

Profile for Heritage Counts 2015

Nairita Chakraborty – Local Council Officer

What is your role title?

“Principal Conservation Officer, Haringey Council, London”

How long have you worked in your role? Or in heritage/planning?

“I have worked in this role for over two years and have been working in conservation for the last nine years. I have worked in three different local authorities during this period.”

What does your role involve? (specifically relating to providing advice to listed building owners or amenity societies)

“I provide advice to applicants, Councillors and residents on listed buildings, development within conservation areas and regeneration projects. I have been involved in large scale development within conservation areas such as Tottenham Hotspurs stadium as well as HLF projects: Alexandra Palace (Grade II), Hornsey Town Hall (Grade II*) and townscape improvement schemes. I have also given advice on alterations to listed buildings, such as Highpoint I and II (Grade I), Percy House (Grade II*).”

What is most pleasing about your role (relating to providing advice, and who you provide it to)?

“One of the most pleasing aspects of my job is to be able to work with architects in finding creative solutions towards adapting listed buildings in a manner sensitive to their fabric. For example, in a recent case in Highpoint II, the Penthouse, originally designed for himself by Berthold Lubetkin, the Architect came up for a solution to replace the failed heating system installed within the ceiling. We discussed various options and agreed, along with Historic England, on a rather different, but highly creative long term solution for the problem. The solution could be implemented in other flats, if (and when) they incurred the same problem. Similarly, working with architects and other colleagues from Alexandra Palace Trust on the HLF application and the required planning permission and listed building consent for Alexandra Palace was a huge privilege.”

Please explain any interesting examples where there were challenges/barriers that were overcome relating to managing heritage in the local context (individual listed buildings – grade II preferably)?

“I can think of many, but within local context, I recently dealt with the listed building consent for a Council owned building for an HLF scheme. Whilst the architects were very sensitive and designed proposals that would bring the redundant parts of the building back into adaptable future use, there was some local opposition with regards to a part of the proposal. This particular local group challenged the Council and Historic England and tried to campaign against the proposals. Needless to say, that a much larger section of the community were very supportive of the proposals. Having received the group’s objections, we looked at every alternative proposed by the group in detail along with the architects and Historic England. On the day of the Planning Committee, members agreed with our recommendations and that the alternatives were not feasible. The committee

unanimously voted in favour of the proposals and I felt that it was a huge relief for us— at stake was a £28M (£16M from HLF) project to restore one of the most iconic buildings in London.”

In light of cuts on heritage services, how important or crucial is in-house conservation advice?

“I think in-house conservation advice is essential in local authorities. I also think that working positively with the architects and coming up with solutions is equally important. As a puritan, conservation philosophy may dictate that certain proposals are not acceptable. But we need to come up with alternatives when we say ‘no’ so that our advice is taken as ‘positive feedback’ instead of ‘negative criticism’. We need to become ‘catalysts’ in development management. For this, conservation officers need to be highly knowledgeable in architectural history, conservation philosophy as well as design, construction and technical matters. This puts great pressure on us as professionals, keeping up to date with changing laws, philosophies and technology in addition to our daily roles. I am always scared that I will miss (or worse, forget) something and give wrong advice!”

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