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Development Opportunities: Small Can be Beautiful



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For many SME property developers and investors, the prospect of building a property development business or portfolio can seem exciting, yet daunting, not least due to the complexities of the UK planning system.

The alternatives in terms of finding and developing properties whilst adding value through planning approval can range from obtaining lawful development certificates to regularising a previously unlawful residential conversion, through to Prior Approval particularly under new Class MA rights, or through to full planning permission.

This article looks at a recent case study that presents at a very simple and straightforward level the typical challenges faced on the latter through full planning applications.

Infill development opportunity

We were engaged in April 2020 by our client, Ozan Redjep, to advise on a site that was a potential infill opportunity at the end of a terrace in Romford, East London.

The site comprised land partially consisting of an enclosed parking space and otherwise open garden land reserved for the benefit of the 1-bedroom, 2-storey house on the adjacent plot. Mature trees (no tree preservation order) sat at the front of the plot, which abuts long narrow gardens to the rear of nearby terraces. The overhead image below shows the context of the vacant garden site next to existing houses:

In May of 2020, we sought pre-application advice from the council (London Borough of Redbridge) for a two-storey, two-bedroom house on the amenity



space. The key issues identified by the planners were:

- ◆ Design of the property: with regard to scale, height, width, building line, plot coverage and external appearance and materials relative to neighbouring houses.
- ◆ Impact on outlook from side ground floor windows of adjacent property (these windows serve a kitchen) as a result of erecting a new house on this boundary.
- ◆ Loss of amenity space to the neighbouring house and inadequate amenity space to the new house.
- ◆ Retention of the trees at the front: these were considered to contribute positively to the surrounding area.

Pre-application consultation

Officers visited the property and then delivered their final written advice in July 2020.

The principal problem raised by the officers related to the loss of amenity space. We sought to retain an area of usable and practicable garden space for the neighbouring property (10.7sqm), as well as the new property (18.2sqm). The Council's Local Plan policies, however, sought a minimum of 50sqm amenity space for new two-bedroom houses.

Oddly enough, if the proposal was for flats, then the requirement per flat would have been less, even if they were two-bedroom flats. However, the council seeks to protect garden land and retain more space to and around houses.

When engaging with officers in pre-application consultations, officers would in most cases revert with an initial indication of what their advice might be, so that we have a final chance to comment or raise other matters (examples

of other developments, point out local development characteristics) before the final advice is settled. Officers do not have to do this, but it is worth asking for in advance, in order to fully test out the strengths and weaknesses in the current scheme.

Although we did revert to officers with further evidence and thoughts, including an analysis of the size of all the plots in the surrounding housing estate in order to make the case that the proposed garden sizes are similar to others nearby, officers were still concerned about the quality of accommodation, particularly with regards to the smaller garden sizes proposed.

Building better, building beautiful

On 30 January 2020, the Government’s Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission published its final report, ‘Living with Beauty’. It is always hard to say how much emerging policy influences the thinking of officers in considering individual schemes. However, the emphasis given in this report at the time, to better quality housing and amenity space to new developments, adds weight to existing planning policy considerations around such issues.

In addition, by July 2020, the UK had already been through a first full COVID-lockdown, and the value of quality spaces and garden land, especially in densely-built suburban areas, had forced itself up the agenda.

As a result, if we were to try to persuade officers in favour of the scheme, the issue of the quality of external and internal spaces needed to be addressed head on.

Full planning application

We submitted a full planning application in November 2021, as the client focused on other development priorities in the intervening period. However, we also used this time to work with the architect to address some of the issues raised by the council.

The team made a number of changes to the scheme. Firstly, we reduced the degree of projection of the property at the front to bring the building line closer to neighbouring properties. By setting the front building line back slightly, we achieved a number of benefits:

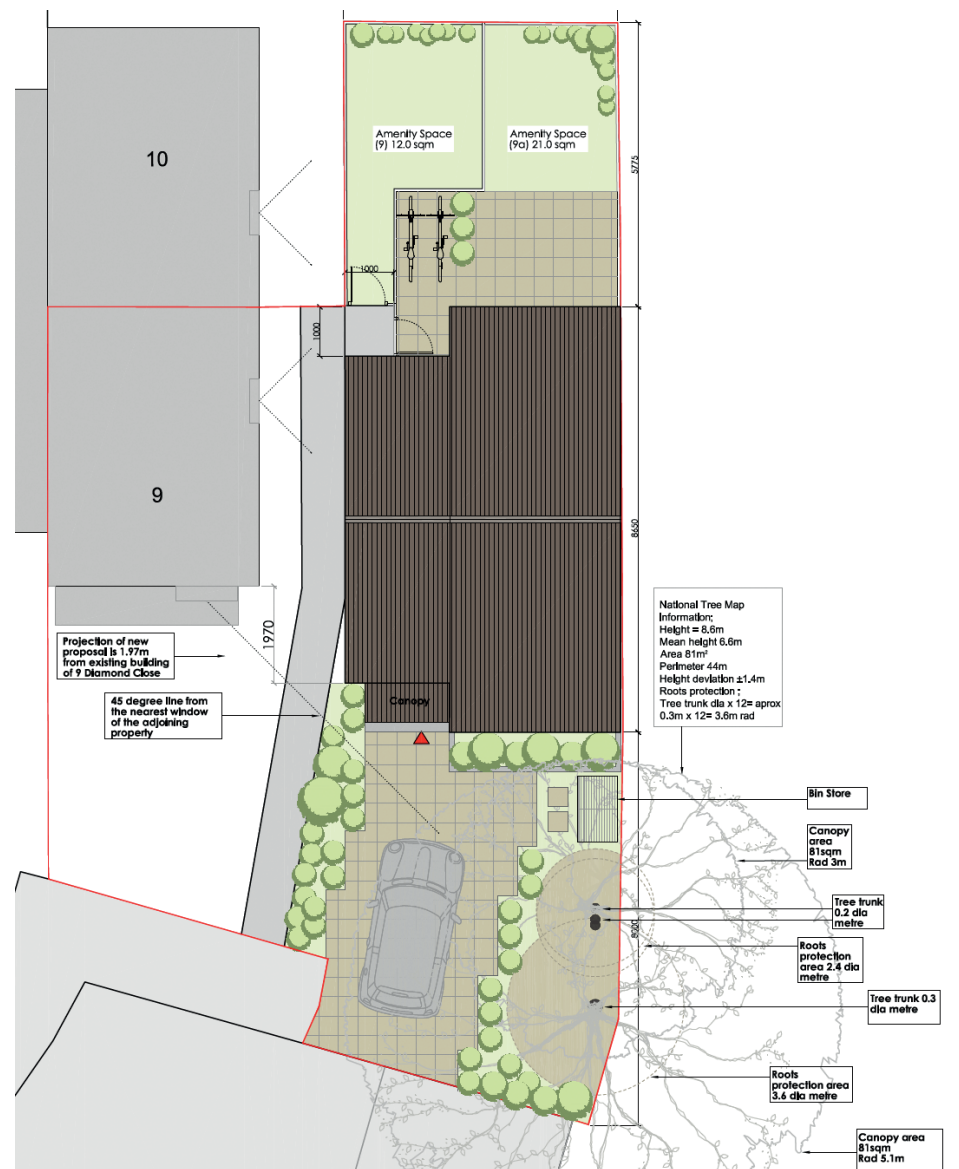
- ♦ More generous angle away from the neighbouring ground floor views to the street to avoid any sense of enclosure or encroachment to the side.



- ♦ Space for bin store away from the front driveway and more soft landscaping.
- ♦ More space for a car parking space and a greater buffer around the existing trees to ensure their future protection.

However, the key focus of our presentation would be a number of high-

quality CGIs to seek to convey that, despite the shortfall in proposed garden land compared to the Local Plan policy target (i.e., a minimum of 50sqm), that each house would still retain potentially attractive and usable rear garden land. ▶





Amenity space to the rear

The site plan below shows the proposed site layout. As described above, we altered the front building line, which improved the scheme, access to the site, front landscaping and the visual relationship to neighbours to the scheme.

To the rear, we reduced the scale of development slightly as it was more important to sacrifice some internal space and footprint in order to try to achieve larger garden sizes, at least in order to get permission for something on the site, such as the degree of importance attached to garden land in this case by officers.

In order to underscore the quality of the proposed space, we provided high quality CGIs of not just the proposed garden space, but also the proposed internal layouts. A third CGI of the street scape comprising the new house was also provided to the planners.

The neighbouring property, as can be seen from the site plan, comprised two back-to-back one-bedroom houses. The rear house, No.10, enjoyed its own rear garden and would be unaffected by the scheme. The front house, No.9, needed to retain some garden land of its own on our part of the site, and this was therefore planned out within the scheme in such a way as it could be independently accessed.

Internal layout

The proposed gross internal area of the new property was 70sqm, allowing for the reductions in footprint to the front and

rear. This made the house just about large enough for a 2-bedroom, 3-person two-storey house under the National Space Standards.

However, the proposed first floor arrangement created the opportunity to add a small study room between the bedrooms, which could add further value:

Overall, the design succeeded in maximising the total potential achievable floor space under full planning permission.

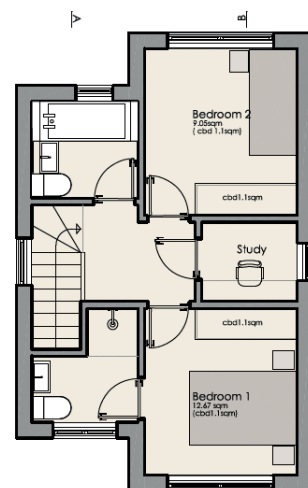
Planning permission was granted in January 2022, within two months of the submission of the application to the council.

Conclusions

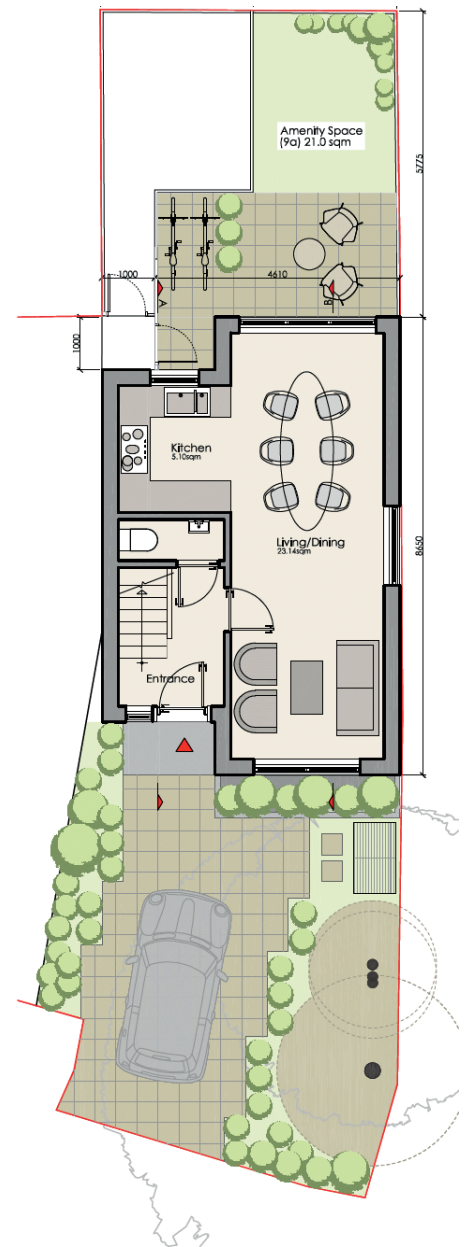
By positively responding to officer's concerns regarding the quality of future

amenity for residents of the scheme and potential loss of amenity space, through changes to scale and massing and high-quality CGIs to convey a vision for the site, we were able to deliver a successful outcome for the client and make use of this development opportunity.

At a time of dynamic and rapidly evolving Government discussion and consultation relating to the way we live, and a greater premium placed on the quality of our living spaces, not just the quantity of housing, SMEs will continue to play an important part in bringing forward well-considered, beautiful homes that are both attractive to live in as well as meeting housing need.



02 First Floor Plan
1:100
Diamond Close /A/AP0001



01 Ground Floor Plan
1:100
Diamond Close /A/AP0001