

The Brixton Society

Understanding the Past, Looking to the Future

Reg'd. Charity No.1058103, Registered with the London Forum of Amenity Societies

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CONSERVATION AREA REVIEW – Brixton Town Centre (CA26)

1. Introduction:

The comments below are provided by the Brixton Society in response to the Council's proposed changes published on 2nd December 2020.

They comprise our proposed **additions** to, or **omissions** from, the existing Conservation Area, and **clarification** of points within the Appraisal, in addition to **comments** on the Council's proposed changes.

In this case, the Council's proposals were limited to deleting one site, and no update of the Appraisal was published.

2. Background:

The Brixton Society was established in 1975 as the amenity society covering the wider Brixton area. We regularly comment on local plans, policy changes and individual planning applications, and try to promote good practice in design and planning within our area.

The Society has supported the concept of Conservation Areas since its early days. Brixton Town Centre continues to be a major concern.

3. Brook House/ Somerset Place and the Civic Centre

The only change proposed in the Council's report is to remove Somerset Place (formerly Brook House) from the CA, while including its new Civic Centre building. However, these sites remain important to the CA, in defining its southern edge around St. Matthew's Churchyard.

While the new Civic Centre is not in any way an exceptional building, the redevelopment of 1-7 Town Hall Parade has enabled improvements to the pedestrian pathways and landscaping at the rear, and the opening up of a new pedestrian route between the Town Hall and the Civic Centre.

However, while the opening up of the Town Hall site can be considered an improvement, the same cannot be said of Somerset Place. This was constructed on the site of Hambrook House, a 6-storey office block latterly used by Lambeth Council. We note that the 1998 report on the Brixton CA

described Hambook House as making a neutral contribution to the CA and went on to say that *“redevelopment should respect the amenity of adjoining residential occupants and the setting of adjoining contributory buildings. Additional height is unlikely to be acceptable.”*

It is regrettable that this advice was disregarded in 2015 when the Council granted planning permission for a 14-storey apartment block to replace Hambrook House. The Brixton Society objected to the planning application on the grounds that the proposed building would be more than twice the height of the existing building, would overshadow apartments in Arlington Lodge a few metres from the site, and would have a significant and detrimental impact on Brixton’s historic centre, *“looming up behind the Town Hall tower when seen from the east side of Brixton Road at the Prince of Wales corner while overwhelming and dominating views of St Matthews church and the Peace Garden from the east”*.

Historic England also objected strongly to the application for the new 14-storey block, which they said would result in “considerable and irreversible harm to the historic environment” while failing to deliver any heritage benefits.

Six years on, and two years after the completion of Somerset Place, and Maugham House to the rear, we believe that our earlier objections were justified. The new building, as we predicted, has a detrimental effect on views of the CA, it casts shadow over windows of flats in Arlington Lodge, and creates an unwelcome canyon-like feeling in the pedestrian passage that runs from Brixton Hill to Porden Road. For this reason we propose that the Somerset Place/ Maugham House block is identified in the CA appraisal as a building having a negative impact on the CA.

4. Brixton Recreation Centre and International House

It is surprising that no reference is made in the report to the Brixton Recreation Centre, just outside the CA boundary, since the building has achieved statutory Grade 2 listing since the last review of the Brixton CA. The Brixton Society would like to propose that the boundaries of the Brixton CA are extended to include this building.

Historic England’s recommendation, made in 2016, that the Brixton Rec should be listed took account of a number of considerations. These included its cultural importance as a social centre for the community and the site chosen by Nelson Mandela for his historic visit to London in 1996 as a site synonymous with post war black British Culture. The decision also took account of its architectural quality. Historic England were impressed with the high quality of the interior of the building, particularly the atrium and swimming pool, but they were also appreciative of the building’s human scale at street level.

The Brixton Society believes that the exterior of the building makes a positive contribution to the CA at street level, in Brixton Station Road particularly, where it adds interest to the street scene with its cantilevered upper floor. At upper floor level, warm red brickwork cladding, overhanging parapets and the curved copper-covered roof of the swimming pool provide an interesting and

sympathetic addition to Brixton's roof scape, something that can be appreciated particularly from the eastbound platform of the railway station.

To the rear of the Brixton Rec on its north side, International House and an electricity sub-station are built of the same materials but are not listed. However, both buildings are joined to the Rec at basement, ground and first floor levels. In addition, a pedestrian route links the Rec and International House at first floor level. Demolition or significant remodelling of International House in particular would have a major impact on and probably damage the setting of the Recreation Centre. For this reason we feel that both International House and the electricity sub-station should accompany the Rec into the Brixton CA. This simply means extending the north east boundary of the CA so that it continues along Popes Road from the junction with Brixton Station Road to the point where Popes Road joins Canterbury Crescent.

5. 322-372 Coldharbour Lane

We note that the parallel report on the Loughborough Park CA recommends that "Victorian commercial premises fronting Coldharbour Lane and the modern development to their rear should be transferred to the Brixton Conservation Area because this shares more characteristics with the Brixton CA than they do with the Loughborough Park CA." We are disturbed to see, however, that this recommendation has not been picked up in the Brixton Town Centre CA report, and assume this was a mistake.

The properties referred to are separated from the Brixton Town Centre CA on the north side of Coldharbour Lane between Valentia Place and the former Walton Lodge Laundry (which is already in the Town Centre CA) by a stretch of former industrial land now occupied by some run-of-the-mill modern apartment blocks (including Milles Square and Carney Place).

We originally proposed these sites for inclusion in the Loughborough Park CA to exercise some control over the quality of development, an approach which sadly has not been followed through.

We see no merit in adding these apartment blocks to the Brixton Town Centre CA. However, if they are not included, then the Victorian buildings can't be included either, as they would be separated from the main body of the Town Centre CA. For this reason, we feel these older properties should remain in the Loughborough Park CA (together with the adjacent triangle bordered by Gresham Road, Barrington Road and the railway viaduct, including the Baptist Chapel).

We have also taken into account the latest fluctuations in the boundary of the Brixton Town Centre Action Area, for more general town planning purposes. This boundary appears to be shrinking on its eastern side, with the nearby Moorland Estate being excluded from the Town Centre by the latest revision of the Lambeth Local Plan.

Generally/...

6. Generally:

It must be borne in mind that this is a commercial town centre with a variety of building types and styles, rather than a unified estate development or planned landscape. Landmark buildings, whether listed or not, should be included in the overall scheme as far as possible.

We are disappointed that the Council remains hostile to standing consultation arrangements for Conservation Areas, having closed its Conservation Areas Advisory Committee in 1988. As a result, it is difficult to mobilise local support to complement the Council's limited resources for promoting good practice or enforcing planning controls.

*Alan Piper,
Secretary.*