

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

Special Edition February 2014

THE PRECINCT OF PARLIAMENT NEEDS A MASTERPLAN.

SO WE PROPOSE ONE

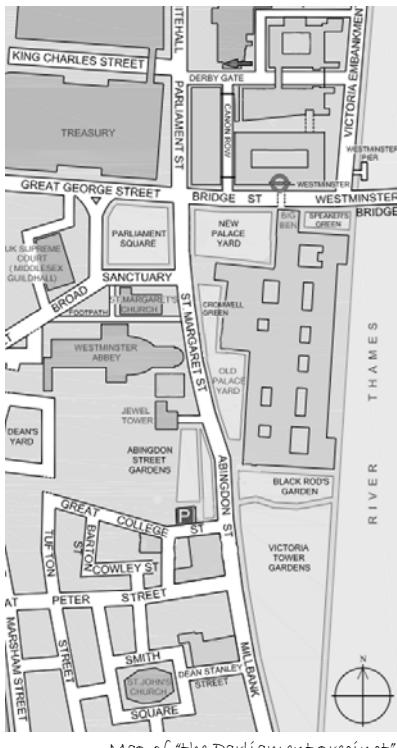
A state based on talk rather than violence, for three centuries and more, is a miraculous thing. A state that exported that idea to every continent is a fabulous thing. A state that once listened to Chatham and Gladstone and Churchill deserves an epic poem. It exemplifies the best political idea mankind has ever had, and it is time somebody said so.

—GEORGE WATSON, TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT, 16 SEP 2010

Epic poems aside, something else has occurred to us that Parliament should have: a masterplan designed for people. (In urban planning, "masterplan" is the term of art for an overall physical design conception and strategy.) We need one. What now passes in the precinct of Parliament for the considered townscape and the abiding public realm is decrepit, markedly dysfunctional and extremely inhospitable. Its non-management is worse than mismanagement.

Granted, modern cities are dauntingly complex. They are lumbered with manifold contending objectives. They have a multiplicity of notional abiding principles, from the elevated to the prosaic. They have press critics, demanding lobbyists, and critics such as us. And they often take orders from a fatal overabundance of managing authorities, none of which can reliably exert effective control on behalf of all of, or even most of, the city's "stakeholders" (apologies for that favoured morsel of bureauspeak). Does the city of Westminster come to mind?

It does to us. In Westminster, the turf we are loosely calling the Parliament precinct has been subject to the nominally strategic but frequently modified objectives of Westminster City's development plan laid down by the council; to the semi-authoritatively definitive London Plan promulgated by the Mayor of London (with the Metropolitan Police and Transport for London nudging his elbow); and of course, to the administrative and security requirements of Parliament—variously expressed by the Speaker of the House of Commons, committees, sub-committees, and occasionally by members of the cabinet and the Prime Minister. (The Prince of Wales may also have opinions.) Yet among them all, the brief for planning for people has patently been mislaid.



Map of "the Parliament precinct"

WHAT'S LOUDY



Parliament Square as a campsite



Parliament Square surrounded by a picket fence of flagpoles



Shrunken Mandela, Peel on plinth,
aggressive traffic



Hostile vehicle mitigation barrier, St
Margaret Street

Let's consider the main things that are functionally and experientially lousy about the Parliament precinct at present:

- The extremely poor design of Parliament Square (by Grey Wornum in 1950). An otherwise estimable architect, Wornum was given a shallow brief during postwar austerity days that left us with a mimsy municipal garden. It has a central grassy rectangle periodically trodden to mud when used as a demo site or campsite, followed by lengthy periods when it's fenced off to be reseeded; some overgrown trees now obstructing views to and from the Supreme Court; and paved border strips holding a piecemeal collection of figurative sculptures of varying scale, historical relevance and artistic quality. Fail.
- The pedestrian approaches to the square. Meshed and contained by aggressive vehicular flows, the paths for pedestrians are forbidding. "The traffic now makes the central space almost inaccessible," said Nikolaus Pevsner in *London 6: Westminster*. In the years since Pevsner complained it has become worse. Visitors understandably prefer to crowd onto the Westminster Abbey side of Broad Sanctuary for a decent view of Parliament rather than risk their necks crossing onto a traffic island, and for further discouragement the island is frequently surrounded by a picket fence of plug-in flagpoles that obstructs good architectural shots. Fail.
- The hostile perimeter of the Palace of Westminster. Augustus Pugin's argument in *Contrasts* (1836), his influential polemic in favour of Gothic revivalism published when he was working on the new design for the Palace of Westminster, held that the Gothic style was originally the product of a believing and caring view of humanity that should be embraced by publicly responsive contemporaneous institutions. The vestige of that logic today has been traduced with fences and gates to exclude everyone except the privileged and the elect, and with ferocious security measures that put people more in mind of Fort Laramie than of the selflessness of humbly caring monks. Especially forbidding are the "hostile vehicle mitigation barriers" (as security specialists call them); that is, the recently installed black concrete fortifications of Bridge Street and St Margaret Street. Fail.
- The security-mandated protected circulation of government ministers, and other key players, between office locations established in an earlier age and Parliament. In the current scheme of things, reasonable concern for the safety of these individuals while they move inconveniently from place to place imposes invisible constraints on urban improvement and better public use everywhere in the Parliament precinct. Fail. (We can't even see why with this one.)
- Inside the Palace of Westminster, the Grade I listed building "has decaying roofs, cracked guttering, extensive corrosion to its stonework, cramped and hot service areas and asbestos throughout," says *Building Design*. The building is therefore soon to receive a long-deferred £1 bn-plus refurbishment (from a team led by HOK Architects, subject to confirmation). The reconsideration of functional uses throughout that will be a likely part of the refurb's brief will present an almost never-to-be-repeated opportunity to reconsider as well the building's external existence, and its relationships within the precinct. Pass, finally?

OUR PLAN: We believe our plan solves all the problems above, and at a relatively reasonable cost (see “associated issues and opportunities”) that makes it sensible to seriously consider. The details, and our argument, follow.

1. FROM MILLBANK TO VICTORIA EMBANKMENT

First, and crucially, a transformation of the Parliament precinct so it functions as a beautiful and inspiring public realm depends on recognising the advantages of diverting the main vehicular route that now goes from Millbank to Broad Sanctuary (see street names on map, p.1). If the route diversion we propose is connectively satisfactory and is economically justifiable, as we believe, the outcome would allow pedestrianisation of the precinct from Westminster Abbey to the Palace of Westminster. Additionally, the removal of a public road at ground level along the west side of the houses of Parliament would eliminate the need for adjacent blast mitigation barriers.



Westminster Bridge's height over the river level

The new route we propose is a low-lying road, built with tanked sides, on piles in the Thames. (We'll call it Easy Street.) It would run north from the Lambeth Bridge roundabout, its top clearance covered over and made level with Parliament's existing ground floor river terrace. It would pass under the westernmost span of Westminster Bridge—as the bridge's height over the Thames Barrier-governed river height does allow—and join to Victoria Embankment. Westminster Pier would be moved a short distance downstream.



Easy Street would allow for the redesign of Parliament Square as a continuous pedestrian public space from Bridge Street to the Victoria Tower, with sub-walkways under Great George and Bridge Streets; with hard surfaces and open sight lines in the newly accessible square itself; and a new greenscape from Broad Sanctuary south to College Green.

2. THE ATTAINMENT OF WESTMINSTER HALL



Second, with people now able to be drawn across the liberated and vehicle-free ground towards it, Parliament could stop presenting itself as a Cinderella's Palace with lovely spires and fetching towers, yet no interior that can be got inside to see. (Very frustrating at Disneyland, as kids can tell you.)

To overcome that, we believe it is time for the Palace of Westminster's great hall to be shared with and opened to the public.

Architects and engineers learn about Westminster Hall as a glorious creation of medieval European timber construction. Historically it is the grandest work of venerable civil architecture in Britain, and symbolically, the pre-eminent expression and cynosure confirming the age and value of our government. It has been virtually off limits for a long time, except for ceremonial occasions when the illustrious dead lie there in state and for booked tours. At the indifferent mercy of its guardians, it has been made to almost disappear as a civil landmark.

That's a big mistake which should be redressed. We citizens of the realm should be able to ponder the shortcomings and accomplishments of government in the light of the objective correlative of British government's most time-honoured, splendidly surviving physical manifestation. Westminster Hall should be the public's accessible quantum and analogue for the importance of the work of Parliament.

In our masterplan, a new public foresquare to Westminster Hall would be the climax of a *promenade architecturale* that starts at the Supreme Court, extends over a new wide pedestrian crossing thinned of foliage, and finishes by integrally extending Parliament Square.

Free unguided visits to the hall might be permitted every available day of the year except when it needs closure for ceremonial functions. Advanced entry security could support swift admission. Though Westminster Hall's unoccupied hammerbeamed space is breathtaking enough, it would make sense for a curatorial staff to be established for the hall with a budget and brief for mounting historical and artistic exhibitions within the hall, adding further value to the experience of access and encouraging repeated public visits.

3. WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THE PRIME MINISTER?

Opening Westminster Hall to the public requires reconsideration of members' and civil servants' access to onsite car parking, some of which is now down a ramp in New Palace Yard. But in any case, the general question of members' access to Parliament needs to be critically re-examined for circulation and security reasons.

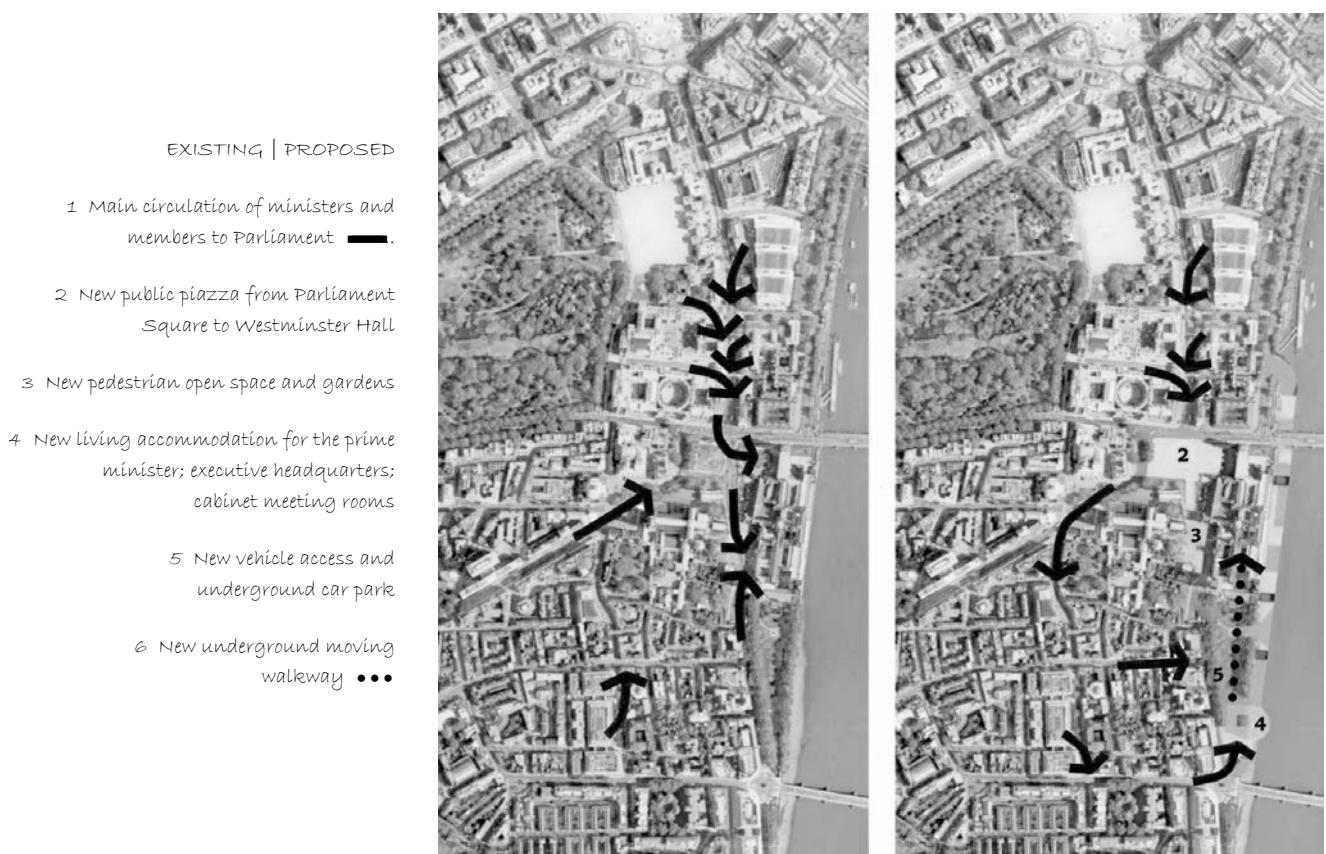
More than by its architecture, the pattern of the Parliament precinct is now largely determined by vehicular arrivals and departures—frequently by members of the Cabinet from the headquarters of their ministries, regularly from 10 Downing Street by the prime minister, and sporadically by the monarch.

It is mainly New Palace Yard's present function as an entry point for the circulation of protected cars, drivers and mobile security forces that prevents Westminster Hall's having a welcoming public approach from

Parliament Square. It is the need for secure access and room for vehicles that has made an isolation pen out of Cromwell Green and has turned Old Palace Yard into a wretched bulwarked parking lot. And with whatever partial attempt, the vehicular security problem will remain paramount and not fully solved as long as privileged access is required along public roads. But that can be changed.

So the third—and probably most radical—main part of our proposal is to relocate 10 Downing Street and the cabinet meeting rooms to a new site south of the Palace of Westminster. (This much is for sure: as a strategic townscape improvement, the move wouldn't be in callous abandonment of any expressive historic architecture, except for the traditional view of a painted black door.)

We suggest that external vehicular access for other parliamentarians should also be relocated there, with a new underground carpark and new executive centre safely and securely connected northwards with a moving walkway under Victoria Tower Gardens. The area of the public park subtracted for use by the new buildings would in effect be swapped for larger public areas and gardens that would be replacing St Margaret Street and Abingdon Street.

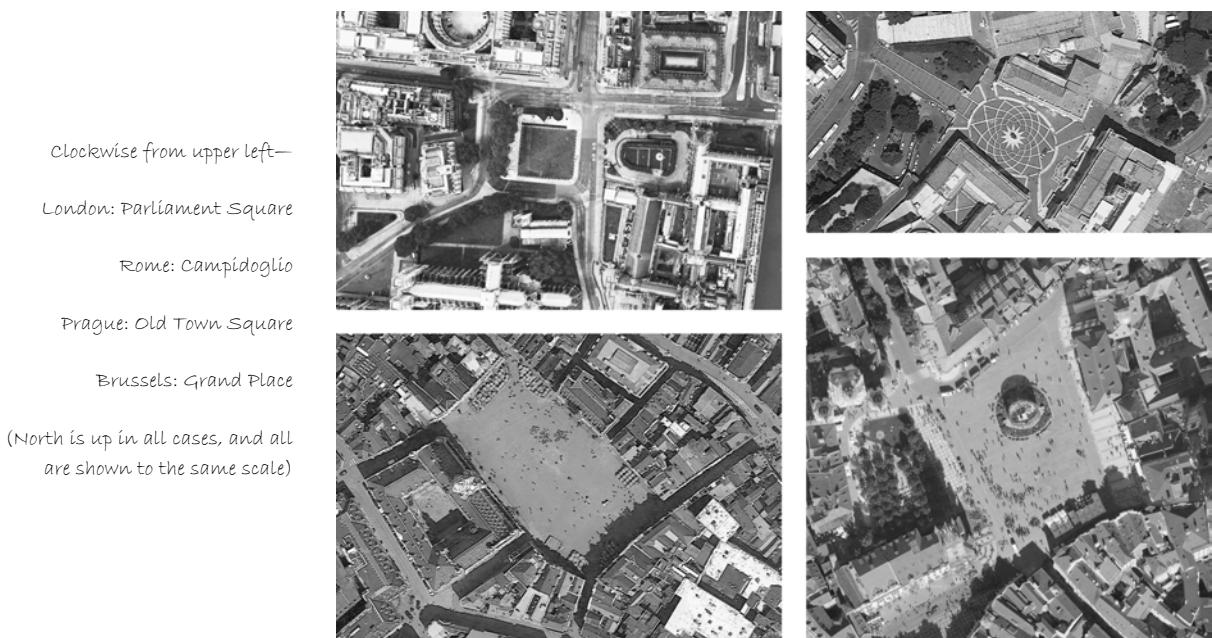


Liberated from their current locations in Downing Street and elsewhere that have become barricaded and cut off, the functions of the executive branch of government could be more securely provided for in a new building of architectural importance and excellence.

Couldn't taking all these objectives together achieve a more accessible and useable Parliament precinct, that would also fittingly enhance and sustain the public's sense of government for the people?

4. ASSOCIATED ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

- **The un-greening of Parliament Square:** If squares got press reviews for townscape, ours would now rate (****). It needs the replacement of obstructive trees, flagpoles and muddy grass with durable hard materials to be found in all other great town squares, e.g. Amsterdam's Dam Square (***); Prague's Old Town Square (****); Brussels' Grand Place (*** 1/2); Rome's Piazza della Rotonda (****) and Campidoglio (*****—its exemplary design by Michelangelo rates five stars). We need elbow room, open views, and solid ground support with the greenery out of our faces and not under our feet. That would allow a comfortable look at Parliament's edifice to appreciate how it was conceived to express—arguably—“the best political idea mankind has ever had,” or anything near it; not to



mention decent perspective and photo sightlines for Westminster Abbey and the Supreme Court. Parliament Square's greenery should start beyond the edges; for example in a new park in place of St Margaret Street. And in approaches, such as—

- **Flowering cherry trees up Whitehall:** London's famous short boulevard leading to Trafalgar Square was designed for regiments on parade, but it has become a six-lane pedestrian crossing hazard. A richer and undoubtedly safer redesign would provide one or two rows of low-height flowering fruit trees along the middle, with appropriate gaps for the great Cenotaph and other monuments. Seen en route from Parliament Square, the Nelson Column above a blanket of low ornamental trees (instead of just traffic) would become more markedly prominent as a grand object at the end of the urban axis.
- **Rationalise the jumble of figurative sculptures:** The Parliament Square sculpture collection today looks to be what it is, *ad hoc* in a bad way: an accretion assembled over a period of time of figurative works representing both greatly admired and largely forgotten people, rendered in various materials, executed by talented and untalented sculptors, displayed and lit poorly. We are in favour of

(a) re-siting most of them; (b) designing and providing a consolidated new rank of sculpture plinths in double hexastyle or octastyle plan form incorporating expert lighting; (c) commissioning 12 or 16 new sculptures of parliamentary worthies by two or three outstanding modern figurative sculptors, in a common scale using a single sculptural material. Honouring the most eminent parliamentary figures in formal assembly could be an outstanding attraction.

- Victoria Street - Parliament Square bottleneck:** Broad Sanctuary to and from Parliament Square narrows to a single lane in each direction in order to limit the superimposed load on existing underground routes. An economical solution to relieve the traffic congestion bottleneck would be upstand side beams forming a flat bridge over the dodgy bits, designed as integrated townscape. The beams could, for example, be Vierendeel trusses along the roadway sides, their verticals creating expressive colonnades.
- The new Thames roadway and the river:** To protect the iconic view of Parliament across the Thames, Easy Street's height above the river must be kept low. (It could be built as a tunnel completely under the river, but that would be more difficult and costly.) To achieve near-invisibility, the lowest datum of the roadbed has to drop close to, or even below, normal river height so its decked-over roof level is no higher than Parliament's river terrace. That requires an outer retaining wall to resist collapse and a tanking finish to prevent seepage when the river is higher. These are not a big deal in engineering terms. Compared to other new urban roads, the cost of the roadway will be low because the right-of-way over river mud is essentially free. The outer retaining wall has to rise up high enough at the ends to prevent overspill. When complete, Easy Street should have no greater risk of flooding than other roads along the Embankment.

PARLIAMENT'S ICONIC APPEARANCE ALONG THE THAMES is rightly cherished, and has to be protected.

The view here—from the cross-river terrace of St Thomas's Hospital—indicates that a low-lying band of roadway on the opposite water edge would look very foreshortened in width and be virtually unnoticeable.

Could future accommodation in the Thames also be contemplated? If the buildings were to be only a couple of storeys high and as discreet in looks as simple river barges, they might enrich the visual picture of Parliament attractively and acceptably, as these boats do.



- The Thames development opportunity:** Easy Street's roof deck will provide a widened river terrace that could be used as a bigger café terrace, a handsome garden, or even the floor

of a single-storey extension to the Lords and Commons libraries. And optionally, the shockingly radical idea of building parliamentary accommodation beyond Easy Street into the Thames could be entertained. Future elements that might deserve consideration could include a helicopter pad (using the clearway of the river, helicopters would have safe takeoff and landing conditions), a parliamentary secretariat, and more individual MP's offices. We would expect any proposed new architectural elements to be low-lying and discreet, but they could be separate enough from the historic building to be permitted design flexibility within a sound contextual relationship to the Gothic Revival original. Alternative energy provisions and river jet fountains are obvious design possibilities.

1 Redesigned Parliament Square—visually open from the Supreme Court, with a relocated wide pedestrian crossing

2 Westminster Hall promenade approach: possible cafes and new figurative sculptures

3 New Parliament Gardens

4 New living accommodation for the prime minister & executive headquarters for the government pro tem

OPTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

5 Future Members' Office Wing on stilts

6 Thames fountains

7 Future Parliamentary Secretariat on green island

8 Floating helicopter pad on pontoons

ROOM 443, THE LINEN HALL,
162-168 REGENT STREET,
LONDON W1B 5TE

PATRON: HRH THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER KG GCVO
PRESIDENT: THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER
CHAIRMAN: OLWEN ROWLANDS

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 235400

THIS DOCUMENT MAY BE FREELY QUOTED AND REPRODUCED.
PLEASE CREDIT:
THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY
PARLIAMENT PRECINCT MASTERPLAN
BY NATHAN SILVER

