

# THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

## NEWSLETTER

(No. 34) October 2023

### THE WHEREBYS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING



—City of Westminster planning approval work in progress: David Chipperfield Architects' modification of Eero Saarinen's former US Embassy, Grosvenor Square, into a luxury hotel

Community engagement ought to be an essential ingredient in determining healthy and durable planning policy, and in reaching widely accepted planning decisions. To achieve these fine goals, Westminster City Council is legally obliged to review and republish a “community investment strategy” statement every five years (see it at **SCI 2023** on the WCC website). Of course the Westminster Society has been quick to offer the council some righteous wherebys.

As we have an unusual core of active architects and a local councillor on our amenity society executive team, we feel well placed to comment on larger and more complicated schemes and also developments seen as controversial, so we've put our hands up for more of that. We are contacted from time to time by local residents asking our advice, and we liaise with other amenity groups. We would like this sharing of wherewithal to increase in the future.

And since Westminster are asking, we've told them we would welcome the opportunity of becoming more involved in consultations on Policy and the Local Plan, particularly around issues where our strength of knowledge is of full professional calibre, such as in matters of land use, density, building heights, public amenities, social housing, and regenerative masterplanning.

On the basis of our professional experience, we've recently advised Westminster to improve community engagement by involving it through multiple stages of design, and to make follow-up presentations normal, including some to be insisted on by case officers whenever there are concerns. We've said that applicants/developers should be advised to present to consultees before seeking final approval. We'd like to have greater clarity and frankness demanded about what applicants seek, and we think that any likely late planning switches should be conveyed to the community. Finally, we've asked the Council to expressly ensure that community consultations on appearance and quality of design are positively sought and invited.

### 1 VICTORIA STREET: CHANGING FOR THE BETTER?





— Even with its glazed front porch addition of 1995, the dullness of 1 Victoria Street at pavement level is a paradigm of urban insensitivity

First, our current *mise en scène*. In Westminster, the precept “location, location, location” rings out with the controlling authority of Big Ben. As in some other parts of London and likewise in other successful and desirable cities, central urban land value and redevelopment economics have won out as the supreme operating factors. We’ve almost forgotten the perspicacity of Jane Jacobs in her 1969 book *The Economy of Cities*, which held that maintaining urban prosperity depends on a rich diversity of kinds of work and established occupancies, as we’ve also become foolishly indifferent to the material wastefulness and social disruption of rebuilding as the main economic value accelerator, with urban property transfers as value on steroids. Our un-Jane-Jacobean disregard for the displacement of established life and work has largely produced new townscapes of towers and slabs with absentee owners, dwellings mainly created as realised investments, and livelihoods gone.

At 1 Victoria Street, the tenant, the government’s Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, has unexpectedly exercised its lease break clause for January 2024, leaving the building’s owner, Mitsubishi Estates, to urgently explore a quick retrofit and extension to get back into income. Our team have begun to attend meetings with planning consultants and the engaged new architects, Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, to discuss redevelopment ideas for the building that might eliminate its 1960s shortcomings: now un-needed extensive car parking, cores that don’t meet current fire and evacuation regulations, and the building’s major design defects to overcome if possible: no sense of its landmark location approaching Westminster Abbey; its hedgehog back of southside bits that ignores the Peabody housing estate; and its main long wall of pedestrian-disdaining offices at ground level that marks its hardhearted greeting to Victoria Street. Our best wishes for ameliorating plans to emerge from AHMM and Mitsubishi.

## LET'S ALL GO DOWN THE STRAND

— Current proposals afoot for 11, the Strand (left in lefthand plan view, with ventilation plenum in Craven Street behind), and for 5, the Strand (right)



Once caroled in song (see heading), there’s been plenty of current redevelopment activity near the Trafalgar Square end of the Strand, though the faint whooshing sound sometimes discernible isn’t a corellative— it’s probably coming from the large ventilation plenum

in Craven Street for the underground below, built during tube improvements in the early 1970s. The concern today about number 11 is from local residents opposed to Wetherspoons opening a pub and restaurant at ground level with tables and chairs on the Charing Cross Station forecourt. We felt that the intervening massive ventilator structure that exists, and perhaps some limits on late openings, should sufficiently control noise and nuisance.

The site of 5 the Strand, now vacant, has had a rapid succession of applications for different uses. The current proposal (see 23/05178/FULL) is for a newish building type: an economy hotel with multitudinous tiny rooms, many without windows, sometimes called a “boutique” or “hub” hotel-- see also Globe House below. We took no position on the building type in context, but commented that the design’s arched bays looked cosmetic and were insincere, and the proposed building height would form an unwelcome new skyline to be seen above the Grand Buildings from Trafalgar Square.

### PASSPORT (AS WAS) TO PIMLICO



Globe House in Belgrave Road.

Globe House, the former Passport Office in Belgrave Road, Pimlico, is a routine modernist building ten storeys high, with a minor original flourish of an attached pavilion, its four floors clad similarly, that takes advantage of the widening site allowed by the flanking street curve in Bridge Place. The wide pavement on the Belgrave Road side has two handsomely mature trees, a public bike rack, and, noteworthy for Westminster, a small bench seating area—all well-considered pavement elements where passport applicants and others might be grateful for a comfortable place to wait.

After Passports moved elsewhere in April 2023 the site was bought by Criterion Hospitality, developers of a 700-room “boutique” or “hub” hotel in the Trocadero. They are applying to create a 357-room hotel with minimum disruption to the existing building apart from the installation of secondary glazing, and no restaurant, bar, or other additional facilities for guests. Section E10 of the London Plan on visitor infrastructure states that the intensification of serviced accommodation should be resisted where it compromises local amenity or the balance of local land uses. We felt such principles applied this time, and wrote about our concerns to the planners.

### ST. JIM



1, St James's Square now

This musical reference is to Liza Doolittle’s song in My Fair Lady, telling Henry Higgins (cf. “Just You Wait”) that “I’ll go to St James so often I shall call it St Jim.” The present no 1 St James’s Square seems to characterise Liza’s view of pretentious pomp without irony, standing as a mind-boggle of neoclassical dullness (built as late as 1997), which, having become vacant, Foster and Partners are trying to refresh and somewhat enliven, keeping the structural frame as intact as possible for green reasons. (See 23/02007/FULL.)

The building’s reborn value will probably command a fortune as a corporate headquarters. Our team has been repeatedly on call for

helpful comments as the much worked-on design sometimes progresses, sometimes looks worse. If only Alan Jay Lerner was still around to characterise any fairish outcome.

## OTHER HOUSES



Rochester Row's orange brickwork and metal panels

Redevelopment plans in early phases can sometimes seem promising, or sometimes as desolating as a chain-sawed aged sycamore at Hadrian's Wall. The existing through-street office property referred to as **17-19 Rochester Row** has outstanding modern exterior walls of bright orange brickwork detailed with a simplicity that looks sophisticated, and metal panels between brickwork piers that are almost the same orange colour as the bricks. The impression it conveys of rich order with healthy vigour can be seen on the property's main frontages of Rochester Row, round the corner, and also in Greycoat Street on the other side of the block. Colour in architecture is seldom used so effectively. Personally, I hope the splendid orange façades will be retained after renewal.

Elsewhere, the former **Belgravia Police Station** on Buckingham Palace Road and Ebury Square has been acquired by The Other House, an Anglo-Dutch property group specialising in what they call "lifestyle hospitality"—that is, clublike hotel accommodation for wealthy travellers. The first Other House has opened in South Kensington, with several more now destined for London. Our team was given a presentation by EPR, architects also of the important recent hotel conversions of The Ned and OWO, the Old War Office. Their pitch to us was shared with the Belgravia Neighbourhood Forum, which, we noticed, has its own design code.



Two present views of Belgravia Police Station

Like the defunct cop shop, the forthcoming Other House will remain L-shaped in plan, but the embraced space will be a garden instead of a detention exercise yard. The previous basement, first and second floors will be retained, and the third and fourth floors replaced. EPR think that two new floors in addition will be acceptable. They have investigated neighbourhood building styles, decorations and materials as a basis for their initial offer of some stone-clad diluted neoclassicism, probably pitched to the Belgravia Neighbourhood Forum. We view this as a work in progress (e.g., no planning app yet), and while we commented critically on some particulars, we're sure the outcome will improve on the former police station.

## GREYCOAT PLACE MAY SURVIVE ITS ORDEALS

Seismic waves of redevelopment have continued to upheave Greycoat Place and its nearby streets. Having recently absorbed the shocks of the redevelopment of its former fire station and the historic warehouse opposite, big building work is now in progress around the corner where a flagship department store once stood.

10 Greycoat Place is scaffolded and swathed while improvements are now under way, including a platform lift for wheelchair users, and--after a struggle with objecting neighbours-- an external roof terrace that will be allowed for use by a limit of 60 people at a time.

## A WELCOME GAIN FOR TOWNSCAPE

As it appears now, 38 Gillingham Street is a pretty unattractive customer. An office building erected in 1975, it terminates the axis of Guildhouse Street, so according to the principles of traditional townscape it ought to be something especially worth looking at. That it isn't. Its facings are dark glass, which with the typical grouped window arrangements of its bygone era, somehow suggests that working within, gloomy descendants of Edward Hopper clerks and stenographers must be eking out their days.



38 Gillingham Street now...



And as proposed

Its proposed replacement would remain in planning Class E (shops, offices, cafes, restaurants, GP practices), and retain most of the previous structure, but it seeks nearly half again the building's previous volume via changes to infill and growth in height that have been surprisingly supported in public consultation. Its designed outcome approximately matches the cornice height of the apartment blocks adjacent, and it attractively if ambiguously signals residential style by the familiar means of brickwork and sash-like windows, though the true office giveaway is indicated by all windows, spandrels and walls between being repetitive in size and shape. (See 23/01690/FULL.) The design's most thoughtful and original proposal, which we have commended, is to turn the previous entry tunnel for car parking into a wide passage to an entrance garden, and have a cafe in the place where cars were previously garaged.

## PICCADILLY HALL DE NOS JOURS

A *piccadill* was an early 17<sup>th</sup> century stiff lace collar. Assessing the depiction of one in a historical portrait is a good way to judge the painter's mimetic proficiency. Fashioning wearable piccadills was once the speciality of Robert Baker, a Westminster tailor in Tudor times who, prospering on their supply, built a mansion for himself and family called Piccadilly Hall. Some historians think it stood at the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue and Great Windmill Street. At any rate, the lost building is the origin of the famous place name.

The urban turf encompassing the old site of Piccadilly Hall and Piccadilly Circus now ranges west, including BAFTA, Wren's St James's, Fortnums, The Ritz, The Royal Academy, the Wolseley,



Sackville House

and the once-and-future Le Caprice as notable landmarks. They all have a special sauce perceptible even to tourists, along with the realisation that those names obviously occupy land of stupefying value. Should we call that smack of virtue the Piccadilly Overtone?

We know it's appropriate that the august Sackville House, designed in 1931 by George John Skipper, was occupied until recently by a Lloyds Bank branch and the Malta High Commission: pretty solid users of a neoclassical building that might well have been dubbed the new Piccadilly Hall. Standing as a pedimented block on the corner of Picadilly and Sackville Street with an attached, slightly recessed wing in Sackville Street, it is cogently a distinguished pile. We have been told that plans for its upgrading are minor. We await news about the proposals and the likely new occupants.

## 1 BESSBOROUGH GARDENS

Asked for our response to the occupant's proposal for this existing office building to have a quite tactful addition of one setback floor in place of a pitched roof (see 23/O4155/ FULL), we commented:

"We welcome the proposed re-use and investment in the building. The modest changes to the roof do not concern us as the building is not listed or in a conservation area. Making use of flat roofs for amenity space is in line with current planning policy provided there are safeguards on tenant noise, overlooking, and Daylight and Sunlight issues. Please keep us apprised on how the project develops following the public consultation."



Proposed addition to 1 Bessborough Gardens

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