

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

May 2014

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2014

The 2014 AGM will take place on Thursday 12 June in the Mayoral Suite in Westminster City Hall. The event will begin with a reception at 6.00pm. This will be followed at about 6.45 pm by a short business meeting and then the architect Ptolemy Dean, who is the current Surveyor of the Fabric at Westminster Abbey, will talk to us about the work he is carrying out in the Abbey and its precincts.

On the final page of this newsletter is an agenda for the AGM. If you would like to attend the pre-AGM reception please complete and return the enclosed booking form. The cost of the reception is £13. There is no charge for attending the AGM only.

FIDDLING WHILE LONDON BURNS



Nero, Roman emperor from
A.D. 54 to 68

Let's begin with a jumbo-sized socioeconomic frame of reference: the unaffordability of life's necessities for most people. That is not only true worldwide, it's probably even true in the City of Westminster. And another frame: remedies for economic hardship are largely ignored in political discussion. Solutions that might work and ought to be considered are not currently on the agenda in our city and country.

Of these necessities, the cost of accommodation is the greatest part. In London a sustained supply of truly affordable housing—as opposed to “affordable” meaning 80% of market value—could ameliorate the problem and someday might even solve it, yet what keeps that from happening isn't unavailable sites, uncommitted housebuilders (including public authorities), or disobliging planners. The principal obstacle is the ever-growing value of urban land.

Isn't high land value a good thing since it shows healthy demand, even attracting the domicile of “job creators” (those who ought to pay low taxes on that presumption)? Not if employees, students, professionals, carers, service providers and their families are thereby priced out of town. Just transporting them to and from the outlying places they are forced to live becomes a major part of the problem. Congestion increases and adds to everyone's misery. In the end, overcostly cities become economically unsustainable. They may go on for a while as tourist attractions and architectural museums, but they become moribund. They even lose their value as taxpaying entities.

So the decisive matter must be for government to take control of urban land value, in some way that helps and doesn't introduce killing constraints of the opposite kind. It isn't true that this can't or won't happen in London and elsewhere, but it's foreseeable that to limit costs and avoid confiscatory measures such a scheme would require introduction over a considerable period of time, and to avoid unnecessary stresses it should start sooner rather than later. Our leaders are possibly preparing to begin thinking about that.*

Meanwhile, London and Westminster have taken much-argued contingent measures that show concern, but are largely ineffective and will continually lose ground. Mayor Livingston's requirement was 50% "affordable" housing in new building; Mayor Johnson eliminated any given percentage; the outcomes for both successive policies have been indeterminate social levy assessments extracted from developers that haven't necessarily provided affordable dwellings either onsite, nearby, or even far off. The developers have to submit "viability reports" that the public isn't allowed to see. (Pray tell us, what aspect of the economic viability of an urban building project requires secrecy?) These include the developers' profit estimates, pessimistically lowball of course, calculating from which the council tries to extract contributions towards the support of general urban infrastructure. The public has no way of telling whether the deals are good, so-so, or lousy, and whether fair or corrupt. What's certain though is that they aren't contributing to truly affordable housing for the commonweal. As developers outbid each other for urban land and land values rise, the situation for housing goes on becoming worse. Do the words "fiddling while [your town name here] burns" suggest themselves?



We countenance few secrets, so here are some details of fiddly current arrangements. The most recent change has been the augmentation of S106 Planning Obligation agreements, which include secret viability

* As a timely indication that the above isn't absurdist nonsense or unthinkable foolishness, see "Mr de Blasio's Moon Shot," an editorial in the New York Times, 6 May 2014, describing how New York mayor Bill de Blasio is venturing to deal with his entirely similar problem: www.nytimes.com/2014/05/06/opinion/mr-de-blasios-moon-shot.

reports, with the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which by the way still include secret viability reports. The sums will be non-negotiable *ad valorem* levies, rather than negotiated *ad hoc* charges for each new development as is currently the case with S106 agreements. CIL levies will have to be paid only on developments providing net increases in floor space of over 100m², and the legislation provides exemptions for buildings housing health and educational services, self-build accommodation and charities.

Unlike funds paid as part of a S106 agreement which are nominally tied to related improvements, CIL revenue does not have to be spent at the site of the development that generates it. So the reality is that CIL is an urban development tax completely disconnected from the provision of affordable housing. (Contributions to an affordable housing fund may additionally be demanded of developers if they excuse themselves from providing affordable housing in residential schemes.) Development taxes are fair enough. But by increasing urban land cost without tax hypothecation for affordable housing, CIL will inevitably worsen affordability for urban residents.

The uptake of CIL has been slow among local authorities, probably for fear of hindering economic recovery. Local authorities are perhaps also waiting for further guidance or clarification from central government; current opinion (and not just from ourselves) is that the legislation has been poorly thought through. In Westminster we will have two CILs, one levied by the Mayor of London and the other by the Westminster city council. The Mayor of London has announced the imposition of £20 per 50m² to raise £300m for Crossrail. In Westminster the expectation is that CIL will be in place by April 2015, at a level many times larger than the Mayor's.

CHELSEA BARRACKS



Previously: The Chelsea Barracks development in suspense. Timeline: this decade. A detailed scheme was presented. The Prince of Wales expressed himself. The architects were replaced. Some developer partners bailed. A new masterplan was approved. At The Westminster Society's 2012 AGM we said that work was probably being done completing details of the new scheme, and S106 agreements drafted.

How wrong we were then. Nothing was being done, and the architects and Westminster were actually in the dark as far as the intentions of the Qatari-led developers were concerned. Yet now the long cliffhanger for Chelsea Barracks, Series 2, may be over, as things have again started to happen. The two blocks on the site slated for demolition have been demolished, and a recent planning application has been submitted with details of the proposed new townhouses near Pimlico Road. Sitework continues. Keep tuning in!

BUCKINGHAM GREEN

Proposals are being made for the refurbishment and redevelopment of 64 and 65 Buckingham Gate, a mixed-use office, residential and retail estate centred around Buckingham Green that includes headquarters



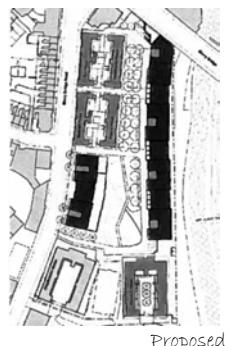
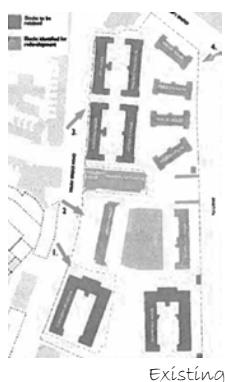
The Buckingham Green site with the Blewcoat School, upper left corner, and The Albert pub, lower centre

of Rolls Royce plc and of the Labour Party, 44 residential apartments, a wine bar and a restaurant. The property was designed by Elsom Pack Roberts and built only 36 years ago, but Rolls Royce's lease expiration (they'll be moving to 62 Buckingham Gate) has presented the opportunity for a comprehensive redesign and redevelopment to increase the property's capital and rental values. Adjacent to the site are two significant buildings: the ornately surviving Albert public house, built 1845-52; and the Blewcoat School, built in 1709 as a school for the poor, currently vacant but owned by the National Trust.

Our investigators were given a pre-planning-application presentation by the developers. They report that the new proposal would demolish the annex north of the tower that's linked to it, replacing it with a new structure mostly for office use. The tower would be substantially remodelled with a renovated core and a new façade and fenestration treatment to lighten its appearance (currently it's a study in brown). Some species of mature tree would replace the link between the tower and the annex, "to act as a focus." The entire ground floor would be redesigned for retail use with opportunities for new cafés and restaurants featuring outdoor tables in Buckingham Green, which the developers suggest will improve the Blewcoat School's setting.

The current apartments in the tower would be replaced by 65 new rental apartments of varying sizes, and spaces below for 36 cars. With good access to public transport the unequal provision of car parking is not deemed to be a problem. Once again affordable housing will not be provided on site; a contribution to the Affordable Housing Fund would be negotiated.

EBURY BRIDGE ESTATE



An application has been submitted to redevelop Westminster City Council's Ebury Bridge Estate, which lies between the railway lines leading to and from Victoria Station and Ebury Bridge Road. Eight residential blocks would be demolished (172 flats). New accommodation would add 273 dwellings, from one to five bedroom in size. Of these 130 would be social housing, 26 would be affordable, and 117 would be private housing. This would materially increase the supply and quality of local affordable housing. Buildings on the estate would vary in height from 4 to 14 storeys. Shops and other retailers would occupy the ground floor of a main block and the basement would house educational or medical services. Consultation with existing residents took place over a two year period. Of 60% participating, 78% voted in favour of the scheme at the conclusion.

The Society welcomed this scheme. We liked the high proportion of social and affordable housing provided and the wide range of unit sizes. The new internal layout of the site is more open. Some might find the 12 and 14 storey heights of some buildings excessive, but the residents don't, and Glastonbury House in Warwick Way at 23 storeys has already set a precedent for tall buildings in the area. Our view is that the higher buildings forming a sort of crenellated wall along the rail tracks make sense. The design has been thought through, and it improves on the existing layout and buildings in every important way.

We were concerned about car parking provision. Normally the council adopts a policy of one space per unit. The current provision is 84 spaces. If the single bed units were discounted there would be a shortfall of 70 parking spaces and if it were assumed that parking spaces would be available for the private accommodation only, the shortfall would be 33. Despite accessibility to good public transport in the area, we have suggested that this issue be further considered.

SHORT LETS



Kris Hopkins, Minister for Housing at the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), thinks that the need to obtain planning permission before using a property for short-term letting constitutes unnecessary red tape, and that the legislation is outdated and unworkable. The DCLG has released a discussion paper on it.

As with other recent government proposals to scrap planning constraints, this notion would increase freedom for some at the expense of others. Short lets multiply noise and nuisance problems for established neighbouring tenancies, requiring greater caretaker and security control. The high turnover of uncustomary new faces worries some of the frail and elderly. But the most commanding social issue is that the exploitability of profitable short lets, which can pull in three to five times as much as normal tenancies, tends to completely take over the market wherever it can flourish. It could severely diminish the number of properties for rent at normal rental market prices, making it even tougher for people to live and work here. Short lets, in short, are directly powered by the forces of high urban land value. They tend to push values further up and blow fuses.

Westminster's chief planning officer Rosemarie MacQueen has noted that short-term letting in the city is such a salient issue it's required a dedicated team of planning officers to deal with controls and breaches. Over a recent 12 month period the team issued 51 enforcement notices. We think this indicates existing legislation's importance rather than its obstructiveness. On all these grounds we have written to the Minister calling for the maintenance of controls on short-term letting. It's a further interesting question whether the government would ensure that local authorities such as Westminster have adequate funds to police breaches of letting regulations if the legislation is retained.

SLAPDASH TICKETING



Guided tour tickets for the Palace of Westminster are preponderantly booked online nowadays, but impulse buyers and others on the local scene currently can get them in the basement of 6-7 Old Palace Yard, adjacent to the Jewel House. The Parliamentary Estates Directorate wants to move the ticket office and it has Portcullis House in mind.

From an access point of view, the trouble with Portcullis House is that it's on stilts over the Westminster tube station. The Victoria Embankment entrance is the only easy way into the building. The

proposed new ticket office would need a well-designed signage scheme directing people to the office that isn't part of the current proposal, its own doors leading up to the elevated ground floor, and wheelchair access that isn't so far apparent or easy to envisage. We have objected to the proposal in its present unready state for scrutiny.

GOSH! A WITH-IT SCULPTURE IN WESTMINSTER?



Abjuring figurative sculpture for once, Westminster has landed a rather with-it work by Yinka Shonibare MBE, perhaps best known up to now for Nelson's ship in a bottle on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. The sculpture, in painted fibreglass and steel, resembles a outsize roll of fabric blowing open in the wind. The make-believe painted-on fabric design consists of a number of colourful repeats jammed together, such as might appear if an unlikely whirlwind whooshed through the fabric section of Liberty. It's cheerful-looking, and pretty good for dull Wilcox Place, the short pedestrianised street between Westminster City Hall in Victoria Street at one end and Howick Place, name of a street and also a new building, at the other.

Howick Place—the building—now stands on the former site of the Army & Navy Stores' food hall. Its letting agent told us that the Shonibare sculpture is a joint public art contribution to townscape by the Howick Place developers and also Land Securities, developers of the properties on the other side of Howick Place (the street).

A few years ago we were invited to nominate a Society member to join a Westminster council committee of local "stakeholders" (we love that bureaucratic word) considering new townscape ideas for Cathedral Piazza and Wilcox Place, which had been attracting rough sleepers. Some competing architects had already been shortlisted. Our man said Wilcox Place would be a perfect little street for outdoor chess tables, which are such lively public amenities in New York's Washington Square and in eastern European towns. The committee seemed enthusiastic. Yet here's what Wilcox Place looks like now: recently repaved, but even the previous benches have been removed!



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CHAIRMAN: OLWEN ROWLANDS

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 235400

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THE 55th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thursday 12 June 2014, 6.45 pm
The Mayoral Suite, Westminster City Hall, 64 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6QP

AGENDA

- 1 Introduction and apologies for absence
- 2 The Minutes of the 2013 AGM
- 3 The Annual Report and Accounts for the year 2013
- 4 Chairman's report
- 5 Election of members of the Executive Committee
- 6 Appointment of a Reporting Accountant
- 7 Any other business
- 8 Annual Lecture by Ptolemy Dean, Surveyor of the Fabric at Westminster Abbey

Peter Handley, Acting Honorary Secretary