

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2008

THE SOCIETY'S RECEPTION, AGM & LECTURE

It was good to see so many at our AGM at the beginning of May. Those of you who attended will know that after an enjoyable reception in the Lord Mayor's parlour at the top of City Hall, Ken Shuttleworth of Make Architects gave us a fascinating

presentation about the many projects his practice is involved within Westminster.

No sooner is one AGM out of the way than we start to plan for the next. In 2009 we shall celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of our foundation by Gay Christiansen and John Betjeman. 2009 is also a year in which we identify recipients for our biennial awards. We are delighted that our patron, HRH the Duke of Gloucester, has very kindly agreed to present the awards at next year's AGM on 13 May 2009. Further details will be in the next Newsletter.

The date of our actual foundation falls in September. To celebrate this auspicious occasion, and with the kind permission of the Dean of Westminster the Very Reverend Dr John Hall, we plan to host a reception in the east cloister of Westminster Abbey sometime in September 2009. Again, further details will be in the next Newsletter.

The Society's new website was launched at the AGM. If you haven't already done so, log on to www.westminstersociety.org.uk.

CHELSEA BARRACKS

The hottest topic in Westminster as far as planning applications are concerned is what will be the outcome of the Candy brothers' applications to redevelop Chelsea Barracks. It is apparent that the

redevelopment proposals have provoked a chorus of almost unalloyed disapproval. Members of local residents' associations calling themselves the "Barracks Opposition Group" have even asked Candy & Candy to adopt an earlier scheme put forward by P&O before the two brothers acquired the prestigious site. This was our own final response to the proposals:

The Westminster Society has had the benefit of two presentations by the applicant and their agents, both at pre-application stage and as part of the wider public consultation recently conducted by them. The proposals have been considered by the Society's Executive Committee and our conclusion is that a formal objection to the scheme should be submitted.

The Society finds the proposals to be a great disappointment for a number of reasons. Whilst the design of the

blocks facing Chelsea Bridge Road (CBR) is less uninteresting now than was originally proposed, the regulated conformity of the design of the blocks will ensure that, even when fronted by the existing and proposed additional London plane trees, the overall impression is likely to be redolent of a development pattern of a bygone era. We would like to have seen a more imaginative approach, including a measure of variety in design including variations to the height of individual buildings.

Viewed from CBR, nine basically identical buildings is not suitable for a site such as this.

Turning to the buildings on Ebury Bridge Road (EBR), the Society does not welcome the design adopted, namely a more solid façade treatment with smaller fenestration. We do, however, appreciate the approach of nine buildings at varying heights up to 13 storeys along the EBR frontage, thus reflecting the varying heights of buildings on the adjacent Grosvenor Waterside development.

The Society is concerned about the imbalance between the sizes of the "market" and "affordable/keyworker" housing. We support the principle of the 50% split and feel that many of the affordable/keyworker units will be unreasonably small in overall dimensions, leading, in our view, to standards of accommodation below what is required in Westminster.

The Society also notes the relative lack of community facilities within the development.

The proposed sports facilities are welcome, but we would appreciate some further clarity about the wider public access to such facilities that is essential given their paucity. In addition, the proposed retail provision is limited in the extreme given the proposed creation of 638 residential units. With only small retail outlets, it is likely that many residents will use cars to access distant major retail outlets where greater choice of merchandise will be available at extended shopping hours.

By and large, the Society regards the access arrangements for both vehicles and pedestrians as acceptable but suggests that the gating arrangements are an unwelcome feature and could give rise to a sense of isolation from the wider community.

In summary, the Society regards the proposal presented as a great disappointment given the strategic location of the site on a major "gateway" thoroughfare. We recommend the application be rejected in its present form.

The Westminster Planning Committee will be considering the proposals at its September meeting. What will that committee recommend, faced as it is with such hostility to the scheme? Will it require Candy & Candy to go back to the drawing board and come up with a more acceptable design for the site, or have things progressed too far for such a major rethink?

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THE MAYOR OF LONDON'S VISION FOR THE CAPITAL

Boris Johnson gave us a flavour of his views about architecture

in mid-June when he hosted a party at City Hall to signal the start of the 2008 London Festival of Architecture. But for details of his views on a wide variety of other key topics, we had to wait for the publication of *Planning for a Better London* in early July.

What we read there was neither surprising nor alarming. Unsurprisingly, he seems ready to protect London's historic skyline and architectural heritage including the Palace of Westminster. He says he is not averse to tall buildings, but he believes they must be in the right places, and only built with the agreement of local authorities. "Right places" would include areas that already have clusters of tall buildings, like Croydon and the Isle of Dogs. The London Plan will be changed to give more prominence to crime prevention—not least by "designing out" crime.

The Plan intends to protect gardens, playing fields, parks and woods, and the Mayor promises to meet the challenge of climate change, but doesn't go into details.

According to estimates provided by the GLA, London's population was 7.5 million in 2006 and will rise to 8 million by 2016. The number of households is expected to grow by 700,000 by 2016.* Most of the growth will be in one-person households, and the challenge will be to provide affordable accommodation.

The Mayor has done away with Ken Livingstone's 50 per cent affordable housing target (which, the Mayor's senior planning adviser Sir Simon Milton claims, achieved no more than 34 per cent in practice), in favour of a commitment to provide 50,000 affordable homes in three years.

* For more interesting facts and figures about London, go to www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/index.jsp, or Google "Focus on London."

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PARLIAMENT SQUARE

Despite the above, to the astonishment and dismay of many, Boris Johnson decided on 6 August that a comprehensive urban redesign for Parliament Square that has been in detailed study and development for nearly 12 years would not proceed.

At the moment (as seen on 12 August), the GLA's website continues to describe the scheme with admiration. Since

6 August the Mayor's office had evidently only had time to cast the previous text in the past tense. Ironically, it praised up the abandoned scheme as follows:

The Parliament Square Improvement project aimed to create a high-quality urban space that is fit for the 21st century and is at the same time sensitive to the surrounding architecture and the square's international significance.

The scheme was to consist of an enhanced and expanded public space, created by closing the south side of the square—the road that connects St Margaret's Church and Westminster Abbey—with accompanying improvements to traffic management and pedestrian facilities round the rest of the square.

The project reached the early stages of design, with Hawkins Brown leading a team of urban designers, including lighting, conservation and landscape experts, and Colin Buchanan conducting traffic modelling, highway design and environmental assessment.

The members of the World Squares for All Steering Group are key stakeholders for the project and include representatives of Westminster Abbey, the Parliamentary Estate, the Royal Parks, English Heritage, the Metropolitan Police and the Cabinet Office.

The cost of the project was estimated at £15-18m, to be funded by TfL, subject to a successful business case.

The state of Parliament Square is now a disgrace. It is barely more than a traffic island in a traffic roundabout, with a hotchpotch of figurative sculptures, some of them fine, others unmemorable or artistically maladroit, that have been placed there piecemeal. It has

poor lighting, only three benches, almost no pedestrian access, and indeed is usually surrounded by temporary police barriers. The only notable members of the public that have reached it in recent years have been Iraq war protesters. Meanwhile alongside Westminster Abbey and the Palace of Westminster, crowds of visitors are often crammed on to narrow pavements, from which reaching the square has been made nearly impossible.

It will be tragic if Parliament Square is destined to remain the way it is at present. The Mayor's powers allow him to take a fairly decisive view of his own, but relegating a worthwhile scheme to limbo seems a disastrous decision to some of us on the Westminster Society Executive Committee. What do you think? Let us know, as we consider what representation we might make.

THE "UGLY SISTERS" HIGH-RISES

Boris has been as good as his word in respect of three high-rise buildings designed by Allies and Morrison that were to have been built north of Waterloo Station. He has instructed Lambeth council to refuse planning permission for the buildings, referred to by

the London Evening Standard as "the Ugly Sisters." The towers ranged in height from 22 to 33 storeys, and the Mayor was concerned that they would have spoilt views of the South Bank.

The Society was invited to comment on these proposals, and we too objected.

One consequence of Boris's ban on the three towers is that Elizabeth House, an office block that contributes little that is positive to the built environment in Waterloo, will be with us a while longer.

The politics of tall buildings might not be as straightforward as the London Plan implies. The Mayor thinks they should be in the right place and only built with the agreement of Local Authorities, but he has the power to ban tall buildings even if a local authority is minded, as is the case with Lambeth, to grant planning permission. And he has done nothing about the Doone Street tower that will rise 43 storeys behind the National Theatre, visible from the gateway to Somerset House and intruding on the magical view to the east from the bridge over the lake in St James's Park.