

ARTICLE FOR FEATURE CATEGORY

Controversial redevelopment plan sparks protest

Following the fire that broke out in the early morning on Monday the 22nd of July, which destroyed more than half of the roof of the two-storey building and part of the first-floor, Waltham Forest council announced their redevelopment plans. These include remodelling estates, modernising the mall, building a second entrance to Walthamstow central station and improvements to the area's cultural facilities. Work was set to commence in early 2020 however this was quickly brought to a halt. Although it has been several months later, repair works continue to be ongoing with the first floor still being closed off.

The fire was a shock to us all but it strengthened our community, with the Mall Walthamstow Team being inundated with messages of support and donations to charities such as the Fashion % Textile Children Trust to aid families whose employment had been adversely affected by the fire. Further appeals such as retailTRUST have been launched to raise vital funds to support staff from both national and independent retailers affected by the fire. These donations were greatly appreciated as it provided vital emotional support and financial assistance to ease the hardship of the incident. This well reflected our strong sense of community that we pride ourselves in.

However, the rebirth of the mall has undergone stiff criticism with concerns of loss of open space in the town centre, lack of affordable housing and gentrification. Although the scheme is essentially focused on the redevelopment and extension of the mall, it also affects public spaces such as children playground and would even mean chopping down a row of trees thus significantly altering the appearance of the area.

Tensions first arose due to the objections against the height of the proposed blocks and loss of almost a third of the public realm to private property developers. However, it was the threat of the avenue of lime trees being felled (to make way for housing and shopping centre development) that sparked protests. Although 94 new trees were set to be planted in their place, people still strongly opposed the plan, claiming that "New trees do not replace old trees". Campaigners from Save Our Square E17 hosted the event in Walthamstow Town square in hopes of attracting public support. People of all ages gathered to tie messages such as "This tree has been condemned to Death by Waltham Forest council" and "Save our lungs" as well as tying hearts to the trees.

Furthermore, in response to the plans, 17 local artists banded together to celebrate the beauty of the trees and highlight their benefits. An exhibition, "Reading between the Limes" was displayed at Walthamstow village Windows Gallery from 29th November to Sunday 2nd December (which was also previously exhibited at the Winns Gallery for three days in October) to showcase their work in hopes of persuading developers to reconsider.

After four years of fighting, Waltham Forest council has finally issued a long-awaited public statement to say that "the avenue of Lime Trees will remain as part of the new development". From mass petitions and letters to publicity stunts and protests, the people of Walthamstow have opposed the condemning of the trees for so long and it warms my heart to see such a successful outcome.

Ahlam, 14 said: "I'm so proud of our community and the fact we were able to stop this terrible scheme has provided me with a sense of empowerment.

Eloise, 14 said: "I think it's great that our community's efforts have saved the trees, but it's sad that we weren't able to stop the development that will take away much of our green space. This victory

represents our community is unwilling to be taken over by gentrification. I don't believe Walthamstow is suited for big shopping centres and skyscrapers as we have always been a small and close-knit community. It's depressing to see how these big corporations have more say in what happen to our home than the people who live it in."

This victory truly demonstrates the strength in our community and the immense impact our actions have. The lime avenue is an asset to our community, providing people with friendly areas to socialise amongst a busy urban environment. With their historical, environmental and aesthetic value, I'm sure many people are thrilled to hear about the revisions to the development plans.

