

# THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

## NEWSLETTER

August 2017

### THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



This year's AGM was held at Church House Conference Centre, Great Smith Street. Our speaker, executive committee member David Jennings of EPR Architects, gave a fascinating talk about EPR's sensitively designed conversion into hotels of two historic landmarks: The Old War Office, Whitehall (see some background in the previous issue of this newsletter), and now nearing completion, the Midland Bank building in the City originally designed by Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens, now to be called the Ned Hotel in homage to him. David's personal account of the design process in the realm of architectural heritage made for a splendid half hour.

2017 is a biennial awards year for the Society, so our energetically debated awards were also duly bestowed. The recipients honoured and their certificate citations were as follows:

for Architecture:

The Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill, W1

to The Gagosian Gallery and Grosvenor Britain & Ireland, clients, with Caruso St John and TateHindle, architects

**citation: MOST CHIC GALLERIES ARE CONVERSIONS OF RETAIL SHOPS. LARRY GAGOSIAN'S THIRD LONDON GALLERY IN GROSVENOR HILL, HIS FIFTEENTH WORLDWIDE, IS HIS LATEST TO MOVE BEYOND SHOP DIMENSIONS TO MUSEUM SCALE. THE NEW GAGOSIAN TRANSFORMS AN EARLIER STRUCTURAL FRAME INTO AN IMPRESSIVE TEMPLE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART THAT ENRICHES ITS NEW MAYFAIR NEIGHBORHOOD WITH ASSURED PRESENCE, AND A SIMPLICITY THAT IS MAGISTERIAL RATHER THAN MERELY MINIMAL.**

for Renovated Architecture:

Foyles Bookshop, 107 Charing Cross Road WC2

to W & G Foyle Limited with Noved Investment One, clients, and Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands, architects

**citation: AS MUCH A REBIRTH AS A REFIT, FOYLES COMBINES TWO CHERISHED HISTORICAL ATMOSPHERES: THE CENTRAL ST MARTINS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN, WHOSE FORMER HOME FOYLES NOW OCCUPIES, AND THE PREVIOUS FLAGSHIP FOYLES, WHICH EXISTED NEXT DOOR—THEREBY EMBODYING AND SUSTAINING A PRECIOUS URBAN STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN ITS SUPERLATIVE RECONCEPTION.**



Foyles Bookshop

for Urban Design:  
The London Cycle Superhighway  
to Successive Mayors of London, clients,  
and Transport for London, providers



The Cycle Superhighway at  
Blackfriars Bridge

citation: THE CYCLE SUPERHIGHWAY SCHEME HAS ONLY BEGUN TO DEVELOP ITS SOVEREIGN PURPOSES OF TRANSFORMING LONDON'S LOCOMOTION, IMPROVING HEALTH AND SAFETY, AND REDUCING VEHICLE CONGESTION (EVEN IF IT TEMPORARILY SEEMS TO HAVE INCREASED IT). WHILE THE APPROPRIATION OF EXISTING ROADWAY SPACE FOR CYCLES MAY NEED SOME MITIGATION, WE STRONGLY SUPPORT LONDON'S ROLLING ONWARD TOWARDS THE PREMIER LEAGUE OF COPENHAGEN AND AMSTERDAM.

## DAVID CAMERON'S HOLOCAUSE



Reviewing a proposal to build a theatre within the park adjacent to Charing Cross Station in the November issue of the Newsletter, we mentioned with disapproval the similar parkland-extinguishing proposal for Victoria Tower Gardens, south of the Palace of Westminster: it was being designated as the site for a holocaust memorial and education centre. Shortlisted design schemes were soon unveiled. We learned that the choice of Victoria Tower Gardens as the holocaust memorial site was Prime Minister Cameron's own notion, supplanting three others being considered. You may think it the second worst idea of his administration, but we couldn't possibly, etc.

We did, however, write in January to Sir Peter Bazalgette, chairman of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, stating our view that while the idea of a national holocaust memorial was entirely meritorious and laudable, the choice of site was neglectful and shortsighted.

The neglectful aspect [we wrote] is that Victoria Tower Gardens will essentially cease to exist as a park when it is dominated by the memorial. Our Society holds to the sovereign urban amenity principle that parks should not become convenient building sites. If a public or private body backs a proposed development that has social or cultural importance, it ought to support that with the acquisition cost of urban land at the going rate, not take it as a free subtraction from the value and territory of an existing park. Small parks near centres of high activity have particular charms of serenity that are vital for urban well-being, and Victoria Tower Gardens is now warmly regarded and indeed loved for that.

As we now see in the shortlisted preliminary design proposals [our letter went on], expressive differences notwithstanding, the park would be swallowed up. Given the brief, there was no way that an inspiring and well-designed holocaust memorial could do less than command the available park dimensions in anticipating the attraction of the large numbers of visitors that holocaust memorials draw. Indeed, the most perceptive designs in the group have registered the understanding that during all opening hours there will be many hundreds of visitors, queues, and by tacit extension, a congestion of coaches discharging and collecting groups of people. The idea that this could be accommodated with the required security measures and traffic space along Millbank within a hundred meters or so of Parliament is beyond reasonable imagination. If the invited design competitors have not themselves expressed these reservations about the choice of site, it must only be out of deferential tact.



Anish Kapoor's hovering meteorite sculpture—part of his holocaust memorial design proposal with Zaha Hadid Architects

Equally, we believe that the site choice is severely short-sighted in that it ignores Parliament's own likely future requirements in 10 to 50 years. Shrewd reflection suggests that it is very poor masterplanning to designate Victoria Tower Gardens as the location of an important permanently fixed memorial. That is because on some day almost certain to arrive, perhaps not far off from now, this garden site may well need to be the location for Parliament's own—for example—cybernetic control centre, fireproof store for precious documents, subsurface security circulation, or even underground parking. Such primary institutional needs might not count against the no-building-in-parks principle because the uses by their nature would be access-restricted, and could be built out of sight well below a securely designed horticultural garden surface. The appropriate financing that such a scheme would require might even include the cost of surrounding pedestrianisation, to increase the size of Victoria Tower Gardens.

What alternatives are there for a suitable holocaust memorial site? Some part of the large plot of the Imperial War Museum, where there is already a holocaust exhibit, is an obvious one, and was considered in the report that David Cameron commissioned. If that seems not geographically prominent enough, a site that strikes us as promising is Waterloo Place, SW1. It would be clever and practical to approach the holocaust education centre from The Mall through or alongside the Duke of York Steps, if the basements under Waterloo Place could be acquired. The education centre could have several levels before ending with a suitably inspiring monument above, near Carlton House Terrace.

In sum [our letter concluded], we believe the Holocaust Memorial Foundation and its supporters should think again about the choice of this site and its abiding problems for the UK memorial. Now that the shortlisted designers have demonstrated their expressive mettle, the Foundation should strive to find another.



Tall walls around waterways, by Lahdelma & Mahlamäki Architects and David Morley Architects

After sending our letter it was learned that Prime Minister May was holding to the Cameron holocaust. But considerable criticism of the choice of site has now gathered. Perhaps the darkly looming costs of Brexit will provide an excuse for escaping from this rash and probably unworkable commitment.

## PHONE BOX ADVERTS: HERE THEY COME AGAIN



The debate about the loss of Britain's classic Giles Gilbert Scott-designed K6 telephone boxes always seemed less important to us than the impingement of the eyesores put in their place. For example, no one ever seems to use the model KX+ design telephone box installed a few years ago outside the Regency Café SW1, but its two-meter-high advertising posters, courtesy of international postermeisters JCDecaux (that's the way they space it), keep us abreast of cheap toiletries and the latest films gone straight to rental download. When we last checked some years ago nothing could be done about the egregious visual assaults, since telephone boxes were deemed to be of public benefit and were therefore free from planning restrictions.

Now a company called Maximus Network has submitted an application proposing a mass installation of public call boxes in Westminster. Cllr Danny Astaire, cabinet member for Planning and Public Realm, has asked Ofcom to look again at its decision to grant the company a licence. Telecom applications are automatically approved after 56 days. The City Council wants the law to be changed so that local authorities have more power to prevent the installation of telephone boxes. And so do we. They may become of public benefit again despite their relentless street advertising if, in future, they become plug-in points for electric cars, but not now.

## WIGRAM HOUSE, ASHLEY GARDENS, THIRLEBY ROAD



This charming block of mansion flats built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century served for many decades as a student hall of residence (VisitLondon.com still lists it). The University of Westminster kept it unlet this last academic year and applied for its conversion to market residential accommodation, but they were told by Westminster planners that the loss of student hostel accommodation is not acceptable on policy grounds. So they withdrew that application.

A second application has now been submitted with a viability report from Savills (see 17/04832/FULL). It argues that the hostel accommodation formerly provided at Wigram House is no longer acceptable to students because the existing bathrooms needed to be shared, and that to provide individual bathrooms would be too costly for normal student lettings. The application attempts to show that the only viable possibility is a complete conversion to market-priced accommodation, because there is only one entrance to the building. That is, there is no obvious place for "the poor door" which some estate agents deem necessary in mixed market and affordable housing schemes to lead to the low-rent part of the accommodation.

What it comes down to is that the building's residual value shows that in London's virtually unregulated market (i.e. regulated only by policy frequently compromised), the determination is clear that this student hostel should become market housing. That's the value-free nature of a residual appraisal for you. Why doesn't the City of Westminster provide an annual grant in aid to the University of Westminster so these 172 student bed spaces can be maintained? It is good for everyone in Westminster to have students living here.

## WESTMINSTER CONSULTS WITH THE PUBLIC (MORE OR LESS) ABOUT TALL BUILDINGS



"I have no idea why it happened, but I'm rethinking my atheism."

Over the past few months a consultation organised by the City Council has been taking place with an online questionnaire entitled *Building height: Getting the right kind of growth for Westminster*. The cabinet member for Planning and Public Realm (councillor Danny Astaire again) explains that Westminster's aim is to "deliver the right kind of growth to an area that is already one of the most developed places in the country. ... We have to look at ways of making the best use of the sites we have... building higher and denser... and considering the scope for tall building, while protecting the places and spaces that make Westminster special."

Online questionnaires often seem predicated on desired responses, guiding respondents towards anticipated answers (check YouGov's current website for any number of such self-deceptive examples). Or they just manage to elicit predictable views (see *Which?* when they poll readers about their favourite tomato sauce). So we decided to dodge the quiz and submit our response in a paper we prepared ourselves.

To generally establish our broad cultural position, we tried to convey our view that political planners' everlasting bias in favour of growth as the abiding principle of economic prosperity should not be the only consideration regarding the acceptability of new buildings. For us, good design and contextual vitality matter as much, or more.

We said we thought that the determination of higher buildings was already effectively dealt with by the Council's robust planning system, and that adding an extra floor or two to existing buildings would make only a marginal contribution to reducing what the consultation questionnaire refers to as Westminster's housing crisis. Moreover, permissions to add extra floors are usually requested because existing occupants seek additional family living space.

We said that both residential and office uses are acceptable in tall buildings, and that we prefer retail facilities at street level. We would, of course, support the City Council's taking a firm line in requiring the provision of on-site affordable housing in new residential developments. And we would support a mixture of tenures, if the social housing provision was protected. In mixtures of market housing and affordable housing we strongly disapproved of unnecessary visual or operational indications of hierarchy, because they kill congeniality.



"The Victoria Opportunity Area," shown in dark gray. Parliament Square is about 3/4ths of the way across at the top. (See City of Westminster online for a clearer image.)

We thought the council-designated Victoria Opportunity Area (see map) now offers little scope for further development. During the redevelopment of Victoria Station significant use was made of air rights for retail and office use above the Brighton platforms. We suggested that this could be extended to the tracks further out from the station towards Grosvenor Bridge, keeping the height of development compatible with existing residential developments on either side.

## REVIVING AND OPENING OUT THE MALL'S ICA



Proposals have been submitted by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in the Mall for a complete revamp of the Grade I listed premises that the ICA has occupied since 1968. Very little has been done since Jane Drew designed their scheme on a severe budget when they moved in, and the building now shows the effects of lack of investment while still containing a great deal of asbestos.

The ICA attracts half a million visitors a year, and the main purpose of its proposed refurbishment is to go on providing "a centre of radical, innovative thinking, leading debates and promoting ideas." At the ground floor of the podium along the Mall, the premises are much larger than one would suppose. They include gallery space, a theatre, two cinemas and a bookshop, as well as a restaurant and a bar. But a small single entrance opposite Horse Guards Road is the only public access opening, next to 22 arches with fixed infill within the Doric colonnade along the Mall.

The planning application (see 17/00746/FULL) is to activate three columnar bays rather than one for the Mall entrance, to reconfigure the internal space, and to remove the infill that closes off the ground floor arches, glazing them for wide visibility towards Horse Guards and St James's Park. There are no other significant external changes. It seems an obvious and attractive plan to us.

## THE LSE NEVER STOPS

The London School of Economics will soon be under way with its new building at 44 Lincoln's Inn Fields, having just achieved planning



Grafton Architects' forthcoming  
Marshall Building

consent with the competition-winning design by Grafton Architects that we first reported on in the April 2016 newsletter. What looks to be an unsentimental but expressively complex design will squeeze alongside the small old three storey building that is nicely to be kept in place on the Fields' southwest corner (part hidden by the tree in the rendered view above). The new building's principal benefactor, hedge fund czar Paul Marshall, also is founder of one of those useful-sounding social science departments that the LSE is famous for: the Marshall Institute for Philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship. And before the new Marshall Building opens, the LSE will have completed another impressive modern building: Rogers Stirk Harbour's Centre for Social Sciences. Hard hats appreciatively tipped!

### 33-35 PICCADILLY



This rather unique site exposes the exterior walls of its small urban building on four sides. It is bounded by Piccadilly, Swallow Street, Vine Street and Piccadilly Place, and is currently home to a foreign exchange business and a branch bank. The existing building dates from the 1950s and pays respects to its more distinguished neighbour next door to the east, Norman Shaw's Piccadilly Hotel (now Le Méridien Piccadilly), and to St James's Church on the opposite side of Piccadilly. Well, it's the perfect site for a fashion industry temple, a multistorey rack of German kitchen interior showrooms, or perhaps a monster sculpture by Jeff Koons. (We jest.)

The landlord The Crown Estate wants the existing building gone because "it no longer meets the standards required by businesses and retailers." The replacement they seek is a high-quality building offering flexible modern office and retail spaces, faced luxuriously / impressively, and complementing the area by being built to a similar height. One's butler should soon be bringing in the ringing phone.

### 1-23 GROSVENOR GARDENS



This property's principal face is to Grosvenor Gardens with sides along Buckingham Palace Road, Beeston Place and Eaton Lane. A formerly elegant building in a significant location, it is showing increasing signs of degradation and neglect. Three wine bars are at street level but all other floors appear to be unused, and the remaining shopfronts on Grosvenor Gardens are boarded up. Sadly, the property is at the heart of a court case between the Candy brothers, the developers of No 1 Hyde Park, and Mark Holyoake, who borrowed £12 million from the Messrs Candy to develop 1-23 Grosvenor Gardens. Mr Holyoake says he hoped to make £100 million in profit from the project, but pressure from the Candys forced him to sell the site at a loss. Oh property developers, do behave!

A planning consent was granted in 2013. By now it would have expired, but it is still extant because the new owners of the site have undertaken some minor building works. According to the Westminster planners, the new owners / developers will produce a new planning application in the not too distant future. In the meantime the clock ticks, and the Grade II listed building lingers in semi-dereliction.

## UPPER VAUXHALL BRIDGE ROAD: "A DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY FRAMEWORK"

The City Council occasionally comes up with development ideas that it tries out on the Westminster Society to see if we might offer support, react with horror, or something in between. We gave the council a something-in-between opinion towards the end of last year when they produced a draft "development opportunity framework."

The framework set out Westminster's likely policy for what was referred to as "an urban quarter of potentially strategic significance, close to Victoria station and adjacent to the Victoria Opportunity Area." It was bounded by Gillingham Street, Vauxhall Bridge Road, Upper Tachbrook Street, Longmoore Street and Wilton Road, and is now mainly occupied by The Queen Mother Sports Centre (QMSC). The Council envisaged (we paraphrase some of the following):

- a comprehensive development to deliver social and community benefits (including a new and improved sports centre and leisure facilities and open space);
- the creation of a new, high quality urban quarter that improves the experience of all who live, work and visit the area;
- the provision of a destination in its own right;
- the expansion and improvement of "the commercial offer" and "the delivery" of new residential units;
- "a contribution to attractive new space, transforming the site into Westminster's housing needs;"
- support of the city's growth, "complementing the development of the Victoria Opportunity Area."

In the Society's response, we said that we would be opposed to any southward extension of the Victoria Opportunity Area to include the new quarter, as some of us thought that a buffer zone is needed between the mercantile and transport hub at Victoria and the small-scale domestic character of Pimlico. We agreed that improvement or replacement of the QMSC—now battered by use—was desirable, and that its replacement should continue to be a focus of community-based activities for the area and perhaps far beyond. But we would not support the use of compulsory purchase by the City Council (set out in one of the sections of the draft framework) in order to acquire the complete "development opportunity" site. That would force out local businesses, especially small retailers. Nevertheless, we suspect the motive for proposing the new development opportunity area is the potential for funding the £3.1 million cost of refurbishing the QMSC by selling the whole site to a developer. We now await further news.

## PATRICIA DRUMMOND, 1924-2017

Patricia, a longstanding member of the Westminster Society, died on 29 May, her 93rd birthday. As well as serving on the Society's Executive Committee, Patricia's working life had been with the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments and the National Buildings Record. For many years she was also personal assistant to Sir John Summerson, the eminent architectural historian. When English Heritage placed a blue plaque on Sir John's former home, it was Patricia who was invited to unveil it.



Foyles in 1936, with a suitably fine-looking customer of the period.  
A classic London photo by Wolfgang Suschitzsky