



Patrons: Rt Hon. Lord Lester of Herne Hill and Lady Lester

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11 December 2016

Lambeth Planning,
For the attention of Miss Lauren Shallcross,
planning@lambeth.gov.uk

Dear Sirs,

Carnegie Library, Herne Hill Road, SE24 0AG

Planning application numbers 16/06270/FUL and 16/06271/LB

The trustees of Carnegie Library Association have considered these applications and the objections made by Friends of Carnegie Library and Herne Hill Society. We share their view that there is so much wrong with the applications that these should be rejected or withdrawn. Nevertheless we are keen to work with Lambeth to provide a workable solution for the future of Carnegie Library. So, while we object to the applications for all the reasons that the Friends or the Society or both have given, we are also writing with suggestions which might conceivably make the presence of a gym tolerable.

Much of what is fundamentally wrong with the applications seems to turn on the repeated claims that implementing the proposals would "aid and support" the building. The applicants have not provided any explanation or evidence to support this assertion and the applications clearly should not be considered until they do. However, in the meantime we think we can to some extent comment since the only possibilities we can identify are that the assertion is a suggestion that the proposals will make for better use of the building and its grounds by local people or provide a financial contribution towards providing accommodation for community uses. We deal with each of these in turn.

Layout and Access

A gym in the basement would no doubt be used by some local people but we should expect them to be few in number. Only 16% of respondents to the survey of local residents carried out by Lambeth and the Carnegie Project Group, set up by Lambeth, liked the possibility of a gym in the basement. What that survey and the earlier one carried out by an independent researcher indicated is that there is local demand for gentle exercise classes of the kinds commonly provided in public libraries. Before Lambeth closed our library three such classes were running successfully each week, two yoga classes and one Pilates mat work class. Possibilities for other gentle exercise sessions are Tai Chi and Qigong and chair-based exercises for the elderly.

In contrast to the gentle exercise compatible with a library, the applicants propose that "higher energised" classes such as "body pump" take place on the ground floor. That would not work. The building was designed very specifically as a library with rooms separated by glazed partition walls, with the aim of maximising light. The vibration from a group of people jumping up and down simultaneously to a heavy bass beat in any one of these rooms would preclude the use of the others. Moreover, it could be expected to damage the parquet floors and the glazing. It cannot be emphasised enough that this is a heritage building the attractiveness of which internally is a consequence of it being a unified whole which, except for the basement, has remained almost unaltered since it was built 110 years ago and has the benefit of expensive restoration work and furnishing sympathetic to the architect's original conception carried out in recent years.

From the above it should be abundantly clear that vigorous exercise, along with all other specifically gym uses, would have to be confined to the basement. Any disturbance from those uses would also need to be confined to the basement. In this connection, we point out that the drawings show no details of fitting out of the basement. In particular there are no clues about the design or location of air conditioning inside the building or sound insulation. Quiet air conditioning takes up a lot of space. We recommend that details be required before considering the application. The lack of detail throughout the applications is astonishing.

The only reason that the applications disclose for having vigorous exercise on the ground floor instead of in the basement is that the excavation, as currently proposed, would not be deep enough for people to do star jumps or engage in other activities where the participants raise their arms in the air. The world's leading expert on converting heritage buildings, Lord Hankey, emailed Lambeth about this and other matters at the pre-application stage. We attach a copy of the email and adopt the contents as part of our present submission.

At first sight, the application drawings appear to isolate the basement from the ground and first floors by using the front entrance for the two upper floors and side entrances for the basement, and installing toilets on the ground floor. However, the proposals fail to achieve the desired isolation. Access through the existing side entrance and use of the lift would still be needed for wheelchairs, pushchairs, shopping trolleys, deliveries and those of us who cannot manage steps. When substantial numbers of people would be travelling through the basement to access the upper floors anyway it would make sense to keep all the lavatory accommodation there instead of losing space on the upper floors. Moreover, the proposal to remove the kitchen without providing a replacement is outrageous. Community buildings catering for a wide range of uses need kitchens.

The layout of the ground floor is a main room with other rooms ranged round it. The main room gives access to those other rooms and is the sole access to some of them. It was designed to combine providing the access with being a library. The proposals would retain the use for access but permanently abandon the library use without proposing any substitute to combine with the access. Obviously participants in a class or meeting there would not welcome people crossing the room. We cannot see any practical alternative to continued use of the main room as a library.

The proposals contain what we think must be intended to partly solve the problem of access via the main room by inserting a corridor in the right-hand front room and inserting a door between the corridor and the stair well. However, this does not really work. It would still be necessary to cross the main room to get to the proposed toilets. Any gain in the way of privacy for users of the front room would be outweighed by the loss of accommodation to the corridor, and knocking through the doorway would be an unwarranted intervention in this Listed building. Lambeth previously sought Listed building consent for a door there but after determined opposition by the Herne Hill Society and others the application was withdrawn in May 2005.

After considering the matters dealt with in the last three paragraphs it is obvious to us that the applicants have not given any thought to the use of the ground floor beyond wanting all of the accommodation available for their exercise classes. The ground floor works well as community spaces compatible with 21st Century library use. It should remain unaltered except for removing demountable partitioning and roller stacks from the right-hand front room, which until recently was used for services to all the borough's libraries.

The need for an extension to provide a plant room in addition to the large one in the building is not obvious and the applicants should be asked to justify the extension. Similarly, even if the sunken area for condensers and an air handler were needed the size of it needs to be justified.

The van park was needed for the Home Visit library service for the housebound to park its vans. If, as Lambeth currently insist, this service is no longer to be provided from Carnegie Library there is no need for the van park. It is very unattractive and cries out for improvement. The proposal to set back the entrance extension to minimise the number of people who have to see it is not the positive response required by the Local Plan. If this extension is needed it should be brought forward to the building line or just behind it and redesigned in keeping with the building. Any other construction needed could also go on the van park. The Reading and Wildlife Garden provides a unique public space locally and was much used when the library was open, both by individual readers and for group activities. There is absolutely no need to interfere with it and especially not with the mature trees. These are a great asset to the garden and growing replacements would take decades. The garden and trees are protected as part of the setting of the Listed Building. In respect of the Planning application a material consideration is that the building and its grounds are registered as an Asset of Community Value.

The level access path to the garden and intercom-connected access gate are also needed. (The path is badly in need of resurfacing for a second time because Lambeth have not sorted out a drainage problem but this is not a matter to pursue here.)

Finance

The need to provide evidence that the gym would make a financial contribution to the running costs of the building, including community spaces, is dealt with in the objections from Friends of Carnegie Library. However, there is another aspect we deal with here.

The library has considerable revenue-raising potential which would be lost if the proposals went ahead. Before closure the library housed Carnegie Creatives hiring more than 20 desk spaces at £200 a month each. The right-hand front room could also be let and the basement accommodation too. Additionally, as a library there was a potential for hiring as a wedding venue. We are advised by people in the weddings industry that there is a shortage of suitable venues in South London and that the library could be a very lucrative venue, attracting not the most luxurious top of the trade but the segment just below that. There are also opportunities for filming and other profitable uses. All of these turn on the building remaining a library. The main room emptied of books and with the wall bookcases removed would be just another "church hall" and its very good acoustic would be lost. On the information currently available the library would be a more viable financial proposition without a gym than with one.

Relations with the neighbours

The trustees hope to take over the running the building and we are very concerned at the suggestion in the Transport Assessment that a substantial proportion of the gym's customers would come from outside the area. The assessment suggests that these people will mostly come by bus or train but we find this suggestion utterly preposterous. Few people will leave a gym to wait in the cold and dark on a bus stop or railway platform. If there were customers from outside the area they would come by car aggravating parking difficulties in the roads around the library. These roads are included in a CPZ. Residents are therefore paying to park and we should expect them to be extremely annoyed if they found themselves unable to do so because spaces had been taken up by gym users.

In their response to the applications Carnegie Community Trust assert that the van park should not be built on because it is needed as parking space by gym customers. However, any contribution those few spaces could make to ameliorating the problem would be minimal. If there has to be construction it belongs on the van park.

The library has always fitted well into its residential surroundings. The users took the calm character of the library with them when they left. For example, most of the neighbours were not even aware of the desk space users. Pumped up people leaving a gym would be very different. We could expect loud conversations in the street and car doors slamming.

The 50% increase in the proposed opening hours of the gym is alarming since it suggests that further increases could be expected if the gym did ever open. The proposed basement plan appears to show an automated entry system so that customers could have access without the presence of staff and many budget gyms open 24 hours a day.

If permission for a gym were ever granted it should be subject to conditions limiting membership to local residents and limiting opening hours.

Summary

Although the trustees would need much more information, as above indicated, and a revised proposal before making any definite comment they would consider suffering a gym in the basement provided that:

- The ground and first floors were not affected by the gym or disturbance from it.
- There was no intrusion on the Reading and Wildlife Garden and there continued to be access for wheelchair users.
- The gym made a worthwhile contribution to the running costs of the building and compensated the Association for loss of revenue from the basement.
- Membership was restricted to local people and the opening hours were limited to times acceptable to the neighbours.

We hope that this is helpful.

Yours faithfully,

Jeff Doorn,

Chair

Dear Stakeholders in Lambeth's Carnegie Library,

I was interested to see the proposals for converting the Carnegie Library on Herne Hill Road to new uses. As a specialist adviser to national and international agencies on the reuse of historic buildings, I come with some experience, and I believe that the public need to have a clear transparent **justification** for what is proposed. I see that the public in this case are the local population of young and old who have genuine stakeholder interests. I noted the character of what I saw as follows:-

Business Plans

1. There was no schedule of accommodation and brief given for the desired uses, access, supporting services, and environmental conditions of the functions proposed for the neighbourhood library, the four flexible community spaces, the three gyms, and a studio. No one can understand the capacity and numbers of persons that can be accommodated.
2. There was no market assessment of potential demand, nor a statement of the numbers of staff that were needed to operate the gym as a competitive destination, and their costs. There was no reasoning that demonstrated how the proposals were justified by the demand for any of the functions.
3. Ownership, capital outlays and return on investment were not adequately explained. The freedom to avoid rental for a long grace period needs better presentation and explanation.

The Building

4. The building is a valuable donation by the Carnegie Foundation built in 1905 and with its street boundary walls is listed grade 2. It is designed with consistency of architectural style and its setting runs up to the adjacent property boundaries.
5. The ceiling heights in the Gyms at 3m are just too low for a tall man or for many exercises.
6. There is a need to pass ventilation from the plant room to the gym and studio on Herne Hill Road side of the property. This might be done with ducting within the depth of the N-S beams. The artist's perspective shows a flat ceiling and no columns. How is this to be done?
7. There is a lack of staff and equipment storage space identified for running the gym.
8. The use of spaces is not always indicated so with a lack of a schedule of accommodation we cannot know if all functions have been taken into account.
9. The main gym would benefit from having daylight and this might be achieved by adjusting the plant room and means of escape from the ground floor level to run away from the building. Can the fire escape not descend over the plant room roof to higher ground levels?
10. Section b-b through the plant compound and the plan showing the plant room 1m from the library wall would require underpinning of the Carnegie walls on two sides Why therefore leave a space between library and plant room?

11. The lower entrance is proposed with a sloping roof and tall glazing for a very small entrance area. The style bears no compatibility with the existing building. The glass on the SW and NW facing facades will make the interior uncomfortably hot in summer and be expensive to heat in winter.

12. The style of the basement entrance is incompatible with the rusticated base to the historic Carnegie library, both in construction and detailing. The elevation does not show how the street elevation the tree and parking make a sensitive composition.

The public

13. The public and your stakeholders in the project can be pretty intelligent in this modern well informed age. I suggest that the Council might benefit by being more transparent and informative in their proposals for a most important project.

I hope that the above is of some help in your deliberations.

Yours faithfully

Donald Hankey

RIBA, FSA, FRAI