

UCLU Stakeholder Position on Ramsay Hall Redevelopment Plans ‘HawkinsBrown Ramsay Hall UCL 11.12.14.’



University College London Union, London, 09 January 2015

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Abbreviations used:

DDA – Disability Discrimination Act

DSO – Disabled Students' Officer

UCLU – UCL Union

WO – Women's Officer

1. Introduction

Following a consultation meeting on the planned redevelopment of UCL's Ramsay Hall, UCLU was given an opportunity to submit its position on the current draft plans on behalf of the student body so that it could be taken into account in the planning process and incorporated into the next stage of the project design development.

After an internal process of consultation with elected union officers and representatives, students and architectural advisers lasting between the 15th of December 2014 and the 8th of January 2015, UCLU is able to present the following position. Concern has been taken to elaborate on what grounds UCLU holds its opinion. Desiring accommodation that in the best possible way meets the needs of UCL students, UCLU has taken care to elaborate and clarify the comments received during the consultation and the position they have informed.

2. Who was involved in the shaping of the Union's position?

UCLU is a democratic representative organisation and its position should reflect this. The following people were thus central to establishing UCLU's position:

I. Students:

UCL students were contacted by three different methods to offer their views on the draft plans. Firstly, all UCL students were invited to offer their views and opinions via focused social media interviews publicised online. Secondly, current Ramsay Hall residents had the option to reply to an online survey accessible to all students presently living there. Thirdly, some current Ramsay students were also contacted for randomly selected face-to-face interviews, conducted by Union Representatives. In total, the views of between 60 and 70 current and former students were heard over the course of the consultation process. For the sake of privacy, all students have been anonymised.

II. The UCLU Disabled Students' Officer:

As halls play a major role in the lives of students and thus need to take into account the needs of all students and since disabled people stand to lose out enormously as a result of failures in this regard, the DSO Thines Ganeshamoorthy was asked to comment extensively.

III. UCLU Halls Representatives:

Both the local Ramsay Hall Union Representative, George Barker, and the campus-wide Halls Accommodation Representative, David Dahlborn, have acted in a representational capacity to gather the views of students at Ramsay. The Halls Accommodation Representative has also acted as the lead union officer on the consultation process.

IV. UCLU Sabbatical Officers:

The consultation also took in views from the full-time representatives. Most prominently the Welfare and International Officer, Leah Frances, and the Women's Officer, Annie Tidbury, who offered their comments on the draft plans and conducted interviews on the Ramsay site.

V. Independent advisers:

As part of the consultation process to gauge a better understanding of technical planning and architectural matters, UCLU invited independent expert consultants to consider the draft plans from a perspective of student welfare. Four consultants were involved: Seyhmus Acis, Royal Institute of British Architects Part 1 Student Member (2012-) and full time 2nd year architecture student at London South Bank University; Louise Cupac, Furniture, Fixtures and Equipment Manager at Keir Group and a UCL Bartlett faculty alumnus; David Powe, full-time post-graduate student at the UCL Bartlett faculty; and Daniel Tang, architect with 10 years' experience with IBI Nightingale and currently a full-time student at London South Bank University.

3. Particular concerns from the side of UCLU

From the onset of the consultation process, the following have been areas given particular importance by UCLU:

I. Quality Disability access:

Having halls that are accessible to all students is an important tenet in UCLU's view

of a fair and equal university. Good quality disability access includes but also goes beyond having a quota of rooms which are adapted for wheelchair use. It is important that all parts of a building are suitable for residents and visitors regardless of their disabilities.

II. Quiet contemplation room on site:

Having a space for relaxation, mediation and contemplation at a flagship site as Ramsay would be beneficial for students' mental health and spiritual and social lives. A quiet contemplation room can offer a retreat from the stress of everyday life and busy days on campus or in halls. The proximity of Ramsay to Ian Baker House and Astor College also means that this facility could be utilised by a large number of students. It is important that the quiet contemplation room is sound-proofed and open for students who need it 24 hours a day, so that residents at Ramsay can access it when they need to.

III. Computer and study facilities:

Students frequently use accommodation cluster rooms. In particular at times when campus libraries are crowded or during periods of intense workloads when staying close to home is more convenient. Robust and reliable, networked multi-functional devices for scanning, printing and copying are also important for printing coursework or other materials.

IV. Noise reduction:

Rooms in halls need to provide students with peace and quiet. Revising or sleeping while having to put up with slamming doors or parties next door can have a detrimental effect on academic results. It is important that rooms in Ramsay are not only soundproofed but also not situated along major access corridors that see a lot of traffic.

V. The cost of living for students:

This is indirectly related to the refurbishment plans. Since these matters are linked and the cost of living in UCL Accommodation is a point that UCLU wants to stress very firmly from the side of the Union, UCLU want to point out that rooms at Ramsay must be affordable for students. Since there are plans to build new en-suit rooms at Ramsay and since en-suit single rooms in UCL Accommodation cost on average £38 more per week than non en-suit single rooms¹, the Union is obliged to point out that we would rather see more new rooms with shared facilities. Although the case can be made that students like being able to choose en-suit rooms, UCLU wants to make it clear that this choice is only available to those who can afford an en-suit room in the first place. Rooms with shared facilities are economically accessible to far more students and prospective students. For some students, en-suit rooms are a necessity, as a result of disabilities or religious or other needs and this means that there should be a certain number of designated en-suit rooms. UCLU, however, believes that building more en-suit rooms will mean that there will be more rooms at

¹ En-suite single room average rent charge at UCL 2014/15: £200pw,
Non en-suit average single room average rent charge at UCL 2014/15: £162pw

UCL that are simply unaffordable for the average student. At the same time, UCLU maintains that en-suit rooms – where built to meet student requirements – should not exceed the price of the average room and that all rooms, regardless of whether or not they are en-suit, need to maintain an equal standard so as not to constitute a separate tier of “luxury” or “non-luxury” rooms. Furthermore, building shared facilities is more cost efficient, better for the environment and helps create a community spirit among students in flats.

4. Students’ comments

There were several reoccurring themes among the comments received from students. Most comments related to students’ immediate environments and their experiences of Ramsay Hall. From this perspective many points naturally related to issues of maintenance or – more commonly – the apparent lack thereof.

On the question of what students would like to see improved in a future redevelopment of Ramsay the most common topics were:

I. **Soundproofing:**

Some students reported having severe problems as a result of lacking soundproofing in their rooms and in corridors and stressed heavily the need for better acoustic insulation. One person stated that ‘I lived on the 4th floor and could hear music thumping from the basement’, adding that they ‘became very distressed by the lack of sleep I was getting’.

II. **Disability access:**

Some comments were made on the level of disability access that is or should be available at Ramsay. One student stated that their disabled friend was never able to visit them at Ramsay because of access limitations.

III. **Plumbing:**

One of the most common topics of student comments related to plumbing. Students complained of the currently push-button-activated showers and wanted to see them replaced by showers with temperature control. A large majority of students who mentioned plumbing stated that they did not like the current showers and would like temperature controls. Commonly, students also made general notes along the lines of “better showers”, but some also reported experiencing a lack of hot water and toilets that did not flush properly.

IV. **Bathrooms:**

Some students also asked for a better ratio of toilets to rooms. One student described the current shower cubicles as ‘dingy’. A few people commented that they like the option of being able to take baths.

V. **Heating:**

Several students noted that their heaters were either too cold or situated somewhere in their room where they did not have the desired effect. One student pointed out that

the current areas with glass walls were often cold in winter.

VI. Bleak interior:

A few students hit upon very similar similes for describing the interior design of the residential areas. Capturing the mood of these comments, one student described their hallway like 'a hospital ward or prison'. In most cases it was also stated that could easily be improved by art or a more welcoming décor.

VII. Ventilation:

Some calls for better ventilation in kitchens and corridors were made. One student commented that corridors are 'stuffy' and 'smell gross most of the time'. Another stated that the smell would make them gag.

VIII. A gym:

Several students expressed a desire for a small gym to be placed on site. By the descriptions this would not require much more than a small room with some good quality weight-lifting equipment.

IX. Kitchens:

The topic with most comments was by far the kitchens. Students either opined that they were too small or that they were inadequately equipped to service enough students or cater for their needs. Several pointed out that kitchen equipment would either break easily or not function properly. Commenting on the combined lack of space and facilities, one student said that '12 people sharing a half size fridge is ridiculous.' Another student stated that 'one small kitchen for around 40 people (as for instance the one shared by Paris and New York 2) is not enough.' The focus of many comments lay upon the necessity of having "well-equipped" kitchens and of having kitchens that can serve entire corridors during weekends. Some, for instance, desired better furniture for socialising in kitchens and others better space for cooking and eating.

X. Laundry:

One student raised the important observation that the current laundry is too small to service all the residents. '700 residents sharing one laundry room with about 3 working laundry machines is completely unacceptable considering that we are paying more than 200 pounds per week to live here,' they argued.

XI. Shelves:

Several students expressed a need for more shelves in their rooms or shelves that are better placed. In particular that more shelves above their sinks and shelves above their beds should be moved elsewhere.

XII. Lighting:

A few students pointed out that they thought the current lighting in rooms was inadequate. 'The orange light seems dim to me', one commented.

XIII. The Cost of Living:

Many students remarked that the cost of rent at Ramsay should be lower. 'Rent

prices are utterly ridiculous', one student stated, 'the focus should be on reducing the price, rather than on improving facilities that are already perfectly adequate.' A sentiment that prices would increase after a redevelopment was also detectable, a typical comment being: 'en-suite rooms would cost a fortune'. Yet another student pressed the 'need more twin rooms so that students with lower budgets can experience Ramsay'. Others commented that Ramsay was expensive relative to what they got back from it.

XIV. Communal areas and study spaces:

The most common statements regarding the communal and recreational areas related to them being impractical or unwelcoming. One student expressed fondness of the communal areas, saying that they 'enjoyed the common room on the ground floor as it was a good place for everyone to get together.' For the shared study spaces, most students who mentioned them expressed approval and several described them as too busy. '[The] Ramsey [study room] was always full during term time and chaotic during exam time', said one student, and several thought that expanding the amount of silent study space was a good idea.

XV. Internet:

One student stated that options for securing internet connections in rooms would be good. They suggested that retaining the option of connecting via an Ethernet port in rooms would be helpful.

When asked specifically about the changes suggested in the draft plans, students offered a variety of views:

a) Flat redevelopment

Cluster flats were met by equal quantities of positive and negative comments. Some preferred the flexibility of open corridors while others welcomed cluster flats. 'Corridors are what make Ramsay what it is', one student commented. Another

b) Cinema room

A few students thought that they could not see students using a designated cinema room.

c) Lecture theatres

The reception of this proposal was also mixed. One student remarked that having a lecture theatre in halls 'might be a weird mix of home life and work life', whereas another thought it would be alright as long as the security concerns of Ramsay residents were met. Student space in halls should not be used for lecture theatres, a third person stated.

d) Linking blocks

A few students commented on this and were in general very positive.

5. Independent advisors' comments

I. Seyhmus Acis and Daniel Tang:

Looking at the draft plans to identify areas where sections of the building could be better adapted to suit students' needs, Acis and Tang strongly recommended that a five-story stairwell or lift be installed in place of the carpark on the Whitfield Street-facing section of New York Block (approximately between horizontal points C7 and C8). This would not only ensure that the access corridors on floors 1-5 would be shortened somewhat, but also – more importantly – provide a more natural access point to New York Block. Placing a lift in this location, they argued, would remove the dilemma of New York Block residents having to access their rooms via the residential corridor on the ground floor (running between horizontal points C7 and C2).

Additionally, they recommended that a robust mechanical ventilation system be installed into residual corridors and kitchens to improve the air quality.

Both these modifications, Acis pointed out, need to be carried out while a major redevelopment is undertaken. If a lift is not to be installed now the opportunity will not come again for a long time. Although income would be lost from the rooms that would inevitably have to be replaced by the lift shaft, Acis maintained that this would be beneficial in the long-term for the health of the site and the well-being of the student residents.

II. Louise Cupac:

With regard to the DDA accessible rooms on the ground floor, Cupac suggested suggest one room should be fully hoisted with a steel supported hoist trackway to the room. This room should then also be come with a carers apartment adjacent, with connecting door. These rooms, she argued, could be let as two rooms if this level of disability is not needed to be catered for. It would also be wise to refurbish the rooms fully in this way from day one as this would be cheaper than a retrofit hoisted room at a later date.

Cupac was strongly in favour of including a quiet contemplation room, stating that 'such rooms are becoming a common feature and should be easily able to be accommodated.' An adjacent store that can house key items that can be used by the diverse stakeholders who would want to use the room should also be provided, she recommended.

In general she considered draft plans to include a good compromise between communal areas and comfortably sized individual rooms. Specifically, she recommended placing a fold down plate drainer and above that, a shelf, above the sink in each room. This could allow residents to keep and store their own crockery or toiletries. She also suggested keeping a few baths per floor to allow for those who prefer not to take showers. In addition to this Cupac suggested fitting each I would suggest that there is a small laundry room per floor. She also pointed out that the

music room on the lower ground floor should be fitted with a double door to allow for a Baby Grand piano to be moved inside as well as a storage space for instruments and additional acoustic treatment. She also asked what DDA considerations have been made regarding access to the music room and the cinema room.

Finally, Cupac stressed that the flexible working area on the ground floor needs to be a key space that is carefully considered from a furniture point of view. There needs, she argued, to be a variety of work areas to suit the diverse way people work and study. There is a risk that if not approached in the right way, it will become a casual living space with no clear identity and so will be under used, not unlike the current Ramsay common room. To avoid this, she proposed a modern open plan office space with various break out areas, rather than have a wide variety of sofas within the space and only some fixed benching.

III. David Powe:

Looking at how to best utilise the space available for students, Powe recommended that more parts of the site be turned into student areas. The courtyard, he suggested, could be decorated with more trees and plants, or house a café.

Questioning the use of a cinema room on the lower ground floor, he recommended that this space instead be used for a quiet contemplation room. He also pointed out that the space in the atrium just to the right of the proposed main entrance could be put to better use as well as the large area marked pink on the lower floor adjacent to the dining hall.

6. The DSO's comments

Thines Ganeshamoorthy began by pointing out that plans and rooms for people with disabilities often only meet basic requirements, and then there are those individuals, including himself, who need more than the basics.

Firstly, he suggested suggest that if the ceiling or two of the walls are able to withstand a ceiling track hoist, then one should be mounted in at least one of the rooms. It is important to have strong walls as the ceiling track hoist weighs about 30 - 40kgs and needs to be able to support the individual of weights up to 270kg². He recommended that least one of the new DDA compliant rooms be equipped with a ceiling track hoist. A ceiling track hoist, he said, "eliminates the risk of back injury for caregivers and requires minimum effort to operate. It offers much closer contact between the user and the caregiver and can be more dignified in use than other solutions. A person is more easily positioned using the ceiling track hoist, as they can be raised lowered turned and traversed with no physical effort from the caregiver." Additionally, he suggested that the remaining DDA compliant rooms have enough space within the room to accommodate a mobile hoist for transfers for individuals, as well as providing enough space for an individual with an electric or manual chair. Furthermore, there

² Ganeshamoorthy recommended the following website for reference:

<http://movement2.co.uk/products/ceiling-track-hoists/freeway-ceiling-track-hoist/>.

rooms have to have space a hospital standard sized bed and enough space for a caregiver to move around comfortably and most importantly safely. Having ample turning circle, while the caregiver is present in the room, he stated, was the important factor here.

For DDA compliant bathrooms, Ganeshamoorthy thought that making en-suite toilets a wet room would be vital. Consideration should be given to the way in which the door opens into the bedroom and how access is gained to the en-suite, he stated. He also stressed the need for appropriately sized wash basins and proposed that the use of clos-o-mat toilets would be a welcome gesture³. Clos-o-mats, he commented, would 'provide a certain level of independence to an individual, especially, if it is their first time away from home and aren't used to independent living'.

In DDA compliant kitchens, he said, it is important to ensure that the hobs, ovens, cupboards, sinks and drawers are at heights which are reachable for someone using a wheelchair.

Carers flats were also suggested and Ganeshamoorthy suggested alternating rooms of disabled room followed by a standard room next door with adjoining doors for renting to carers where required. Mixing DDA compliant rooms and standard rooms in this way would also increase levels of socialisation and diversity in the corridors.

For lifts, Ganeshamoorthy also recommended considering placing a ramping system between the ground and lower ground floor of the halls in the event of the lifts failing of being inaccessible. He also stressed that lifts would need to be able to carry at least 500kgs and provide ample turnings space for wheelchairs. Finally, he suggested considering the installation of a fire safe lift.

On the increased costs of installing specialised equipment, Ganeshamoorthy stated that 'if we are looking to provide a greater variety of options for those with physical disabilities, I think in the long run these costs will be well worth it.'

Communal areas also need to be accessible and Ganeshamoorthy pointed out the lack of disabled toilets on the proposed lower ground floor. Drawing from his own experience, he commented that 'I found it disgraceful that I had no proper access to a disabled toilet as a guest to the hall.' Communal disabled toilets would not have to follow the exact dimensions of en-suite ones, but their inclusion was strongly recommended. For all planned communal areas he also stressed the need for appropriate turning circle to negotiate rooms safely and access all their facilities. To ease access, he also recommended the use of automatic doors in communal areas.

Finally, Ganeshamoorthy noted that the best way to ensure that the needs of disabled students and guests are being met during the refurbishment and reconstruction of Ramsay Hall is to ensure that UCL and the architects and builders keep a constant dialogue with current disabled students at UCL. He himself and other students who would be happy to feed in to the work that is being done on the premises and he stated that he would be happy to stay in touch with the planners to offer running feedback.

³ Ganeshamoorthy recommended the following website for reference: <http://www.clos-o-mat.com/>.

7. The WO's comments

In her notes, Annie Tidbury stressed the need for rooms to be of an equally high and affordable standard. Vast differences in this regards, she pointed out, 'could create division between students in the "basic" rooms and those in the "nice" rooms'

Tidbury questioned if long corridors with many doors (such as in New York Block) would be easily traversable for wheelchair-users. Furthermore, it is important, she stressed, that the halls should be accessible not only to wheelchair users who live there, but also to visitors. Thus all floors should be accessible for wheelchair-users. She also expressed full support for a fully hoisted DDA compliant room with an adjacent carer's apartment.

She also questioned the need for two lecture theatres/cinema rooms and suggested keeping a few baths.

Although Tidbury noted Ramsay's reputation of being a "party hall" but was nevertheless curious to know what intentions had been held with regards to housing student who are parents and wish to live with their children at the site.

The quiet contemplation room, Tidbury stated, should be as safe a space as possible. This includes making it an alcohol-free space, something that will be especially important as it will be open throughout the night.

On a diverse offering of rooms, Tidbury solicited caution. Noting that en-suit rooms are important as they are a must for some students, she also states that 'I would be wary of the "diversity of rooms ... for students with different budgets". There shouldn't be any 'luxury rooms' or anything like that - all the rooms should be clean, comfortable and of a high quality.'

8. UCLU's position

I. General position:

UCLU strongly maintains the importance of its particular concerns as stated in section 3, and takes on-board and endorses and backs fully the concerns and interests of students elaborated in section 4, the DSO's comments, and the WO's. Furthermore, UCLU recommends strongly the suggestions made by its independent advisors in section 5. Believing that all these comments and suggestions to be feasible and realistic if sufficiently resourced, and necessary if the needs of future generations of students are to be adequately met, UCLU wishes that they be adopted to the largest possible extent in the forthcoming planning stages.

UCLU also wishes to stress additionally the following particular areas:

II. Bathrooms:

UCLU welcomes an increased toilet to resident ratio and an enlargement of toilet and

shower areas. UCLU stresses the importance of retaining baths on each floor. UCLU stresses the importance of installing manual temperature controls in showers.

III. Cinema room:

UCLU thinks that the proposed inclusion of a lecture theatre on the site makes the cinema room on the lower ground floor superfluous. This space would instead be used for a much-needed quiet contemplation room.

IV. Disability access:

UCLU wishes to express again that it maintains and fully backs all the recommendations made by the DCO, the WO and Louise Cupac in this area.

V. Gym:

UCLU maintains that, although not being a need, the inclusion of a gym at the site would be beneficial and welcome.

VI. Heating:

UCLU maintains that it is important that all rooms be adequately heated, in particular with regard to the proposed glazed atrium on the ground floor.

VII. Kitchens:

UCLU welcomes the proposed increased size of kitchens and strongly maintains that these plans need to be taken even further. UCLU notes that there are particular problems with the typical kitchens in the Grafton Way wing of New York Block, and the Fitzroy Street side of the fifth floor as these kitchens do not have room for seating. UCLU also notes that room to kitchen ratio in the Whitfield Street side of New York Block is currently too low, at over 20 rooms per kitchen. UCLU further maintains that the option of washing machines in kitchens be considered seriously.

VIII. Linking blocks:

UCLU welcomes the proposal to link access between the three blocks on the ground floor via the proposed glazed social space.

IX. Maintenance and durable facilities, plumbing etc.:

From students' comments it became clear that many day-to-day, so-called "maintenance issues" related to inadequate or decaying facilities. UCLU would therefore wish to maintain that maintenance is a redevelopment issue since it highlights the immense need for durable and high-quality facilities and equipment. Ranging from plumbing, heating and kitchen appliances to ventilation and lighting in rooms, the need for installing materials and machines that can withstand wear and tear, accidents and rough use is crucial. Many of the most common maintenance issues would be alleviated if high-quality, robust materials and appliances were used in halls. This is an area where cutting corners leads to students experiencing broken fringes, flooded or blocked toilets, broken toilet seats, cold hand driers or wobbly taps.

X. Quiet contemplation room:

UCLU maintains, with reference to the comments by Louise Cupac, David Powe and

the WO, the importance and feasibility of including a quiet contemplation room.

XI. Soundproofing:

UCLU maintains that it is very important that rooms and corridors are fitted with adequate acoustic treatment.

XII. Study spaces:

UCLU notes that there are currently only 8 desks designated for communal computer terminals and maintains the importance that the number of such desks be expanded to meet the needs of students. UCLU also endorses Louise Cupac's comments that the proposed communal areas on the ground floor needs to take on a specific character. UCLU thus suggests that the area be divided between one larger part which should feature more communal computer terminals and one smaller part which should feature more comfortable seating. UCLU furthermore suggests that the proposed library space marked as pink on the ground floor be reserved for quiet study by Ramsay residents.

XIII. Structural redevelopments:

UCLU wishes to second the notion that major structural redevelopments should be executed during this project. This is to say the opportunity to install a new lift by the New York Block corridor, as suggested by Acis and Tang should be considered seriously. UCLU nevertheless recognises the cost that such developments may incur and understands that the final say here on the balance here between more rooms and better quality of access lies with the planners and UCL.

XIV. Ventilation:

With regard to the comments on structural redevelopments, UCLU further maintains the importance of installing a robust system of mechanical ventilation in residential and communal areas.