

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

May 2019

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY GETS ASSERTIVE



The NPG's diptych main entrance

Two of Westminster's greatest cultural artifacts—the National Portrait Gallery, and Westminster Abbey—are the settings of some relatively small current architectural proposals that, by mainly improving entry and circulation shortcomings, nevertheless accomplish far-reaching enhancements of urbanism. We love it when design achieves potent leverage like that.

The National Portrait Gallery's grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund has inaugurated an appeal for £35 million of building capital, largely to be used to increase public gallery space by 20 per cent and improve educational facilities. But to planning aficionados and site strategists like us, the most significant aspect of the refurbishment will be Jamie Fobert Architects' and heritage specialists Purcell's relocation of NPG's main entrance from the west side of the building to its north side.

The NPG's individual identity has always been somewhat unclear, with its inexpressive appearance unassisted by its being a neoclassical hunk squeezed alongside the extensive and similar-looking real estate of the National Gallery. It sure hasn't helped that the NPG's main entrance occurs on the narrow and perennially congested pavement used by pedestrians between Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square, nor that foreign visitors accustomed to driving on the right stand dithering in front of the diptych front doors, uncertain about which one to use going in. The great new solution moves the entrance to the NPG's uncongested north flank, bridging the sunken area adjacent to basement rooms, and facing the estimable 1910 Thomas Brock sculpture of actor Henry Irving.

The NPG's proposed new triptych entrance, facing actor Henry Irving.

We think an added portico would make the entrance properly important; and the urban space decidedly needs redesign by the City of Westminster.

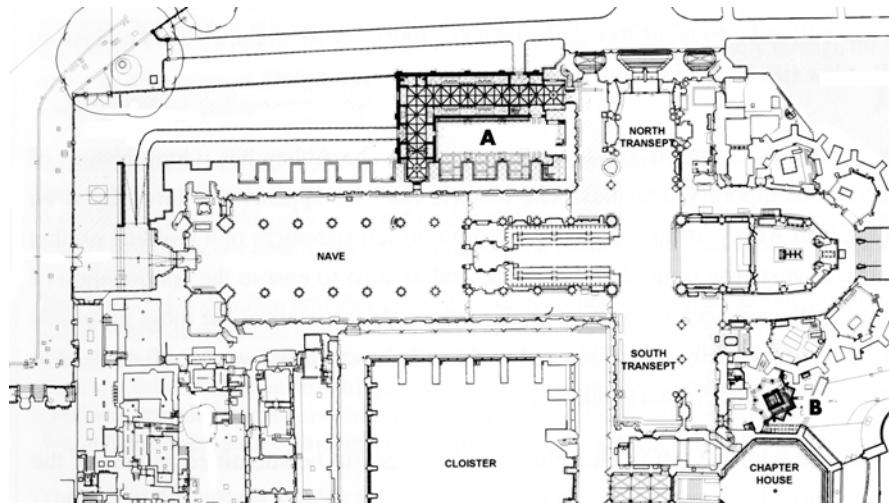
Perhaps Henry Irving should be moved to the axial centre of pedestrianised Irving Street-- retaining the plinth as a stage for 3D representations of the NPG's current exhibitions



WESTMINSTER ABBEY GETS ORGANISED

As Surveyor to the Fabric of Westminster Abbey, Ptolemy Dean won wide approbation last year by attaining access to the Abbey's triforium (the intermediate level of some basilicas built mainly for transverse structural support), with a brilliant design of an external freestanding lift wrapped with a stair (see B on the plan below)—the first significant external addition to the Abbey since Hawksmoor's.

Plan of Westminster Abbey. (B) is the recently completed lift and stair tower for access to the new triforium exhibition space; (A) is the proposed location of a new storeroom and visitors' entry on the foundations of the once extant Abbey sacristy



Now, solutions are being sought by the Abbey for some more troublesome problems: inconspicuous storage for numerous trolleys stacked high with chairs that now block the aisles when the chairs aren't needed; and a more successful circulation system for the admission of thousands of daily visitors who nowadays queue for tickets, submit to security, and then get their first impression of the Abbey via an uncongenial route from a side portico in the north transept. Another external addition is desirable, but connected how, and looking like what? Fortunately, Dean is still on the scene as Abbey Surveyor, and it looks like he's cracked it.

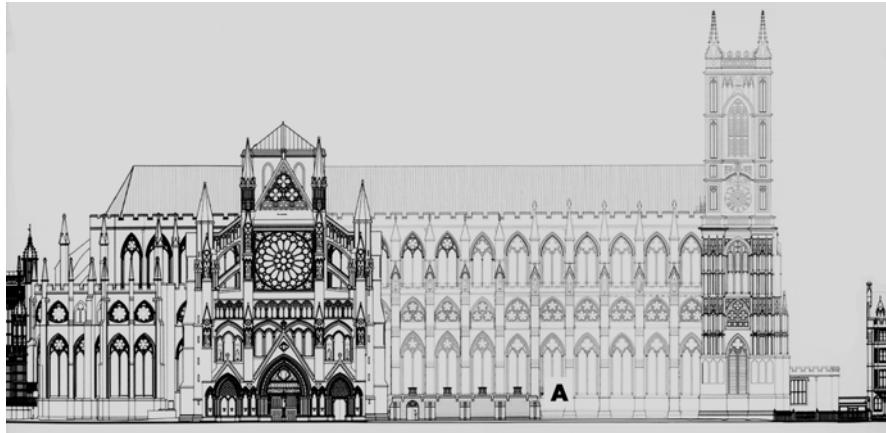


Model of north transept (left) and nave (right) exterior of Westminster Abbey, showing the proposed visitor access and storage building planned to sit on the foundation of an ancient sacristy

After exhaustive document research, archaeological discovery and copious sketch designs (most of which appear in an unpublished large illustrated report which we've seen in a preview), a low, "contextual," but plainly modern, building addition has been proposed that rises no higher than the nave windowcill height. Its exterior would have stone facing in horizontally coursed ashlar bands, and a range of twinned wall piers that are delicate, but correspond in their double width to the Abbey's nave buttresses.

Inside, the visitor route will have oak-ribbed structural bays, clerestory windows, and skylight lanterns. In the closed-off centre there would be a large skylit multi-use rectangular space mainly for chair storage, but able to be used for robing or flower preparation at large ceremonial events.

So it's hoped that in a few years, the 1.2 million or so annual visitors will enter a new dedicated portal on the north side of the Abbey and



North elevation of Westminster Abbey, showing the proposed visitor access and storage building at (A)

progress through an L-shaped route constituting entry, security, ticketing, and audio guide equipment rental. They will then proceed outside again within the fenced Broad Sanctuary perimeter to follow a paved walkway leading west, around the northwest tower, and up a step-free 1/20 slope ramp to the Abbey floor level. The climax of the *route architecturale*, and the principal object of the design (the final version of which we will be pleased to comment upon at planning consent stage), will be the visitors' entrance into Westminster Abbey through the historic Great West Doors, for their first view of the Abbey interior looking down the magnificent long axis of the nave.

PARLIAMENT TO SHUT DOWN, BUT NOT SHUT UP

As has been reported, the Palace of Westminster (or PoW, aka the Houses of Parliament) will, in the early 2020s, be closed for business and evacuated in order to carry out a vigorous architectural restoration and renewal programme lasting for at least five years. Having agreed an indicative budget of reassuring hugeness to ensure that the job will be done properly, Parliament also chose to not cohabit with the builders but move themselves out. So how to do that, and go where?



The Northern Estate, just north of the Palace of Westminster

The consultants awarded the vast and complex planning contract were BDP, with Head of Heritage Alasdair Travers in charge. We mention this because such authorship is nowhere to be found in *The Essential First Step*, the official public consultation document (online, see northernestate@parliament.uk). BDP's scheme first entails a comprehensive renewal and infill job on the largely Parliament-owned precinct known as the Northern Estate that lies directly north of PoW, from Bridge Street to the Ministry of Defence. Once complete, parliamentary offices, services and a temporary Commons chamber will be decanted there when Parliament endures its Mother of Renewal Works. It must have been a tough planning job to think through and there is some sense to it, but we are unconvinced and partly troubled by the extensive intrusions, even some disembowelling, of many important historic buildings, and the architecturally uninspiring "indicative views" of the proposed improvements shown in *The Essential First Step*.

WHOOPS! ALL LIVING FORMER PRIME MINISTERS BAMBOOZLED BY THE VICTORIA TOWER GARDENS HOLOCAUSE

As we await the City of Westminster's decision about planning consent for the UK Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre proposal for Victoria Tower Gardens, the designers have supplanted their submitted scheme with a revised one—a remarkable occurrence for a prize-winning project—though the revision entirely misses the point, since the engulfment of a lovely park isn't an issue of detail, but about the whole misguided notion. Meanwhile, the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation's PR team has cajoled support from all living former Prime Ministers plus the one extant, no doubt in the Primes' belief that endorsement will attest to their militant stance against antisemitism.

The Westminster Society has already commented on the memorial's terrible choice of site, but in view of its revisions and the recent dutiful new support, let's particularly consider its design.

It would be a great accomplishment to have a UK Holocaust Memorial that evokes the tragic past and provides a permanent warning for the future through its resonant design appearance. Unfortunately, this proposal's main expression is that of a theme park. It looks to be an attraction of displays, and shows its main considerations to be audience load, security, and crowd control. While visitor circulation may be no less important for a holocaust memorial than for, say, Westminster Abbey, the scheme's keep-moving-on dynamics might have been less obvious on another site.

More unforgivably (and ironically), the design deliberately rejects its associative context alongside its Palace of Westminster neighbour. It aims instead for a poignant sculptural expression of its own, but unique expressive forms fail when they are lame (expressing what?) and uninspiring. Well, its design wasn't chosen through a wide competition, productive of the likes of Washington DC's heartbreaking Vietnam Memorial or Paris's unique Centre Pompidou. It was a choice from a quite limited group, selected and judged by a panel of mainly representative functionaries.

Plainly, the design now being considered by Westminster planners introduces unacceptable turbulence in tranquil Victoria Tower Gardens, a supposedly protected Royal Park; it miscalculates the public space required for suitable use, which should have a quiet and amply sized working library for scholars as well as a learning centre for parties of schoolchildren and tourists; and it proposes to place an inevitable attraction to terrorism alongside our principal structures of government. The worst of it is that approval of this gormless scheme would tragically preclude a more soberly inspired holocaust memorial on an appropriate site. (Vienna, after uproar, surprisingly did have a second try to improve its holocaust remembrance. That produced its unforgettable Rachel Whiteread design: a library of books with spines turned backwards).



The Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial, Vienna (AKA The Nameless Library), by Rachel Whiteread

The decisive reason this proposal should be rejected by concerned planners is that it ignores Parliament's own likely future requirements in 15 to 50 years. The proposed expenditure of billions for the refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster has so far masterplanned nothing that considers enhancement to the entire parliamentary precinct, including, for example, how Victoria Tower Gardens might be enlarged by rerouted vehicle traffic and improved by pedestrianisation that could begin from Parliament Square. The scope of BDP's Parliament masterplan should be determining overall needs and connections and making stronger, wider provisions for the future. Clearly, a meritorious masterplan should be the required context for a planning application like this.



The Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial's site in Vienna was not determined by hopeful contemporary political associations, but by remains of the medieval synagogue underground that was burned down in the Wiener Geserah of 1420 decreeing the forcible baptism of Jews. There is a holocaust information centre on the ground floor of a neighbouring building.

MORE BRIEFLY NOTED

This issue's assemblage of proposals for several great Westminster institutions has required squeezing in the news about less illustrious matters. (Their brevity may misrepresent the time and attention paid to them by the Executive Committee.)

Interested parties may soon speak at Planning Committee meetings. Our September 2015 Newsletter published a reasoned discussion, quoting Councillors, about why Westminster disagreed with other local authorities about permitting interested parties to speak at Planning Committee meetings. They maintained a no-way rule. Now they've reconsidered, subject to restrictions. Details may not be finally settled. If you have an interest in a forthcoming Planning Committee decision, see the City of Westminster website for the current information on your ability to be heard.

Portland House. Land Securities, owners of the 1963 octagonal office tower once occupied by Blue Circle Cement (hence the name "Portland"), are proposing a new 14-storey wing attached to the



Portland House's proposed improvement as seen along Bressenden Place

central part of its frontage that would extend over much of the currently dreary, windy pedestrian setback of Bressenden Place. It will improve the street, have a lofty new lobby, and may be joined at the top of the tower by a new public viewing gallery. The Society looks forward to the Portland House planning application.

Townsend House, Greycoat Place. After we responded negatively to a preliminary redevelopment proposal's issues of height and alignment (see our June 2018 Newsletter), the Society's executive committee architects provided some guidance for the developer that may help them to swing the planning application into favour.

Christchurch Gardens. As also seen in our June 2018 Newsletter, the strictures in the last sentence of our assessment of the planned improvements for "the charming small park" at the corner of Victoria Street and Broadway were based on incorrect information. Our apologies. The "better ideas" that we suggested were already included in the plan, and it is intended that over time they will be carried out.

Affordable housing in Rampayne Street. The Crown Estate has acquired one of those William Whitfield architectural bouquets (cf. Whitfield's Whitehall façade of Richmond House within the Parliament-owned Northern Estate, described above) to convert to 60 affordable housing units in order to offset what they couldn't provide in their St James's Market development. But the Rampayne Street property has recently been listed, which probably reduces the number of units it might yield. We await further news about the redevelopment's shakeout.

Citizen M Hotel, 292 Vauxhall Bridge Road. A 248-room hotel has been proposed for the former Press Association building site by Citizen M, an international hotel brand that targets young professionals and culture-seekers in pursuit of what is usually an elusive oxymoron, "affordable luxury." The Society is generally in support of the scheme, but has helped the developers respond to concerns of prospectively adjacent residents in King's Scholars' Passage about privacy and light spillage by suggesting the reduction of clear glass, with measures such as shading fins.

The Westminster Society's Annual General Meeting will be held on 4 July, its agenda including the presentation of Biennial Awards, a brief talk, and a reception. See full details in the invitation separately sent to you by post!



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