

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY

CELEBRATE, ENHANCE AND PRESERVE THE HEART OF LONDON



NEWSLETTER

August 2008

The Society's reception, AGM and lecture

It was good to see so many at our AGM at the beginning of May. Those of you who attended will know that after an enjoyable reception in the Lord Mayor's parlour at the top of City Hall, Ken Shuttleworth of Make Architects gave us a fascinating presentation about the many projects his practice is involved within Westminster.

No sooner is one AGM out of the way than we start to plan for the next. In 2009 we shall celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of our foundation by Gay Christiansen and John Betjeman. 2009 is also a year in which we identify recipients for our biennial awards. We are delighted that our patron, HRH the Duke of Gloucester, has very kindly agreed to present the awards at next year's AGM on 13 May 2009. Further details will be in the next Newsletter.

The date of our actual foundation falls in September. To celebrate this auspicious occasion, and with the kind permission of the Dean of Westminster the Very Reverend Dr John Hall, we plan to host a reception in the east cloister of Westminster Abbey sometime in September 2009. Again, further details will be in the next Newsletter.

The Society's new website was launched at the AGM. If you haven't already done so, log on to www.westminstersociety.org.uk.

Chelsea Barracks

The hottest topic in Westminster as far as planning applications are concerned is what will be the outcome of the Candy brothers' applications to redevelop Chelsea Barracks. It is apparent that the redevelopment proposals have provoked a chorus of almost unalloyed disapproval. Members of local residents' associations calling themselves the "Barracks Opposition Group" have even asked Candy & Candy to adopt an earlier scheme put forward by P&O before the two brothers acquired the prestigious site. This was our own final response to the proposals:

The Westminster Society has had the benefit of two presentations by the applicant and their agents, both at pre-application stage and as part of the wider

public consultation recently conducted by them. The proposals have been considered by the Society's Executive Committee and our conclusion is that a formal objection to the scheme should be submitted.

The Society finds the proposals to be a great disappointment for a number of reasons. Whilst the design of the blocks facing Chelsea Bridge Road (CBR) is less uninteresting now than was originally proposed, the regulated conformity of the design of the blocks will ensure that, even when fronted by the existing and proposed additional London plane trees, the overall impression is likely to be redolent of a development pattern of a bygone era. We would like to have seen a more imaginative approach, including a measure of variety in design including variations to the height of individual buildings.

Viewed from CBR, nine basically identical buildings is not suitable for a site such as this.

Turning to the buildings on Ebury Bridge Road (EBR), the Society does not welcome the design adopted, namely a more solid façade treatment with smaller fenestration. We do, however, appreciate the approach of nine buildings at varying heights up to 13 storeys along the EBR frontage, thus reflecting the varying heights of buildings on the adjacent Grosvenor Waterside development.

The Society is concerned about the imbalance between the sizes of the “market” and “affordable/keyworker” housing. We support the principle of the 50% split and feel that many of the affordable/keyworker units will be unreasonably small in overall dimensions, leading, in our view, to standards of accommodation below what is required in Westminster.

The Society also notes the relative lack of community facilities within the development.

The proposed sports facilities are welcome, but we would appreciate some further clarity about the wider public access to such facilities that is essential given their paucity. In addition, the proposed retail

provision is limited in the extreme given the proposed creation of 638 residential units. With only small retail outlets, it is likely that many residents will use cars to access distant major retail outlets where greater choice of merchandise will be available at extended shopping hours.

By and large, the Society regards the access arrangements for both vehicles and pedestrians as acceptable but suggests that the gating arrangements are an unwelcome feature and could give rise to a sense of isolation from the wider community.

In summary, the Society regards the proposal presented as a great disappointment given the strategic location of the site on a major “gateway” thoroughfare. We recommend the application be rejected in its present form.

The Westminster Planning Committee will be considering the proposals at its September meeting. What will that committee recommend, faced as it is with such hostility to the scheme? Will it require Candy & Candy to go back to the drawing board and come up with a more acceptable design for the site, or have things progressed too far for such a major rethink?

The Mayor of London's vision for the capital

Boris Johnson gave us a flavour of his views about architecture when he hosted a party at City Hall to signal the start of the 2008 London Festival of Architecture in mid-June. But for details of his views on a wide variety of other key topics, we had to wait for the publication of *Planning for a Better London* in early July.

What we read there was neither surprising nor alarming. Unsurprisingly, he seems ready to protect London's historic skyline and architectural heritage including the Palace of Westminster. He says he is not averse to tall buildings, but he believes they must be in the right places, and only built with the agreement of local authorities. “Right places” would include areas that already have clusters of tall buildings, like Croydon and the Isle of Dogs. The London Plan will be changed to give more prominence to crime prevention—not least by “designing out” crime.

The Plan intends to protect gardens, playing fields, parks and woods, and the Mayor promises to meet the challenge of climate change, but doesn't go into details.

According to estimates provided by the GLA, London's population was 7.5 million in 2006 and will rise to 8 million by 2016. The number of households is expected to grow by 700,000 by 2016.* Most of the growth will be in one-person households, and the challenge will be to provide affordable accommodation.

The Mayor has done away with Ken Livingstone's 50 per cent affordable housing target (which, the Mayor's senior planning adviser Sir Simon Milton claims, achieved no more than 34 per cent in practice), in favour of a commitment to provide 50,000 affordable homes in three years.

* For more interesting facts and figures about London, go to www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/index.jsp, or Google “Focus on London.”

Parliament Square

Despite the above, to the astonishment and dismay of many, Boris Johnson decided on 6 August that a comprehensive urban redesign for Parliament Square that has been in detailed study and development for nearly 12 years would not proceed.

At the moment (as seen on 12 August), the GLA's website continues to describe the scheme with admiration. Since 6 August the Mayor's office had evidently only had time to cast the previous text in the past tense. Ironically, it praised up the abandoned scheme as follows:

The Parliament Square Improvement project aimed to create a high-quality urban space that is fit for the 21st century and is at the same time sensitive to the surrounding architecture and the square's international significance.

The scheme was to consist of an enhanced and expanded public space, created by closing the south side of the square—the road that connects St Margaret's Church and Westminster Abbey—with accompanying improvements to traffic management and pedestrian facilities round the rest of the square.

The project reached the early stages of design, with Hawkins Brown leading a team of urban designers, including lighting, conservation and landscape experts, and Colin Buchanan conducting traffic modelling, highway design and environmental assessment.

The members of the World Squares for All Steering Group are key stakeholders for the

project and include representatives of Westminster Abbey, the Parliamentary Estate, the Royal Parks, English Heritage, the Metropolitan Police and the Cabinet Office.

The cost of the project was estimated at £15-18m, to be funded by TfL, subject to a successful business case.

The state of Parliament Square is now a disgrace. It is barely more than a traffic island in a traffic roundabout, with a hotchpotch of figurative sculptures, some of them fine, others unmemorable or artistically maladroit, that have been placed there piecemeal. It has poor lighting, only three benches, almost no pedestrian access, and indeed is usually surrounded by temporary police barriers. The only notable members of the public that have reached it in recent years have been Iraq war protesters. Meanwhile alongside Westminster Abbey and the Palace of Westminster, crowds of visitors are often crammed on to narrow pavements, from which reaching the square has been made nearly impossible.

It will be tragic if Parliament Square is destined to remain the way it is at present. The Mayor's powers allow him to take a fairly decisive view of his own, but relegating a worthwhile scheme to limbo seems a disastrous decision to some of us on the Westminster Society Executive Committee. What do you think? Let us know, as we consider what representation we might make.

“The Ugly Sisters” high-rises

Boris has been as good as his word in respect of three high-rise buildings designed by Allies and Morrison that were to have been built north of Waterloo Station. He has instructed Lambeth council to refuse planning permission for the buildings, referred to by the London Evening Standard as “the Ugly Sisters.” The towers ranged in height from 22 to 33 storeys, and the Mayor was

concerned that they would have spoilt views of the South Bank.

The Society was invited to comment on these proposals, and we too objected.

One consequence of Boris's ban on the three towers is that Elizabeth House, an office block that

contributes little that is positive to the built environment in Waterloo, will be with us a while longer.

The politics of tall buildings might not be as straightforward as the London Plan implies. The Mayor thinks they should be in the right place and only built with the agreement of Local Authorities, but he has the power to ban tall

buildings even if a local authority is minded, as is the case with Lambeth, to grant planning

permission. And he has done nothing about the Doone Street tower that will rise 43 storeys behind the National Theatre, visible from the gateway to Somerset House and intruding on the magical view to the east from the bridge over the lake in St James's Park.

Battersea Power Station

The saga of Battersea Power Station continues. The latest contenders in the quest to find a viable future for Giles Gilbert Scott's iconic building are Real Estate Holdings Limited and Treasury Holdings UK. A key feature of their proposals is the creating of a "natural machine" in the form of an "EcoDome" (not unlike the Eden Project) with a chimney rising from the centre. The dome will act like a greenhouse, warm air rising to the top, whence it will be extracted via the chimney. At the same time, fresh, cooler air will be drawn into the atriums of buildings and eventually exhausted into the EcoDome. Current plans also include the extension of the Northern line from Kennington to the Power Station site.

The main drawback of the scheme is the accommodation-surrounded chimney, which is currently proposed to be 1000 feet tall and which would certainly dominate the appearance of the World Heritage Site.

The Society has made it clear that it will not be able to approve the scheme if the chimney is not reduced in height and if nothing is done about improving the overland rail link between Battersea Park Station and Victoria.

A new architectural adviser for the Mayor

Richard Rogers will continue to advise the Mayor of London on design alongside a host of other architects, according to an interview with Boris Johnson in Building Design. On a possible role for Terry Farrell, who had been widely tipped to take over from Rogers as chief architecture adviser, Johnson added: "watch this space".

Redevelopments, planning applications and the Society's responses

1-7 Howick Place: we lodged no objection to the proposed demolition of the former House of Fraser building that once housed the old Army & Navy food store and its replacement with a nine storey building for mixed use, including retail outlets at ground floor level and 33 residential units. Our response to the new building was that while it was not overly exciting it was well-mannered. A bonus of the new development will be the removal of the footbridge over Howick Place. This will open up a view of Westminster Cathedral and the campanile from Artillery Row.

38-42 Leicester Square: the proposal is to redevelop the site of the Odeon West End together with frontages on to Orange Street, Panton Street, Whitcomb Street and St Martin's Street. Two new cinemas will be created at basement level with an entrance on Panton Street. A variety of retail outlets will be on the ground floor. Above will be a 250 bed four-star hotel aimed at business travellers, topped by about 30 market-oriented residential units. The height of the building would be comparable with the Hampshire Hotel and Communications House. Our response was to broadly support the application.

Victoria Transport Interchange: while we support the overall project to improve the transport interchange, we objected to proposals to provide a ticket hall for the Underground beneath the eastern

frontage of Victoria Station. We felt that the scheme did nothing to improve access to the District and Circle line platforms, especially for people with limited mobility.

6-9 Buckingham Gate: the buildings in question date from about 1860 and were originally large family houses—in Pevsner's phrase, "big stuccoed houses with Doric porches." In the 1950s they were converted into offices. The proposal now is to convert no 6 to a single family residence, and the rest to eight apartments of varying sizes. Few if any changes are proposed to the Buckingham Gate side of the building, although most of the apartments would gain a small balcony. No s106 contribution has been agreed yet, but possibilities include the provision of short-term seating or gardens, or a contribution to education projects under the Building Schools for the Future programme. The Society is generally supportive of the scheme.

Arundel Great Court: this site is a large one, bounded by the Strand, Surrey Street, Arundel Street and Temple Place. The present building dates from 1971-

1976. They were designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd as a quadrangle enclosing a semi-public garden. The new proposals envisage two new

structures divided by the recreation of one of the two minor streets removed during the 1971-76 redevelopment. To the north there would be a new block of roughly similar size as the existing building for predominantly office use, with retail at ground floor level. To the south would be a u-shaped building with 159 residential units, and a 98-bedroom hotel facing west. There will be no affordable housing on site; the City Council has accepted that this component will be sited at the Wilton Plaza development. When the formal proposal is received we expect that our response will be broadly positive.

7-8 St James's Square: site consists of a Lutyens building (no. 7) built in 1911-12 and at no. 8 an immediately prewar neo-Georgian office block designed by Angell & Curtis. The proposals are for no. 7 to be adapted for use as a single residential unit while no. 8 (the office building) would be demolished and replaced by a building of nine storeys, three of them below ground level, housing six apartments. We suggested a number of changes to the proposals that would improve the appearance of the St James's Square frontage.

New conventions at bus stops

Following consultation in April 2007, Transport for London proposed to make changes to what they call "bus stopping custom and practice." They will remove the distinction between compulsory and request stops. Bus drivers will be instructed to stop for boarding or alighting passengers unless it was clear that no-one wanted to get on or off. TfL comments that this change "essentially formalises what has evolved in practice."

In time the compulsory stop sign will become standard at all stops, and the old request stop sign will disappear. It is evidently the responsibility of passengers to make it clear that they wish to get on or off buses. According to TfL drivers will be instructed to stop on all occasions if their view of a bus stop is impaired.

Grounds for objecting to planning applications

Members of the Society and members of the general public often contact us when they receive details of a proposed redevelopment in their neighbourhood. Bear in mind that if you lodge an objection on design grounds this might be taken into account. If, however, your objection is to having a noisy, dusty

building site next to where you live, this is not a valid planning consideration and you would be better advised to contact the City Council's Considerate Builder Scheme. The scheme tries to minimise the inconvenience caused by development sites.

A date for your diary

The London Open House weekend will be on September 20-21 this year. For details of properties open, go to www.openhouse.org.uk or email hsasaki@openhouse.org.uk.

Canvassing

City of Westminster Electoral Services have sent us details of a scheme for employing local residents as canvassers to help compile the new electoral register. The strapline reads: "Would you like to help with the democratic process and earn some money?" Canvassers will be required to visit properties in an area allocated to them and to return completed electoral registration forms. Canvassers will manage their own time but evening and weekend work would be necessary. The canvas

takes place in September, October and November. Canvassers will be paid £1.50 for each completed form returned.

For more information and an application form please visit:
www.westminster.gov.uk/councilgovernmentanddemocracy/elections/recruitment.cfm
or contact Electoral Services on 020 7641 2730.

Westminster Society Awards 2009

The Westminster Society expects to stage a presentation to winners of the Society's biennial awards at the AGM in May next year.

In our own awards, we honour accomplishments in excellent new architecture as other award giving bodies such as the RIBA and the Financial Times do. Unlike them, we also make awards for renovated architecture and urban design. In all three categories, the distinctive qualities that the Westminster Society especially wishes to direct to

public attention are *significant achievements that heighten and refresh Westminster's public realm.*

Over the past two years some outstanding new buildings and renovated buildings, large and small, have been produced in Westminster, and perhaps also a few contributions to urban design. Would you like to nominate anything for a 2009 Westminster Society Award? If so, send your nomination to Nathan Silver, 19 Regency Street, London SW1P 4BY, or to ns@nathansilver.com.

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