

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

August 2011

WESTMINSTER SOCIETY AGM 2011

The Lord Mayor of Westminster kindly allowed the Society to hold its 2011 AGM in the Mayoral suite at the top of City Hall. The venue is delightful not least because of its magnificent views. After the reception and a brief business meeting, the Society's biennial awards were presented (see below). The evening was rounded off by our speaker, Peter Heath, Public Realm Director for the Atkins engineering and design consultancy, who gave a fascinating presentation with animated graphics demonstrating the impact of pedestrian and traffic changes between the Duke of York's Steps and Oxford Circus.

THE SOCIETY'S BIENNIAL AWARDS

This year we presented awards in four categories. The winners, with the text of our citations on the awards, follow:

ARCHITECTURE

★ *The Apple Store, Covent Garden, 1 The Piazza, WC2E 8HA.* Apple Inc., *clients*; Bohlin Cywinski Jackson (San Francisco), *architects*, Mark Pinney Associates, *executive architects*.

"It was difficult to imagine that the matchless central ground of Covent Garden and the Royal Opera could be augmented by a retail establishment with similar magnetism, but the Apple Store has achieved that—with a replenishing yet sleekly modern design that richly deserves the success it has engendered."

RENOVATED ARCHITECTURE

★ *Burberry Headquarters, Horseferry House, Horseferry Road, SW1P 2AW.* Burberry Group plc, *clients*; Gensler (San Francisco), *architects and interior designers*.

"Fortunately for Westminster, Burberry's brand strategy has fostered a painstaking renovation for its new global headquarters. It transforms and brings to life a formerly unprepossessing government office

building, and vitalises the neighbourhood in bright sympathy with its occupant's dynamic corporate personality."

URBAN DESIGN

★ *BBC Broadcasting House's new configuration and All Soul's Place pedestrianisation*, Langham Street, W1. The British Broadcasting Corporation, *clients*; Sir Richard MacCormac with MJP, *architects*.

"It couldn't have been easy to stand on the shoulders of John Nash, but Broadcasting House's new footprint has provided an appropriate pedestrian branch for the Nash promenade architecturale. The building line's curving walls gracefully relate to the spire of All Souls', they embrace a new grand entrance for the BBC, and they generously contribute an inviting piazza to the public realm."

CONTRIBUTION TO URBAN VITALITY (*a new category that we will especially use to honour non-architectural accomplishments*)

★ *The Oxford Circus pedestrian criss-cross scheme*. Westminster City Council, the City Commissioner for Transportation, Transport for London, The Crown Estate and New West One Company, *sponsor clients*; Atkins: Public Realm, Transport Planning, Intelligent Space and Scheme Landscape divisions, *urban design consultants*.

"London's renowned Oxford Circus is a traffic node that pedestrians once did best to avoid. Removing the surrounding railings that squeezed and corralled them has liberated visitors and pram-pushers, and the new invitation to intermittently scurry diagonally when crossing is hard to refuse. The scheme has dramatically reduced crowd congestion, and has probably made the Circus much safer."

CHELSEA BARRACKS

Despite a positive response on behalf of Westminster City Council to the hybrid planning applications submitted by the Chelsea Barracks developers Qatari Diar Real Estate in June this year, there is still a long way to go before the development—described by Councillor Alastair Moss, chairman of the council's planning and city development committee, as "the most significant residential development we have seen in Westminster in recent years"—is completed.

In particular there will have to be a great deal more consultation on the detailed design of the planned houses and flats and that of the proposed sports centre, shops and health centre, for which outline planning permission only has been granted. We thought it was important that the Society got to see the conditions that the architects contracted to build these core elements are required to abide by, so we obtained the decision letter issued following the granting of planning permission that sets out such conditions. The development will

include 123 affordable homes, with £78m being contributed to the council's affordable housing fund. We would like to know more about how the council will spend this windfall, so we have written to Cllr Jonathan Glanz to ask him what his plans are. The money may not be spent on infrastructure projects since these would be covered by contractual planning obligations (Section 106 Agreements). A likely further limitation on the expenditure is the supposedly limited amount of space within the City of Westminster for affordable housing.

In the latest design iteration, there will no longer be a hotel on the corner of Pimlico Road and Chelsea Bridge Road. Instead there will be an increase in accommodation on the site and a corresponding increase in car parking spaces. The Society objected to the automatic increase in car parking provision. And it seemed to us that the hotel provision was objected to by some local people for unsophisticated reasons. It is unlikely that an expensive hotel would cause disturbance due to heavy traffic, noise and late-night drinking, whereas leaving it out of the scheme would make the western and northwestern areas of the site pretty dead. A good thing about a new neighbourhood hotel is that it might have a nice restaurant. A better thing is that its discreet liveliness contributes to public safety: someone is always visibly there, with the lights on.

KINGSGATE HOUSE

We provided brief details of the development plans for Kingsgate House (at the western end of Victoria Street) in the April edition of the Newsletter. To recap: two new buildings will be constructed on the site. The West Building will provide office accommodation and the East Building residential accommodation. Both will have shops at ground-floor level. The height of the office block steps up from 8 to 13 storeys and will be slightly taller than the existing building. A new open space will be provided around the Underground entrance. A planning application in respect of the new development was submitted in May.

We think the breaking up of the mass of the building into two is successful. It creates an effective transition from Cardinal Place to City Hall. The breaks in the building are functionally appropriate, and we like the opening of routes through the site, provided these are fully public rights of way. We told the planners that details of an effective management strategy should be sought to ensure the success of the proposed redevelopment.

We were disappointed with the ungenerous general appearance of the office building. We liked the looks of the residential building, but had concerns about how its materials and form would weather and age, an important consideration for a building in such a key position. As for the proposed new open space, we thought the tree planting ideas imaginative and the surface treatments well designed.

The developers, Land Securities, are looking for a site to house the affordable element of the residential provision. They have a former hostel in Castle Lane in mind.

WESTMINSTER
LIBRARIES

We wrote again to Cllr Summers about the winding up of the St James's Library, expressing concern about the amount of time that will elapse between its closure and the opening of its replacement in Land Securities' big, oncoming Victoria Transport Interchange 2 development, bounded by Victoria Street, Bressenden Place and Buckingham Palace Road. We suggested that the council might look for a temporary replacement in Ashdown House in Victoria Street, which is currently being refurbished: in our view the developers might be willing to assist the council in this way. Well, it's not going to happen. Cllr Summers's reply makes it clear that even if premises were forthcoming the council wasn't factoring in an ongoing rent for a library, or the staff and operating costs.

Meanwhile, changes have been proposed to two components of Victoria Transport Interchange 2. The main one involves moving the future library from its slightly tucked-away proposed site to a more exposed location right on the corner of Bressenden Place and Victoria Street, with a new entrance directly opposite Carlisle Place. The Society thinks this is a major improvement.

On a gloomier note, the council proposes to close Victoria Library in Buckingham Palace Road. We are deeply concerned about the relocation of its unique music library, and we are determined to do our best to keep the excellent purpose-built historic building from becoming another commercial handover for something like an expensive restaurant. (Cf. June Stubbs, in our final piece.)

RIVERWALK
HOUSE

Riverwalk House, 157-161 Millbank, is a postwar block on the river to the north of Lambeth Bridge and "an injustice to its prominent site," say Simon Bradley & Nikolaus Pevsner in *London 6: Westminster*. It is proposed to replace the current 12 storey building with a 17 storey structure housing 121 apartments. The developer says the scheme will have extensive features with public access, including a restaurant and gallery at street level. Good news? Further details in the December Newsletter.

232-242
VAUXHALL
BRIDGE ROAD

This site will house the affordable housing component of the Riverwalk House development. The existing building will be refurbished and the basement and ground floor levels used for office use. On the upper floors will be 25 apartments with a new residential entrance in King's Scholars' Passage. The 25 affordable apartments represent just over

20% of the market housing at Riverwalk House, a proportion that is too low in our view. We are also concerned at the lack of a children's play area.

3-5 GREAT SCOTLAND YARD

Developers have plans to refurbish a handsome building just off Whitehall and transform it into a "budget boutique" hotel (what a lovely phrase). The apparent idea is to create a four-star facility with three-star prices (ha), aimed at short stay coach groups. The building was put up in 1922 by the Office of Works to house the Central London Recruiting Office. Later it was home to the Ministry of Defence library. It overlooks not only Great Scotland Yard to the south but also Craig's Court to the rear. Both facades will be retained. The majority of the refurbishment will involve the interior. There are issues to do with access to the site in particular for coaches dropping off and picking up clients that might need to be addressed before a planning application is submitted, but that apart, the scheme is a worthwhile one that will return an interesting building to active use.

Historical note: in 1829 a police station was established in Great Scotland Yard. Later it became the first headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Force until it next moved to what is now called the Norman Shaw Building on Victoria Embankment.

SOUP RUNS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS

In our April Newsletter we mentioned the City Council's consultation on the introduction of new bye-laws that would prevent rough sleeping and the distribution of free refreshments in a designated area of Westminster centred on the cathedral. The results of the consultation were published in a report titled *Transforming Lives: Westminster City Council's Approach to Rough Sleeping* which can be downloaded from the council's website.

As a result of the consultation, the introduction of a byelaw that would have prohibited rough sleeping in the designated area has been abandoned. The council has decided to plump for the superbly named Soup Run Roundtable, which, independent of the council, will bring together representatives of local business, the police, residents and soup run providers, and it is hoped will be the means to a solution of the soup run issue without resort to legislation.

PARLIAMENT SQ. CROSSING

The Society has long held the view that the national piazza that is Parliament Square needs to be joined to the Westminster Abbey grounds, and redesigned in stone instead of grass. Mayor Johnson disagrees. A new announcement about the provision of a pedestrian crossing at the southeast corner of the square is far short of enough.

ACROSS THE RIVER

Across the river, colleagues in Southwark, Lambeth and Wandsworth routinely give us the opportunity to comment on developments in their areas which impact on the Society's area of Westminster.

FORMER LONDON FIRE BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS: The riverside headquarters of the London Fire Brigade is being sold to developers. Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands are the architects. The façade will be kept. The site will provide a new smaller fire station as well as residential accommodation, 25% of which will be affordable. There will also be retail provision. The height of the new building will be 14-15 storeys. The Society has not objected to the modest height increase.

MARCO POLO HOUSE: The proposal is to demolish the kitschy 24 year old marble and glass-clad Marco Polo building that stands on Queenstown Road, Battersea, and replace it with two new mainly residential buildings that are taller than the original. Our view is that the new blocks should ideally be reduced by 2-3 storeys in line with other residential developments in Queenstown Road, but even without reduction they will have little visual impact on our area. We do feel that the redevelopment should relate to the proposed extension of the Northern Line to Battersea. If this is not done further pressure will be placed on the inadequate facilities at Queenstown Road by new residents travelling into Victoria. This is an issue for the Mayor of London to resolve.

VISITS

Enclosed with the Newsletter is the Society's visits programme for September – December 2011. In November we are re-running last year's visit to the Old Bailey. Numbers are limited for this visit. If you would like to participate we recommend that you apply as soon as possible.

Bill Dunnett, who coordinated our Visit Programme for about 10 years, had had to step down. Bill's specialised in visits to architectural practices, and it's thanks to him that we able to visit the studios of Richard Rogers, Thomas Heatherwick, MAKE and many others. Bill was also a member of the Trustees' Design Sub-Committee that assists the Honorary Secretary in evaluation of development proposals.

DIARY DATE

London Open House this year will be the weekend of 17-18 September.

JUNE STUBBS

June Stubbs, longtime Westminster Society member and Chairman of the Thorney Islands Society, has been made an MBE in the Queen's Birthday List for services to conservation in Westminster. It was a great pleasure for our Chairman to write to June to congratulate her on her well-deserved honour. It's largely thanks to June that the building that once housed Great Smith Street Library is still standing.

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