

London Residents Alarmed by China's 'Super-Embassy' Plans

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Plans by China to establish a large new embassy complex in central London have sparked concerns among residents, with some expressing fears over personal security and the implications of such a high-profile diplomatic presence.

The proposed development is located at Royal Mint Court, a historic site close to Tower Bridge and the Tower of London. The building, currently vacant, was formerly used for

manufacturing Britain's coinage before being purchased by the Chinese government in 2018 for approximately £250 million. The redevelopment plans envisage transforming the site into what would be Europe's largest Chinese embassy.

The project has attracted considerable attention due to its scale and location. Several residents and community groups have voiced apprehension about the potential impact on the neighbourhood, including worries about espionage, surveillance and the presence of embassy staff living nearby.

Barry, an insurance broker working in the vicinity, described the handover of the Royal Mint site to China as a significant symbolic loss for the UK. "The building is such a UK monument... it was the Royal Mint. So to give that to a foreign government, especially the Chinese, with everything that's happening at the moment, is a bit of a joke," he said.

The embassy plans have been under government review, with the final decision expected by early September. Angela Rayner, the UK's Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, recently requested that China provide explanations for redacted sections of the embassy's planning documents. The Chinese authorities were given until 20 August to respond.

China's initial embassy application was rejected by the Tower Hamlets local council in 2022 on security grounds. The proposal was resubmitted last year, shortly after the Labour Party returned to government under Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

The Royal Mint Court site had previously been designated for redevelopment into a complex of shops, offices and leisure facilities before being acquired by China.

Approximately 100 residential properties in the area are now situated on land owned by the Chinese government, though these homes will not be part of the embassy grounds.

Concern has also been raised about the proximity of embassy staff accommodation to existing residential blocks on Cartwright Street. Plans include balconies for diplomatic personnel, which would face directly towards neighbouring apartments. This has prompted anxiety among some residents regarding privacy and security.

Mark Nygate, treasurer of the Royal Mint Court Residents' Association, which represents around 300 residents, highlighted fears about China's potential powers as a landlord. Because they own our land, they are our landlords and therefore they have certain rights to

get into the properties. If they find something they're not happy with, you can be sure they're going to come and check us out," he said.

Nygate added that everyday activities such as photography could be misinterpreted as spying due to the close borders between the embassy site and the residential estate.

The Metropolitan Police have expressed concern that large-scale protests against the embassy could disrupt traffic and tourism in the area. Rights groups and campaigners have also voiced concern that the embassy could serve as a base for Chinese authorities to monitor and intimidate dissidents living in the UK.

In recent years, China has faced accusations of using overseas diplomatic premises to exert control over Chinese nationals abroad. An incident in Manchester in October 2022, in which a Hong Kong pro-democracy protester was reportedly assaulted on consulate grounds, resulted in diplomatic tensions and the expulsion of several Chinese diplomats.

Despite these concerns, some local stakeholders argue the embassy will bring economic benefits. Mark Lahiff, managing director of the UK subsidiary of Malaysian-based property developer IJM, praised the investment. "This borough, Tower Hamlets, is one of the most impoverished boroughs in the UK," Lahiff told a government hearing. "For the People's Republic of China to invest in this borough is a huge investment. That site in particular has been empty since 2008."

Lahiff added that redeveloping the site would revitalise a strategically located but long-neglected area adjacent to a major London landmark.

However, residents like Nygate remain sceptical, believing the project prioritises prestige over the welfare of the existing community. "It's all about prestige in the end because they want to outdo the American embassy," he said.

The outcome of the embassy application will be closely watched, as it raises wider questions about diplomatic presence, urban development, and security in central London.