

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

April 2016

THE 2016 WESTMINSTER SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

We have decided to make changes to the format of our Annual General Meetings. The meetings at which we announce our biennial awards—those that take place in years with an odd number, so the next one will be in 2017—will be preceded by a reception and include a lecture. The ones in even years will be purely business meetings with no reception and no lecture. The next such meeting will take place on Wednesday 15 June from 7 to 8pm in the meeting room on the ground floor of Hide Tower in Regency Street. An Agenda is included in this mailing.

THE MILLBANK TOWER SITE



The new proposal

Planning news: proposals for the 50-year old Grade II listed Millbank complex have been submitted by architects John McCaslan and Partners (see City of Westminster planning application 15/07756/FULL). These include increasing the height of both the tower and the adjacent Y-shaped building, and the demolition and replacement of both the north and south podium buildings. The tower would be reconfigured as 215 apartments with the Sky Bar reinstated on top, the south podium would become an arts and cultural centre, and the north podium and the Y-shaped building a 195-bedroom hotel.

The change in height of the tower and the Y building do not seem significant relative to the size of the existing structures. The range of apartment sizes in the tower—from one to three bedrooms—reflects current demand. Proposed landscaping changes would be a considerable improvement on that which currently exists, and we view the creation of a multifunctional amphitheatre at the southern end of the site as a fine idea. A current complication arising from the listed status of the site means that coaches arriving or leaving the hotel would have to receive or discharge passengers on the river side of Millbank, but we would expect that problem to be sorted out.

Despite our enthusiasm for the favourable aspects of the scheme, the response we submitted was an objection. Given the amount of residential space being created, we considered it unconscionable of “the billionaire property investors David and Simon Reuben” (as Bloomberg News refers to them) to make no provision for any on-site affordable housing, nor to propose a substantial financial contribution in lieu to the City Council’s Affordable Housing Fund.

1-5 GROSVENOR PLACE



Last autumn proposals were submitted to replace an elderly office block on the corner of Grosvenor Place and Grosvenor Crescent with a development providing residential accommodation, a hotel, retail facilities and public space.

Our view was that the proposals for 1-5 Grosvenor Place, featuring a building with sophisticated finishes and improved access for both the residential and hotel components, would be a worthwhile enhancement. But we thought that when viewed across Hyde Park Corner the domination of the rather higher new skyline would be unwelcome, and suggested that the uppermost floor should be eliminated.

NOVA PLACE AND NOVA EAST

View of the forthcoming Westminster library building (the lefthand side of the block) at the northwestern corner of Victoria Street and Bressenden Place. The cupola of the Victoria Palace Theatre is visible just beyond



The big property company Land Securities has been redeveloping major parts of Victoria Street for years. The outcomes have been achieving commercial success for shareholders, and by and large, much improved community and social values for the rest of us. (In fact, looking ahead a bit, if the new Mayor of London resumes mandatory property developer obligations for the provision of affordable housing, our scope for grumbling would be quite seriously reduced.)

Land Securities' next phase is called Nova Place and Nova East, and it is starting to appear in the region northeast of Victoria Street and Bressenden Place (see the Westminster planning application at 1508005/FULL and 15/08006/FULL). Currently the site mainly awaits construction completion of a humongously hard-to-fit-in Victoria Station Underground ticketing hall below street level.

A few months ago the Society was consulted about some amendments to the applications. We were pleased to see that the façade and part of the interior of Sutton House, the pawnbrokers that formerly stood in Victoria Street, will be relocated to a realigned Allington Street. In Nova Place itself (see main part of photo above), a quarter of the housing to be provided will be affordable. All units will have dual aspects. In Nova East (tall building to right in photo), the 16-storey

block fronting the realigned Allington Street and Bressenden Place is proposed to become offices and retail accommodation. The retail part should ensure lively activity and prevent it from becoming moribund in early evenings and at weekends. And of course the new community library on the corner of Victoria Street and Bressenden Place will be a very big deal for us. All in all these contributions to the area strike us as genuine improvements, and we look forward to their completion in stages in the next couple of years.

OLD NEW SCOTLAND YARD



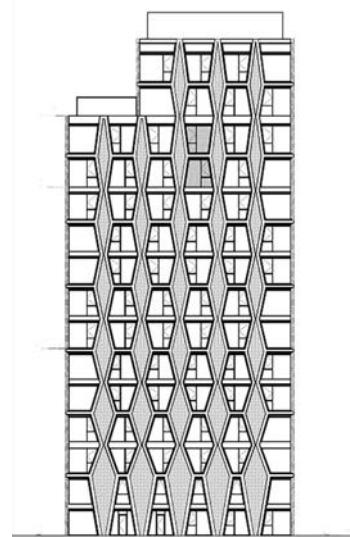
Old New Scotland Yard,
Broadway & Victoria Street view

Modernist architect Max Gordon may have been celebrated as Nicholas Serota's "Architect for Art" (the title of Sir Nicholas's 2011 book on Max Gordon and his work), but that hasn't cut any ice with developers and Westminster planners who are giving the heave-ho to one of Gordon's finest efforts, the New Scotland Yard building. While construction continues apace to finish renovating the NEW New Scotland Yard on Victoria Embankment (and we were scornful about some design aspects of what's under way there), here is an update on OLD New Scotland Yard, soon to be known as 10 Broadway. For more about it, see 15/07497/FULL on the council's website.

It takes some historical perspective on Old-New's felicities to recall the building that Pevsner admired as "the most memorable" along Victoria Street, with the wide part and the tall part making "an excellent group." Courtesy of ever-increasing police security, the good old Old-New successively did away with retail accommodation, then public open space, then finally became a forbidding fortification surrounded by "hostile vehicle mitigation barriers" and bulletproof glass.

When the site became redundant, the imagination of developers, architects and planners could have—should have—come into play. There was a strong urban case for retaining the complex as offices. With the Metropolitan Police's exit, it would have been simple and terrific to carry out radical ground and first floor revisions that would bring life to the powerfully sleek-looking office slabs, modernise the interiors and services, and leave it at that. But the sale of the site to an Abu Dhabi financial group for a stupefying £370 million evidently put paid to any conservationist notions, and we were off to the races.

The mixed-use comprehensive redevelopment application last summer by the architects Squire & Partners was opposed by the Thorney Island Society on the grounds of daylight, appearance and materials. But the Twentieth Century Society regrettably didn't seem to have got its act together to object, and we of the Westminster Society nodded consent. So there are now destined to be seven residential towers, with facing windows too close to each other. The towers are expressed on elevation with elongated hexagons (expressive of what? See left), inharmoniously perched on four storey high office-and-retail podiums.



New 10 Broadway—typical elevation of one of seven new towers atop four-storey podiums

Yes, pedestrians will have ground space, but whether the space will have lively use is questionable when it will be largely adjacent to retail shops away from Victoria Street's boulevard promenade. The residential plans are for 258 market-priced plus ten affordably priced flats. The council will therefore be pleased to accept £10,000,000



Rendering showing aerial view of the future 10 Broadway

from the developers in order to shift the provision of more affordable housing onto its own conscience.

And so? Not good. Far from it. Unnecessary redevelopment can sometimes be countenanced when a new building is better than the one it supplanted. (Such as might have been achieved after contemplation of Patrick Hodgkinson's beloved Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury, built on a similarly extended site with many flats, but still low rise. Its residential units have uncrowded outlooks, well designed public spaces and finely integrated shops.) In the Newsletter editor's opinion we're all guilty of having muffed this one, folks.

ALHAMBRA HOUSE



In the September 2013 Newsletter we described proposals to reconfigure this office building at 27-31 Charing Cross Road into residential accommodation. We objected at the time to what was being proposed. What was on offer were single-aspect apartments that were extremely bijou (though not in a nice way), with windowless kitchens and no balconies.

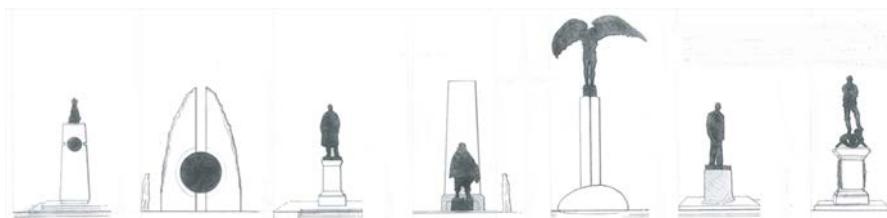
The latest application for this site proposes refurbishing the upper storeys of the building as a hotel (see 15/09858/FULL on the council's website). This time we have objected on hotel-centric grounds.

We've pointed out that the Odeon Leicester Square has a major exit into Charing Cross Road immediately next door, extruding noisy cinema customers who are certain to continue debouching below what would now be hotel windows. The putative taxi dropoff at the hotel entrance would conflict with an important existing bus stop that is usually crowded with queueing passengers night and day. And there seems nowhere feasible in the immediate vicinity for the coach stops of arriving and departing coachborne guests. We made no comments on design issues, as they are premature until the noise conflict and traffic overload concerns affected by a change to hotel use have been dealt with.

THE IRAQ- AFGHANISTAN MEMORIAL

Westminster planners have approved a semi-figurative memorial in recognition of British military forces and UK civilians who served and worked in Iraq and Afghanistan during recent periods of conflict, to be sited in the part of Victoria Embankment Gardens that is east of the Ministry of Defence. Paul Day is the sculptor. His work includes the Battle of Britain monument on Victoria Embankment, and "Meeting Place," a large bronze couple who seem pleased to see each other in the concourse of St Pancras station.

The Westminster Society has raised no objection to the Iraq-Afghanistan memorial. Memorials are sympathy promotions. Their artists are uncompetitively chosen; they are paid for and then approved with little chance of reconsideration on account of amenity society niggles. And after all, this one will stand uncontroversially in the little Ministry of Defence memorial park amid others of similarly mild potency (not as close together as shown below, but the silhouette images are in relationship order and in scale). The Iraq-Afghanistan memorial is second from the left, with a life-sized visitor at the same scale standing next to it.



It's unlikely to become a memorious memorial. The figurative part is a bronze bas-relief on the central disc, still to be disclosed in any detail. It will be mounted between two craggy shards of Portland stone inscribed DUTY and SERVICE on one side and IRAQ and AFGHANISTAN on the other. Despite the labels, the forms make one think of salad tongs or a lobster shell cracker, and irony could not be intended.

MAKE'S TAKE ON THE ALBERT EMBANKMENT



Thanks to our colleagues in the London Borough of Lambeth, we have been considering whether Westminster's view across the Thames of a new development at 36-46 Albert Embankment worries us. The developers have engaged MAKE Architects to design the proposed scheme. If approved, it will sit among some consented schemes that are over 90 meters in height.

Vintage House is the current name of the last remaining Victorian warehouse on Albert Embankment. In this scheme the warehouse would be retained, and converted to provide nine affordable rental flats. The adjacent petrol station would be redeveloped to provide 160 residential units of varied sizes and tenures, with some office and retail uses at lower levels. The intention is to construct two towers 25 storeys tall, largely clad in Portland Stone with bronze detailing. Its most controversial element is a side section of the downstream tower that somewhat uneasily cantilevers over the Victorian warehouse. We decided we'd probably be able to live with that.

THE LSE'S INSPIRING ARCHITECTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS



O'Donnell & Tuomey's student centre



Rogers Stirk Harbour's forthcoming Social Sciences block



Grafton Architects' forthcoming mixed academic building

The London School of Economics and Political Science has announced its architects for a new building. We'll get to that in a moment.

It reminds us that the LSE, an admirable constituent of London University sited in the City of Westminster, has been continually progressing in educational quality and prestige for the last 50 years. Its curricula are highly attractive to students from all over the globe, earning it high tuition fees from thousands of foreign students; after which some of the LSE's more prosperous foreign alumni see fit to endow the LSE handsomely. (With urban land costs as they are in London WC2, that's just as well.)

By the year 2000, research and scholarship rankings were showing that the LSE was usually outdoing every other institution of higher education in Britain. They must have helped The Campaign for LSE's fundraising drive in 2001, which set a goal of £100 million. That some of the proceeds would finance outstanding planning and architectural improvements was soon signalled by several adroit road closures and pedestrianisations on LSE turf—e.g. the new plaza in front of the LSE library, which the Westminster Society noticed at the time—and the 2008 opening of the Management and Law building on the south side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, a brilliantly adroit structural conversion of a historic property by Grimshaw Architects.

No doubt the LSE's greatest architectural achievement to date has been the magnificent Saw Swee Hock Student Centre by the Irish firm of O'Donnell & Tuomey, opened in 2014. Both contextual and exuberant, it has won some of the biggest architectural prizes going, as well as a more modest but deeply felt Biennial Award from us. Hardly drawing breath, the LSE next ran an architectural competition for a new Social Sciences block. Before Saw Swee Hock had even opened, they chose Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners as the winners. The design looks likely to be a beautiful, dynamic new building on Houghton Street and Clare Market.

The LSE's stated property strategy is "delivering a university quarter comprising a world class estate." If thereby it has become a voracious octopus, it's bad luck that London doesn't have more of its kind.

Most recently the LSE has been acquiring property on the east side of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The listed former Land Registry building at no. 32 has now been conserved and neatly renovated for graduate work. Soon to come will be the next big one: a replacement for the unprepossessing office block at 44 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which will become a mixed academic, sports and arts facility to be called the Paul Marshall Building. An RIBA-run competition shortlisted some famous firms for the job, including AL_A, David Chipperfield, Herzog & de Meuron, and the New York practice Diller Scofidio & Renfro. The now-announced winner has proved to be another Irish firm: Grafton Architects. Its principals, Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, are both women. (Just sayin'.) Pip pip!

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