floors are accentuated by large sash windows set into round arch recesses, with decorative iron balconies.
7. In spite of some variation between individual houses, as well as incremental changes and accretions associated with changes to hotel uses, the special interest and significance of the Grade II listed building is partly derived from the consistency of its principal elevation, its Classically ordered arrangement, and architectural detailing. The listed building also derives significance from the inherent group value it shares with the wider late Georgian terrace townscape along Argyle Street.
8. The appeal site (No 17 and 19) are two former houses located at the end of the listed terrace, which have been amalgamated internally for use as a hotel. Despite the extant hotel use and associated alterations, from the exterior No 17 and 19 continue to be read as two separate houses, with a clear vertical emphasis, two bay rhythm, and separate front doors. Therefore No 17 and 19 makes a valuable contribution to the architectural consistency of the rest of the listed terrace and are integral to the special architectural and historic interest, and group value, of Nos 7-19 as an entity.
9. The boundaries of the CA encapsulate a dense urban area of central London, laid out on gridiron pattern of streets and formal squares. The significance of the CA is derived from the history of Bloomsbury's expansion since the end of the 17th century and evolution as fashionable London suburb. While there is some variety in the age, form and style of buildings throughout the CA, the quality of the built fabric, street layout, cohesive traditional townscape, and historic associations underpin the CA's special interest.
10. According to the Council's Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy, 2011 (CAAM), the area around Argyle Street and Argyle Square, was one of the last phases of the Bloomsbury's development in the 1830s and 40s. The Classically ordered and coherent form of traditional terraced townhouses fronting Argyle Street, including the appeal site, collectively express the typical attributes of planned 19th century residential townscape and therefore contribute positively to the character and appearance of the CA as a whole.
11. A band of artificial foliage has been installed across the frontages of both No 17 and 19. Comprised of a series of overlapping green wall panels, the artificial foliage installation sits between the ground floor arched head openings and decorative first floor balconies. While the foliage panel is

obviously a later addition to the c.1830s houses, the dark green colour of the plastic foliage contrasts starkly against the soft yellowish tone of the stock brick and white stucco materials of the frontage. The foliage also projects forward of the front façade, which creates a visual distraction away from the decorative iron first floor balconies and further accentuates the panel's conspicuousness in the context of the wider listed building.

12. The foliage panel is a little over 10 metres in length and runs unbroken across No 17 and 19, creating a sense of horizontal connectivity between the two houses. As a consequence, the legibility of the vertical emphasis and two bay rhythm that differentiates each house within the wider listed terrace has been eroded. The case is made that the foliage panel has a beneficial screening effect of 20th century pipework to the frontage of No 17 and 19. However, in the pre-existing photograph provided by the appellant, the pipework appears relatively unobtrusive, to mainly respect the vertical boundary between the houses, and be painted white to visually recede at ground floor level. Moreover, pipework and guttering are not uncommon features of terraced houses along Argyle Street, even listed ones, whereas an expanse of plastic greenery at below first floor level appears wholly out of place.
13. The product installation guide indicates the panel has been fixed into the building with screw fixings, which arguably could be removed with little impact on historic fabric. Although the foliage panel has only been installed on two houses within the listed terrace, it nonetheless stands out as an inauthentic intervention that has undermined the consistency of the principal elevation, classically-ordered arrangement, architectural detailing and wider group value of Nos 7 – 19. It follows that the works and development have failed to preserve the Grade II listed building, or its features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses. The development is therefore contrary to the statutory presumption under s66(1) of the Act; and the works, to s16(2) of the Act.
14. The attractiveness of artificial foliage panels is subjective and whether they are increasingly popular features does not denote their appropriateness in the context of a traditional Georgian townscape. The appellant contends that it is not uncommon for signage or foliage panels to be installed in a similar location on buildings of a similar form; and that the panel should be treated as an extension to the existing hotel signage. Irrespective of reversibility, the CAAM specifically identifies signage amongst the later interventions that detract from the homogeneity of the terraces in the Argyle Street area. I therefore do not consider the existence of signage or accretions to other building frontages, nor the contrast between the adjacent 20th century building, justify a further weakening of the cohesive traditional townscape that is of value to the significance of the CA. Although the impact of the foliage panel is relatively localised, the harm is ongoing while it is in situ. The character and appearance of the CA as a whole has not been preserved, therefore works and development run counter to s72(1) of the Act.
15. Paragraph 206 of The National Planning Policy Framework, 2023 (the Framework) states that any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset should require clear and convincing justification. Bearing in mind the scale and nature of the appeal scheme relative to the significance of the Grade II listed building and the CA as designated heritage assets, the degree of harm in each instance is less than substantial but,

nevertheless, of considerable importance and weight. In these circumstances, Paragraph 208 of the Framework requires less than substantial harm to be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including, where appropriate, securing the heritage asset's optimum viable use.

16. The Alhambra Hotel has been in the same family ownership and well maintained for a number of years. Although I do not doubt that the business makes a valuable contribution to the local economy and that the local hotel market is a competitive one, there is other clear signage on the Alhambra Hotel and it is unclear why the business would not be as attractive nor easy to find in the absence of the artificial foliage panel. I am therefore not persuaded that there are any public benefits to be derived from securing the optimum viable use of the listed building in this instance.
17. That the extant panel does not require watering or come with potential risks associated with the need for watering or creation of a microclimate that a 'living wall' might create is not a public benefit. The absence of harm in relation to neighbours' living conditions, parking, residential density or flood risk are neutral considerations and are not public benefits.
18. Paragraph 205 of the Framework indicates that, when considering the impact on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation irrespective of whether any harm amounts to less than substantial harm to significance. The weight of public benefits associated with the works and development is minimal and does not outweigh the less than substantial harm to the significance of the designated heritage assets that I have identified.
19. Even if the foliage could be removed at some point in the future, there is no convincing case made that that it is the least harmful means of accentuating the hotel within the Argyle Street scene. Consequently, the harm to the significance of the designated heritage assets in these appeals has not been supported by clear and convincing justification. The works and development therefore fail to satisfy the historic environment conservation and enhancement policies under chapter 16 of the Framework.
20. Conflict also arises with Policies D1 and D2 of the Camden Local Plan, 2017 insofar as these require development to be of high-quality design and materials that respects local context and character; that seek to preserve Camden's heritage assets, including conservation areas and listed buildings; and require less than substantial harm to the significance of a designate heritage asset to be convincingly outweighed by public benefits.

Conclusions – both appeals

21. For the reasons given above, I conclude that both Appeal A and Appeal B should be dismissed.

H Porter

INSPECTOR