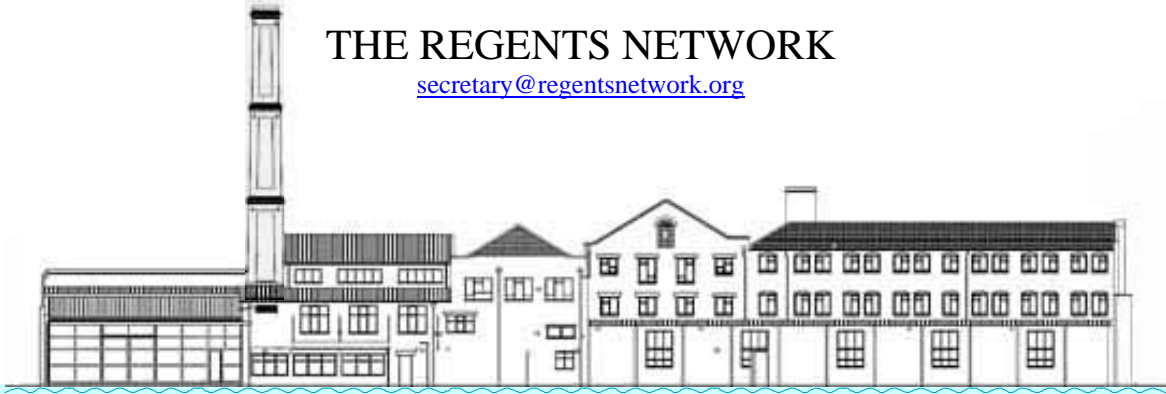


## THE REGENTS NETWORK

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### A REGENTS CANAL RESPONSE TO DEMOLITION OF HOLBORN STUDIOS AND LARGE REDEVELOPMENT

**LB Hackney Planning Application Ref: 2015/2596 OBJECT**  
49 - 50 Eagle Wharf Road London N1 7ED  
Regents Canal Conservation Area

#### INTRODUCTION

It is relevant when considering this application that close attention is given to the Regents Canal quietly sitting there, not animated. The importance of the waterway must be considered, as the water itself is given the distinction of being part of London's Blue Ribbon Network as defined in the London Plan, and with the high status as **open space** with the same importance as the Royal Parks and other London spaces. Development beside a park - or canal - must be done carefully.

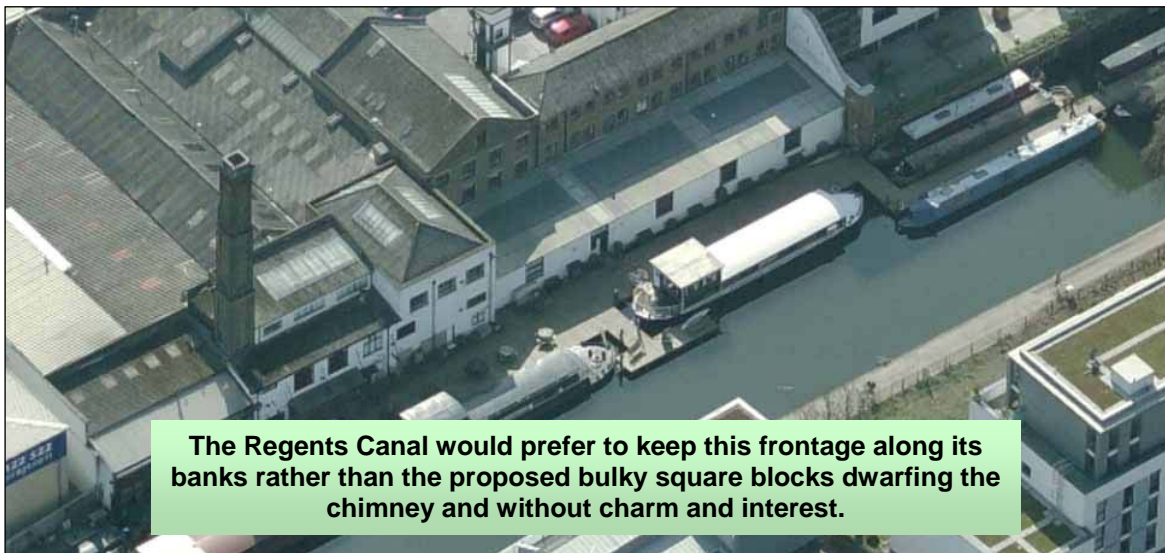
#### Clear guidance

Having focussed on the starting point and identifying the important context, only then can the attention be given to the redevelopment of the studio, because any development undertaken must be in conformity with the requirements and sensitivities of the conservation area and open space, and not interfere with or degrade the heritage and special character of the wonderful canal setting. The charm and interest is so valuable, and irreplaceable if damaged in any way.

#### Working together for the future

However, there is another consideration, as the studio site itself that is going to be redeveloped and altered significantly by this application is also located within the same conservation area. This does not mean that changes cannot take place, but any development must be planned with great respect for the conservation and heritage, and should work towards long term aims to enhance and improve the wider setting while moving forwards. The next generations will appreciate that.

Londoners as well as Hackney and Islington residents are so fortunate to have such a charming and accessible location at Eagle Wharf, and it is valuable to be able to share this wonderful setting.



The Regents Canal would prefer to keep this frontage along its banks rather than the proposed bulky square blocks dwarfing the chimney and without charm and interest.

## A FLAWED APPLICATION

### 1.1 Contrary to legislation

Consent for the non-waterway use of the studio redevelopment beside the canal would be directly contrary to London Plan BRN Policy 7.24 which states that it is of strategic importance that the land alongside waterways should be used for “water related purposes”. It goes on to say that the starting point for development and use of land alongside the Blue Ribbon Network “must be the water” (Para 7.71). There could not be a clearer indication of how the intrusive residential blocks are unwelcome and out of place.

1.2 If the studio replacement does not comply directly with this policy, then it must at least ensure that it does not have a negative impact on the Blue Ribbon Network, that is the Regents Canal, and that the canal is the starting point for the development, rather than an unsuitable exploitation of the setting. It must be seen to be taking positive steps to assist and enhance the canal and its environs.

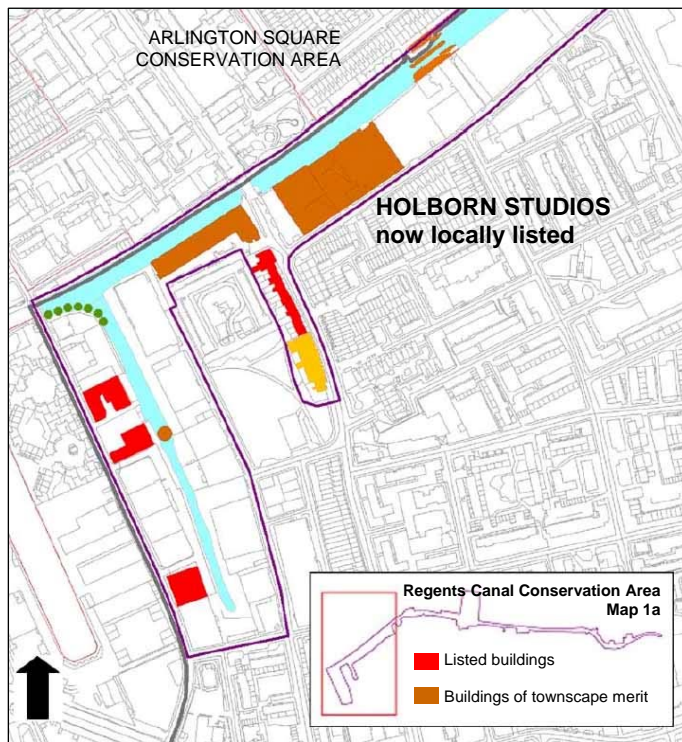
### 2.1 Big responsibility

The Regents Canal is not just a pretty pond beside the development site.

This stretch of water is a key section of the historic Regents Canal nearing its bicentenary; it is a section of the capital’s Blue Ribbon Network; it is a very high profile section of a national historic network of the country’s inland waterways; it has its place in the history and commercial development of our nation; it is part of a national monument of thousands of miles of canals throughout the country.

2.2 This distinctive testimonial for the Regents Canal should be well recognised and respected. But the important matter is that those local authorities responsible for a section of the canal network running through their borough have a heavy and direct responsibility for a national asset. It is as big a responsibility as that.

2.3 LB Hackney may recognise their responsibility for this stretch of the Regents Canal and treat the waterway with respect and gratitude. The setting up of a conservation area along the canal was



an important undertaking, and the land alongside was included to identify a significant canal corridor as a buffer to negative development.

Immediately opposite the historic chimney, and threatened by 2 bulky residential blocks in the proposed development, is another special area across the canal in LB Islington, the Arlington Square Conservation area.

#### **Locally Listed Buildings**

Locally listed buildings are those which are on the LB Hackney Council’s own list of buildings of local architectural or historic interest, and in recognition of their value as irreplaceable historic assets which contribute to the quality of the local environment.

(see *Regents Canal Conservation Area Appraisal, London Borough of Hackney, October 2007*)

2.4 LB Hackney will be judged on the manner in which this development of Eagle Wharf is dealt with in such a sensitive location. This stretch of London’s Regents Canal has been badly treated and degraded by a number of unsuitable and bulky developments along its banks, that have been given consent in contravention of the policies and guidelines. This is seen to be irresponsible and short term, and with the result that a degraded asset is being passed on to future generations.

### 3.1 The greed element?

The unconvincing excuse for building out-sized residential blocks along the Regents Canal and as close to the water as possible, is that housing is urgently needed. But there are many ways of providing housing that could fit in with the special canal requirements, and very many suitable locations other than the canal that are available for large bulky blocks.

3.2 There has been a frenzy of development along our canals (the Thames has suffered the same sort of degradation but on a larger scale), as developers can guarantee an uplift in profits of 25% or more for waterside flats. So, in effect the Regents Canal gives the developer a benefit while losing out, as the developers take but do not give anything back.

3.3 It seems that the proposed over-development of Holborn Studios site will be no exception, especially with the two taller residential blocks sited too close to the canal for comfort.

### 4.1 Loss of industrial land

Industrial land in London is being lost to residential use at twice the rate identified in the capital's strategic planning document. It has been argued that this land was surplus to requirements, but more than half the lost industrial land was in use. This trend has been property developer led, and facilitated by weak planning and administration. Of course industrial land can be purchased at a lower price, and when developed as residential will ensure that the developer makes large profits.



4.2 Although office space is being provided in the plans for the Holborn Studio development, it strangely does not seem to be studio space that the current photographers and specialists require. Will that mean that Holborn Studios will find that it cannot move back into the premises after the rebuild, and in effect will hundreds of people be displaced from their jobs, and the world famous photography business has to close?

4.3 The planning application in its present form will cut the heart out of the busy industrial use of Holborn Studios and is strongly opposed. The gentrification of sites like this is not acceptable, and London's industry should be actively protected. It is crucial to London's economy.

4.4 In the disagreeable event of the closure of Holborn Studios it is possible that the offices and commercial space could be marketed at higher commercial rents. More favourably in the current 'change of use' climate the commercial space could possibly be converted into flats for those who could afford them. Complete transformation by stealth would not be welcome, even if it makes huge profits for someone. Loss of industrial, gain of residential, bigger profits!

### 5.1 Excessive redevelopment

The extent of the redevelopment looks excessive. The wholesale demolition of the heart of the well known and listed existing buildings and a new and very different building supplanting it, bulky rather than human scale, with much increased floorspace resulting in the inevitable and prominent high rise blocks, it seems a development too far.

5.2 Any replacement building for the Holborn Studios should have some merits. It would not be possible for it to have the same high and appreciated characteristics of the existing buildings as the proposed structure could not have any heritage value or interest, nor ever be considered to be a building of 'townscape merit'. The proposed building will be large and bulky and will lack

refinement and charm, and certainly will not gently fit in with the locality. There are more than a few misfit buildings in the area, but that is no excuse for having one more.

### 6.1 The developers overcome?

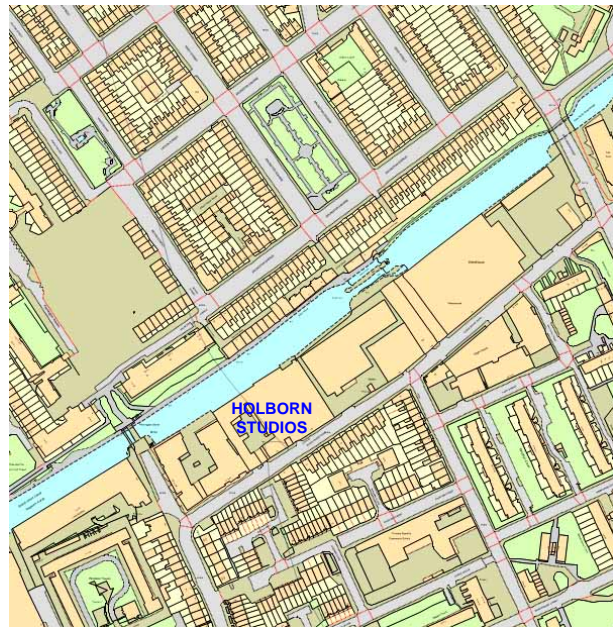
The developers knew well that the Eagle Wharf site had a formidable history and reputation, and that redevelopment would have a number of constraints and restrictions, but they still bought the site from the failed previous developer. They knowingly have designed a replacement building which is not enough of an improvement on the former unsuccessful application.

6.2 The developers are setting about now devising ways of trying to justify their unsuitable over-development of the site, and their high risk situation.

### 7.1 The local character

The local area is predominately residential with a greater percentage of terrace houses as can be seen on the borough map. There is not a high bulky buildings presence as it is not a town centre or strategic location.

7.2 The developers say that there are tall bulky buildings which provide an example they can follow, but they give no examples of the more general characteristic in the locality of low level housing that could also be followed.



### 8.1 So-called context analysis

A weak attempt to justify the mis-fit and large scale of their planned development is contained in page after page of photos and text in the 'context analysis' section of the applicant's planning documentation, with the main 'context' being carefully selected examples of large bulky buildings. It seems to be more of a dark art rather than a straightforward assessment and justification in planning terms for the characteristics of the range and style of other build developments that may inform the suitability of the proposed development at this sensitive site, as it has no established credence. It is also far too limited a selection.

8.2 The context analysis seems to be based on precedence, which is not a planning consideration in any planning policies or guidelines. In any event precedence is a bit suspect to rely on as it works equally in both directions. If there is are tall buildings for instance, then you may say that it means you can have another tall building, but it can equally indicate that there are sufficient tall buildings and no more are welcome. Precedence has no standing, and each developments must be judged on its merits.

8.3 Apart from the low industrial buildings beside the canal for historic reasons, the 'grain,' of the application area is residential and terrace buildings. That is the context.

### 9.1 An extreme example



A nice elevation is shown above of the canalside near Holborn Studios, and without any large and bulky buildings having been dumped along the canal. But in the application document there is a very large, dominant, out-of-character building, Gainsborough Studios, on the left of the elevation.

9.2 Gainsborough Studios is an out-of-place residential block with great bulk and height. It has the fine open space of the Regents Canal on one side, and the extensive open space of Shoreditch Park on the other. How it managed to muscle in with a consent in that sensitive environment is not

admitted. Its a disgrace (and also rather average architecture), and it is worrying that it is often used as an extreme example that developers follow just because it is so huge.

9.3 No surprise that Holborn Studios developers also make reference to the dreaded Gainsborough building in an attempt to justify their own over-development even though it is ½ kilometre away, and does not have any significance in planning terms. That planning consent has a lot to answer for. [Note: The Gainsborough building also encroached into the canal!].

#### 10.1 A landmark or gateway?

Before the developers and their apologists try to make out that their new buildings at Holborn Studios will provide a 'landmark' (or a 'gateway' which is developer's second favourite attribution), it should be pointed out that the site already has much greater status than that, as the Holborn Studios themselves are a treasured feature of the area and provide a positive contribution to the locality. And anyway, there is also the scale and impressiveness of the historic Regents Canal which was a landmark 195 years before the proposed development was even applied for.

#### 11.1 Homes not for Londoners?

Studying the proposals for residential provision in the Holborn Studio replacement buildings, it is not clear whether anyone in the locality could afford the canalside flats in the new development.

11.2 There is a huge amount of development in London, and it has become a serious problem that much of the accommodation is so pricey or the rents are so high that many Londoners are being pushed out of their own city, and typically by people from abroad. There would be more accommodation provided in the new development, but it would not be welcome unless a good proportion of it is readily available to a wide range of the community.

#### 12.1 Balconies

Prominent protruding balconies have been a blight on new properties all over London, and as balcony technology seems to have advanced, so the over-sized balconies can more readily be constructed and be more conspicuous.

12.2 Even reasonable balconies still thrust themselves out into the open space beyond the building and can be very obtrusive, and are not acceptable on canal elevations, or beside parks and open spaces. Some balconies can almost be visually aggressive by the way they impose themselves (as with the Lime Wharf development further along the Regents Canal in Hackney).

12.3 Internal balconies have always been popular, and are fortunately still in fashion these days and are being recommended more frequently. Internal balconies for a flat can also readily integrate more usefully with the accommodation of the flat itself. It can have the added benefit of opening up the front elevations, which can be a distinct advantage with some featureless frontages.

12.4 The plans for Holborn Studios unfortunately include prominent balconies on the Regents Canal elevations protruding rather blatantly towards the canal. Internal balconies would suit very well and would also be an improvement by shaping the flat front elevations facing the canal, and the application plans should be revised.

#### 13.1 The chimney

The developers know they would not get away with demolishing the famous chimney of course, but they do not seem to appreciate the importance of it. The manner in which the chimney is set unsympathetically between two bulky modern buildings is not acceptable, and an improved setting should be devised and revisions made to the planning application.

#### 13.1 Viability?

The developers of Holborn Studios cannot justify their over-development in planning terms, nor that they should have gone for development of the site in the first place.

13.2 However there is a trend for developers to provide a 'viability study' which attempts in financial terms to insist that an extended and larger building is required to cover the developer's

high expenses and the level of profit margins that they aim for. How reasonable the calculation is for costs and profits remains to be seen, and how the figures are arrived at.

13.3 These viability studies have never appeared as a one of the development documents on the planning websites, and the developers claim that they are confidential as they contain commercial and financial information. It is only fairly recently that it has become generally known that these documents exist and are used behind closed doors for planning decisions without our local authorities even revealing the secret process that they are undertaking.

13.4 There is no doubt that the Holborn Studio developers are using financial information behind the scenes to try to undermine and influence the planning system in this case so that a non-planning decision may be achieved. Another of the dark arts of the planning system, perhaps?

13.5 In order to attempt to avoid this unnatural strategy that may possibly result in an unsafe decision, a FoI Freedom of Information request is being sent to LB Hackney to require them to supply a copy of the viability and financial information provided by the applicants, and for it to be in the public domain, as it rightly (and legally) should be.

#### 14.1 Good neighbour?

There is no doubt that the Holborn Studio complex is a good neighbour in the locality (and a wider area) as well as to the Regents Canal. But with the bulky dominance of the proposed group of buildings imposing themselves into the area, the only neighbourly detail that will be passed on to the mis-fit development will be the name, taken in vain.

14.2 It would be gratifying if opportunities could be found to develop and improve the studios and its functions, as there is no opposition to development of Eagle Wharf providing that it is suitable, and of course with this site, recognising that the opportunities may be limited. This could be achieved by the management, the owners and architects working together with the occupants and local community, and of course the Regents Canal, to realise the full opportunities for these historic buildings and the treasured environment in which they are happily located.

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Del Brenner, Regents Network

September 2015

Footnote:

#### **Regents Canal Iron Foundry**

Set up by Henry Grissell on the banks of the Regents Canal at Eagle Wharf in about 1841, and sections of the original buildings can be identified in the Holborn Studios.

Massive ironwork was made for major bridges, including a number on the Nile for Robert Stephenson. Also much of Grissell's work can be seen at London's major railway terminals, and in the construction of the new Houses of Parliament. The railings for Parliament and Buckingham Palace were his work. The foundry was noted for its decorative ironwork including the Covent Garden Floral Hall.

Three cast iron lighthouses were manufactured in the foundry including the famous one on Seskar Island (1858) en route to St Petersburg, and still in operation. They made news headlines and visitors flocked to see the lighthouses being set up on the canalside during construction.

