

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

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PLANNING NEWS ISSUE



What's a planning "viability report," and why should we care?

It's like this. Developers submitting a planning application to Westminster City Council are required to provide some additional social and financial information in order for their application to be entertained. Developers of residential accommodation are normally expected to either provide a measure of affordable housing or agree to a compensatory contribution to the council's affordable accommodation fund—unless they are excused from both, on the grounds that a proposed development will not generate sufficient return to enable them to make a contribution. Such pleas are subject to scrutiny to determine whether "failure to make the necessary policy-compliant provisions is justified on viability grounds," and the pleading instrument is called a viability report.

The problem is that viability reports, unlike all the other documents submitted in support of a planning application, aren't circulated to nominated amenity societies for comment on the grounds that they contain commercially confidential information. Consideration of pleas is solely entertained by busy council planners who may not have broad knowledge or particular experience to judge whether or not the claims made by developers are reasonable. In contrast, amenity societies can call on architects and other members with local knowledge and commercial development experience for their views—but they can't if the reports continue to be treated as confidential. We believe that the confidentiality of viability reports in planning applications from developers is overprotectively antipathetic to vital social objectives, and should be abandoned.

ALHAMBRA HOUSE, 33 CHARING CROSS ROAD

This bulky, banal 10-storey office building occupies the former site of the Alhambra Theatre, hence the presumptuous (and recently abandoned) name. It's adjacent to the rear of the Leicester Square Odeon, with a branch of Barclays Bank at ground floor level. New proposals for its redevelopment include creating side and roof extensions, recladding the Charing Cross Road elevation and converting the offices at first floor level and above to 60 apartments. The Society has no objection to the conversion of the former office

block to residential use, but key elements of the design and configuration are well below what we would expect in this prominent location.

Our objection would have been justified solely by the proposed new 11th and 12th floors surmounted by a barrel roof that would unacceptably heighten a building already taller than its more conservative and interesting neighbours. But furthermore, the proposed cladding is an uninspiring new surface of cast stone and glass that ignores the architecture of adjacent buildings without contributing any design significance of its own.

The proposed accommodation doesn't help. The 42 one-bedroom and 18 two-bedroom units are meanly sized; kitchens don't have windows; the units haven't been provided with even tiny balconies—which might be saving graces for a scheme in which most of the units are built off corridors and have a single aspect.

We accept that on-site provision of affordable accommodation is unlikely to be viable here, but no mention is made in the application of off site provision. As we've argued above, the applicants' viability report and offer for a contribution to the affordable housing fund should be subject to critical disclosure.

SECURITY AT CROMWELL GREEN



We have also objected to an application by the Palace of Westminster to alter the security fencing adjacent to Cromwell Green. The proposal is to increase the height of the fencing from 2.3m (7'-6") to 3.4m (over 11'), and to extend it along the wall bordering Cromwell Green as far as the St Stephen's entrance to the Palace. Fencing adjacent to Westminster Hall on the east side of Cromwell Green will also be increased in height.

Clearly there is some concern about potential breaches of security despite the Palace of Westminster being guarded by armed police, since the rationale for these changes is that the current height of the railings doesn't adequately deter intruders. We think the proposed railings would not be discreet, and would constitute a sad visual intrusion in the townscape of the World Heritage Site at Parliament Square. They might even be taken as a challenge to those intent on putting security measures at the Palace to the test.

The Palace of Westminster security authorities need to come up with a subtler way of dealing with their concerns—justified or not—about security at Cromwell Green.

HYDE PARK CORNER UNDERPASS

The eastern and western ramp approaches to the Piccadilly-Hyde Park Corner Underpass are looking pretty dilapidated, due to neglect of routine maintenance and the irregular repair of accidental damage. In principle we therefore welcome proposals put forward by Westminster

City Council to refinish the ramp retaining walls with reconstituted Portland Stone, the tunnel section with alternating stainless steel and aluminium panels, and the refurbishment of the shabby tunnel portals which should improve their appearance for pedestrians as well. The proposal also has the good idea of providing a plinth at the western entrance for use as a sculpture display.

However, the means attached to the planning application for financing the job kills our enthusiasm cold: installing media screens at each end, to display advertisements that change every few seconds. Louvred screens would be placed that supposedly would prevent the screen images from distracting drivers as they start through and ensure that the screens aren't too visible by people out for a walk. However, as drivers proceed further into the underpass and accelerate away from the slower traffic above ground, the images would be blatant and unmissable in their line of sight.

As with the outdoor advertising that suddenly began to appear on the sides of telephone boxes a few years ago (in that case, without any planning constraints), councillors seem egregiously insensitive to the gratuitous invasion of the peaceful urban scene with commercial displays. For our part, we additionally took exception to the implied threat in the application documents that without the commercial component, the improvement works wouldn't happen. Do we correctly understand the suggestion that if the advertising sites aren't approved the underpass will be allowed to deteriorate further with no intervention from Westminster? We would deplore that attitude from a private property developer, and we don't expect it from the city council. Our critical comments were lodged in the documents that went back to the planning subcommittee.

1 CHADWICK STREET



In our May Newsletter we described proposals to redevelop 73-75 Great Peter Street. It now appears that the Great Peter Street scheme was the first part of a more comprehensive scheme of which 1 Chadwick Street is the second. The proposal is to demolish the existing building, which for many years housed the Civil Service Recreation Centre, and create two new buildings for residential use. These will contain a range of residential units and on-site affordable housing. One building will have 10 storeys in total, and the other six. The upper floors would be set back, and at all levels, some form of amenity space—terraces or small conservatories—would be provided. Currently 28 parking places are proposed for 46 units, an acceptable proportion for a location such as this in easy reach of extensive public transport.

We felt that this is a good scheme that will complement the new building going up in St Peter Street, presuming that the final choice of exterior finishes and the articulation of elements are acceptable.

ODEON WEST END SITE



This newsletter has previously commented on proposals for the development of the Odeon West End site in the southwest corner of Leicester Square, as successive would-be developers bowed out or lacked the cash. The latest scheme, which the society is supporting, comes from Edwardian Pastoria Hotels. They have acquired not only the cinema site but the rest of the block down to Orange Street, including the old Hand and Raquet public house, now closed.

The proposal is for a deep basement that will hold two cinemas and a spa, and above that an eight storey building having restaurants and cafés on the ground floor and a 360 room (gosh!) hotel with duplexes on the corner where the Odeon West End cinema stands. This corner would have expressive LED advertising displays for the cinemas, and entrances for the cinemas and duplexes. The hotel would have its main entrance on Panton Street and subsidiary ones on St Martin's Street and Whitcomb Street. The expectation is that customers will arrive largely on foot or by taxi.

The developers are keen to make the hotel and cinema attractive to the film industry and hope to attract "red carpet" events to both. (You know, the kind where most of the square becomes annoyingly barricaded from the public.)

ELAND HOUSE



In Bressenden Place, this is the Pointy One. Proposals have been submitted by Eland House's current owners, Tishman Speyer, to refurbish the building when the Department of Communities and Local Government moves next year into spare accommodation at the Home Office building in Marsham Street. The amount of reconstruction work proposed "is minimal," they say, and it won't increase the building's mass. But it will eliminate its only distinctive characteristic, the ski-slope roof and spire. Hmmmm.

The owners defend the change by arguing that relocating the existing roof plant to the basement will allow more natural light into the building, the provision of additional entrances will make it easier to let the building to multiple occupants, and renovation is a greener strategy than replacement. Most of the existing basement car park and office ground floor will give way to retail space, a cycle store, and car parking for the disabled. In place of the sloping roof, a series of flat terraces would be created with views towards the Royal Mews.

HOBHOUSE HUB

Plans are emerging to create a new art gallery, retail and residential units and some office accommodation on a site bounded by Whitcomb Street and Hobhouse Court, which that nice Dr Pevsner has called "the most interesting part of the historic lane linking Charing Cross to Oxford Street."

According to the developers, nos. 3-7 Whitcomb Street will return to what it once was, the premises of the Royal Watercolour Society (currently at Bankside Gallery), while elsewhere the ground floor along



the street would become retail space, though with restaurants, cafes, pubs, wine bars and takeaways "discouraged." A revived pedestrian route will be opened between Whitcomb Street and Suffolk Place via Hobhouse Court, and the listed vaults beneath will be made accessible. Above would be a mixture of office space and 20 residential units ranging from studios to three-bedroom apartments.

The developers maintain that it isn't possible to provide affordable housing on site because affordable and free market accommodation require separate entrances and there isn't room. The separate-but-equal concept, discredited elsewhere but successfully maintained by London developers, is held to be necessary because as free market residents are paying more (though only 20% more, if Mayor Johnson has his way), they resent sharing entrances. The council will no doubt accept this socially primitive argument as usual and require a contribution in lieu to the affordable housing fund. We deplore that, but in other respects the scheme looks likely to get our support.

PALACE OF WESTMINSTER EDUCATION CENTRE



The Palace of Westminster makes a considerable effort to enthuse school students as well as others about the work of Parliament. Proposals have now been submitted to build an education centre for younger children adjacent to the Palace, designed by heritage architecture specialists Feilden and Mawson.

The proposal is for a demountable modular structure at the north end of parkland in Victoria Tower Gardens. It would have a security entrance lobby and five classrooms with break-out areas for use by guided groups of 12-year-olds in orientation and post-tour discussions. These now occur at 15-minute intervals, about 10 sessions daily throughout the year, even when Parliament is sitting.

The centre would be built of laminated timber and designed so that at the end of a ten-year period it could be dismantled and used elsewhere, if so decided. It would have a green (i.e. planted) roof and mostly be hidden by foliage. Landscape architect Kim Wilkie's intention is to conceal the centre as far as possible under a green bank. Paths near the Rodin statue of the Burghers of Calais would be realigned.

While we recognise the proposed education centre's functional benefits and the intended tactfulness of a provisional and reusable structure concealed by planting, five well-secured and serviced classrooms will take up a lot of ground. We have serious reservations about giving up a large piece of the park for a building, however worthy and allegedly "temporary." We will withhold judgment until we learn more.

LIFE IN SW8

The London Borough of Wandsworth's Planning Department updates us regularly about development in the Nine Elms area that might be visible from Westminster. Recently we had a look at proposals for a

comprehensive redevelopment of a trading estate and a milk distribution centre in Sleaford Street, SW8. What's proposed is a largely residential-based mixed use development featuring buildings of 10 and 11 storeys and one of 18 storeys, lying within the Vauxhall, Nine Elms and Battersea Opportunity Area. There is no need for alarm for us because other schemes with planning consent along Nine Elms Lane and Battersea Park Road will shield the Sleaford Road site from nearly all points in Westminster. If the 18 storey building is to be visible from the top of Portland House or the Hilton Hotel, it would be no more than a moderately tall building surrounded by much taller ones.

GROVE HOUSE, 2 ORANGE STREET



Finally, back to the streets just south of Leicester Square. Z Hotels, who specialise in accommodation for short stay online-booking clients, have submitted proposals to convert another Westminster building into a hotel. They have already done up 5 Lower Belgrave Street and 17 Moor Street, near Cambridge Circus. Stylish understatement is their thing, so it's easy to not notice the Victoria and Soho establishments.

The existing Orange Street building is unremarkable. Z Hotels' plan is to convert it to an 112-bedroom hotel for short-stay business and weekend customers. There would be no restaurant, just a small café on site, so provisioning would be limited to stock for the café and resupply of linen and towels. Service deliveries should present no problems. We liked the development, and wholeheartedly welcomed the stylish additional hotel spaces it will provide at a reasonable price.

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