

King's Cross Development Forum

Planning reference number 2015/6015/P

“Internal and external alterations associated with the refurbishment of the Western Coal Drops and the northern 20 bays of the Eastern Coal Drops with their adjacent viaducts and the erection of a new roof level extension spanning between the Eastern and Western Coal Drops and new single storey shop units along Lower Stable Street, together with works to create means of access and circulation, hard landscaping, servicing, cycle parking and cycle facilities, for retail uses within Use Classes A1, A2, A3 and/or A4.”

Response by the Forum

The King's Cross Development Forum was set up so that people living or working in King's Cross could have a say in the future of the area and the development of the old railway lands. Its composition can increasingly represent the occupants of the King's Cross Central development site now that is becoming occupied; for example, already more than half the members of its Steering Group live there. This response reflects the views expressed at a meeting of the Forum following the submission of the planning application.

In the opinion of the Forum, the proposal does not adhere to the principles of the outline planning permission and should be rejected. The Forum endorses completely the response by the Victorian Society. From its own perspective, as representing the occupants, the Forum makes the following additional comments.

1. The supposed reason for the new upper level between the Coal Drops is a need for a large space for a large retailer. Yet Covent Garden and Camden Market, which form the usual points of comparison with the site, do not need such spaces. A very solid business case for needing such a space would be required to justify this significant deviation from the outline planning permission. Certainly “the quantum of retail space that the existing buildings would deliver is comparatively small” (in the words of the Design and Access Statement) is not a justification, when there are large amounts of retail space throughout the whole development: the Retail Statement notes that King's Cross Central is comparable with major shopping centres such as Camden Town.
2. The outline planning permission, and subsequent publicity illustrations, envisaged the Coal Drops as two rows of small shops, such as craft workshops. The new upper level for a large retailer would change this in various respects: by adding about 30% to the retail floor space it would suggest a character and level of rents more appropriate to an indoor shopping mall than to such workshops.
3. The Design and Access Statement claims that “the new upper level should be an architectural statement that forms an attraction in its own right”, so that the site is marked out as distinctive. This is unfair both to the Coal Drops themselves, which with sensitive treatment could be very attractive to shoppers, and to the work done elsewhere in the King's Cross Central area. The existing buildings do not need to be contorted into a ‘flagship’ or a ‘gateway’: they can speak for themselves, without rococo flourishes such as the curved roof.

4. Though the scheme would preserve parts of the buildings, it would not articulate their original purpose well. In the Western Coal Drops, the canopy would be destroyed to make way for the new upper level. In the Eastern Coal Drops, much of the original brickwork would be removed from the northern half, thereby negating a primary reason for the listing of the building and making the coal drop cells almost impossible to appreciate. These cells remained largely complete on all three levels until the 1985 fire; the dividing walls and many of the (now, charred) beams that carried the railway survive. In a conservation-led development this evidence of a remarkable structure should not be lost to our history but instead used for partial reinstatement.

5. The massive curved roof of the new upper level would dominate the site, as shown in the Design and Access Statement (in Figures 5, 6, 11, 43 and 44, for example). It would not be an intervention like those at the University of the Arts and at King's Cross Station, where the new structures fit fairly comfortably and respectfully alongside the old ones. The roof outline would be prominent from Granary Square and clash with the functional characteristics of the gasholders and other historic buildings.

6. The images in the Design and Access Statement (such as Figures 44 and 45) also depict the inside of the new upper level as a transparent, almost invisible, empty glass shell; it would be nothing of the kind, as it would be filled with department store fittings that, with the roof, would obtrude on the views of the site from both ends of the Coal Drops.

7. The new upper level would greatly darken the space beneath; this would feel in effect more like a rather draughty and gloomy building than part of the open space. The King's Cross Central area has very high density and can ill afford to have its open spaces restricted in this way.