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Historic England throws weight behind Balfron plans

20 October, 2015 | By Colin Marrs

Heritage watchdogs have backed contentious changes to Erno Goldfinger's 26-storey brutalist Balfron Tower in east London

Planners at London Borough of Tower Hamlets are [currently considering proposals](#) by Studio Egret West and Ab Rogers Design for changes to internal layouts, window units, facades and landscaping at the building.

In a letter to the authority, Alasdair Young, assistant inspector of historic buildings and areas at Historic England, said proposed changes to the grade II* listed building were justified.

He said: '[We] recognise the significant benefits that are offered in the repair work to the building, the reinstatement of original architectural features, and the new public realm.

'Moreover, we are encouraged by the high-quality design approach that has been taken by the developers which should secure a viable and long-term future use for this important building.'

Young said he was pleased that the architects had addressed worries it had raised about the original design of window units could harm the significance of the building.

The designs now reflect the original glazing pattern, which expresses a strong horizontal and vertical emphasis in mullion and transom arrangement. It said that the use of anodized metal, although darker than on the original building, was acceptable 'as this will help mask future staining caused by vehicle fumes from the nearby Blackwall Tunnel northern approach'.

Young also said that proposed changes to demolish partition walls within most of the flats were also acceptable "on the understanding that internal features of interest such as the exposed concrete stairs and timber balustrades, are retained or replicated where possible, and that the original layout for at least one of each unit type is retained".

The watchdog's letter also said that the proposed landscaping changes should create an 'inviting and attractive' urban environment, 'which should significantly raise the profile of this important historic area for the enjoyment of the local community and wider public'.

It also praised the developers for taking a collaborative approach throughout the planning process.

Some conservation campaigners have criticised the designs, with the Twentieth Century Society claiming they would 'be detrimental to the character of this highly significant landmark building' ([see AJ 15.10.15](#)).

Response to Alasdair Young at Historic England from James Dunnett of DOCOMOMO UK and a former employee of Goldfinger

Dear Mr Young,

Having just read of your letter to Tower Hamlet Council supporting the wholesale transformations planned for Balfcon Tower, I of course feel that those of us who have spent quite a long time nominating it for a listing upgrade, talking to the developers' architects, and commenting in detail to the Planning Authority on the application, have been wasting our time since our views will have little weight compared to those of Historic England.

So also perhaps do those in Tower Hamlets who commissioned Avanti's Conservation Management Plan and Avanti themselves - architects with the highest reputation in the field - since their work appears to have been ignored entirely. I myself, who have been writing about Goldfinger's work for half a lifetime, after having worked for him, doubt whether my efforts have been worthwhile.

I have to say that I disagree with with more or less everything you are quoted as saying. [The] only point on which we agree is the need for repair work to the building - but we have the example of contemporary grade II-listed Carradale House [also designed by Goldfinger] next door to Balfcon Tower which has been repaired and upgraded in a way that preserves its external appearance and most of its internal character. If it is possible at Carradale, why not at Balfcon? If I am not allowed to remove original windows or eliminate original room shapes in my grade II-listed terrace house of circa 1830, identical to thousands of others, why is it OK for the developers to remove every single original window and destroy almost every single original rooms in an almost-unique Grade II*-listed 'tower block'? Why are C20th listed buildings treated with less care than those from earlier centuries - because their listing is taken less seriously?

The developers have not had a 'high-quality design approach' - their feeble imitation produced under duress of the original glazing pattern on the west elevation is totally unconvincing and would be derided elsewhere - like stick-on plastic glazing bars. The developers have not taken 'a collaborative approach throughout the planning process' - they have ignored the comments expressed by C20 Society and DOCOMOMO-UK, and the public consultation has been minimal. as clearly shown in his submission by Mr David Roberts, who is writing a PhD about Balfcon. The 'landscaping changes' that you are reported to admire seem to me largely inappropriate to the character of the architecture.

It seems to me extraordinary that Historic England should go so far out on a limb in contradiction to the opinion of all others with specialist knowledge of the architect and his period. Carradale House exists as a model next door, if not a perfect one, of what could and should be done at Balfcon Tower, and we would have hoped that Historic England would have seen it as their duty to press for it to be emulated.

Yours sincerely,

James Dunnett

Past Chair, DOCOMOMO-UK

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