

# New school buildings on Central Square. What really happened.



The Residents Association Council took the unusual step in April of agreeing in principle to an independent inquiry into the events leading up to the planning approval in 2008 of the new Henrietta Barnett School buildings. What form such an inquiry takes and whether to proceed will be discussed at its June 3 Council meeting which is open to the public.

These red brick buildings, sitting either side of the original Institute buildings, have triggered radically different opinions. The School and Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust say they are delighted with them, and Dr Mervyn Miller, President of the Lutyens Trust has written that they "enhance" Central Square.

Critics say the opposite is true. They say that the bright red brick stands out against the grey of the Institute, the windows are square, not rectangular, and are missing the small panes and white wooden frames that are the signature not only of the Lutyens design, but of much of the rest of the Suburb.

Questions of taste are subjective. But some residents are angry that they and fellow residents were not asked for their views in a comprehensive consultation process. This is in contrast to 2002, when the school held a full public meeting for residents prior to a previous planning scheme which was later abandoned.

Henrietta Barnett School, voted the best state school in the country by the Sunday Times Good Schools Guide, had long needed to expand and replace temporary huts on its flanks. Plans to add buildings were discarded most recently in 2002, but resurrected in 2007. At that time, the school was told by Oftsted that the current accommodation in the temporary huts was unsatisfactory. It was also told by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) that the original £7 million grant from 2002 was still in

place, but that a decision was wanted by Autumn 2008.

The school appointed Hopkins Architects, one of Britain's leading architectural practices acclaimed for its work on buildings such as the Glyndebourne Opera House, Portcullis House and the Olympic Velodrome.

The original outline scheme in January 2008 envisaged the new buildings behind the Institute building, but Barnet and English Heritage advised against it because it interfered with sightlines across the site.

A second scheme was outlined for buildings adjoining the Institute alongside, in line with the original Lutyens concept, was also developed and discarded in April.

The third scheme laid out the two L-shaped buildings which are to be seen on the site today.

Later in May the school consulted local residents inviting 17 to a public meeting, 12 of whom attended.

In July more detailed plans for the third scheme were shown to English Heritage. English Heritage was supportive but had questions about the windows and detailing.

On July 23 the school submitted the plan to the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust which owns some of the land and needs to give planning consent. On August 1 the school submitted the formal planning application to Barnet.

Later in August Hopkins wrote to English Heritage to say that there was no money in the plans to alter the window design, but argued that as the Suburb features many different window designs, this was no problem.

On September 2, the Residents Association Council met for the first time since July. The RA Chairman, David B Lewis, presented to the RA Council a draft letter produced by Consam, a group that advises the RA on architectural matters, inviting the RA Council to support the

application and write in support to Barnet.

Many on the Council was stunned. Few, other than the Chairman and two members who were also members of Consam, had seen anything of the plans: some members of the Council even expressed surprise to learn that such a development was under way. The Council rejected the proposal and instead passed a motion saying it "deplores the lack of public consultation on the most important Listed Building and Heritage site in the London Borough of Barnet."

The RA chairman then wrote to Barnet asking them to extend the consultation period so that the association could hold a public meeting. Barnet refused, saying the consultation period, from August 7 to August 21, was adequate and that discussions with Consam had also taken place pre-application.

Barnet said it had met all legal requirements, with 436 letters sent to neighbouring residents. In addition 15 professional bodies including the Lutyens Society, the Victorian Society and the Metropolitan police had been consulted and of those replying, none had objected.

Barnet's Finchley and Golders Green planning committee agreed the plan on September 22. At the meeting Cllr Eva Greenspan declared an interest as a Henrietta Barnett School governor and went on to debate and vote. She had no financial interest in the scheme but as a school governor was very keen for planning permission to be given.

The biggest controversy concerns the rush: If the plan had been submitted earlier, or later, it would not have gone to Barnet when residents were on holiday, and in the one month when the RA Council did not meet.

The school says the haste was because if they failed to get a decision by September, the grant would be withdrawn.



In the application, the architects wrote, "The DCSF have made it clear that failure to meet the timescales stipulated with the current award will result in the grant being withdrawn. It should be stressed that this application therefore represents the School's final chance to progress the initiative."

The School says this was made clear by the DCSF which wrote to them: "Unfortunately, we will have to stick to our original deadline of September 2008. We originally allocated this funding in 2001 so to extend the deadline any further would be excessive and also we cannot afford to roll this, and other funding, forward into other financial years."

But the Department of Education, formerly the DCSF, disputes this, insisting the money would not have been withdrawn. "There is no cut-off deadline," wrote Steve Atkinson, an officer with Partnerships for Schools, following a freedom of information request. "Failure to have in place planning approval by the given date would have no effect on Targeted Capital Funding, consequently it does not represent a deadline, or a cut-off date."

Asked why the school did not hold a 2002-style consultation for all the residents, the School insists it consulted adequately, saying that in addition to inviting 17 local residents, it took advice from interested parties. "We were also advised by Barnet, HGST and CONSAM on how and with whom to consult, all of which were carried out in a timely manner," said a school spokeswoman. "The school's architect, we understand, followed all planning and consultation requirements, as outlined by Barnet and the Trust."

Hopkins said in a statement that the application "was submitted on a timescale to allow the detailed design to fit in with the timescales set by the DCSF."

One thing seems certain: If the RA does hold its inquiry, there will be no lack of interest in its conclusions.

CHRIS STEPHEN

JUNE ARMSTRONG WRIGHT

## CENTRAL SQUARE NW11

*Who pushed or passed the ill-judged plan*

*For red carbuncles; school-flanking pair?*

*Disuniting*

*Ever blighting*

*Lutyens once harmonious Square.*

*Crass heritage destroyers.*

*The Square can never look the same.*

*Short-sighted ones*

*Benighted ones*

*Go hang your heads in shame.*



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TELEPHONE: 020 8349 0037 • FAX: 020 8349 0092  
EMAIL: [architects@brillowen.co.uk](mailto:architects@brillowen.co.uk) • WEB: [www.brillowen.co.uk](http://www.brillowen.co.uk)