

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



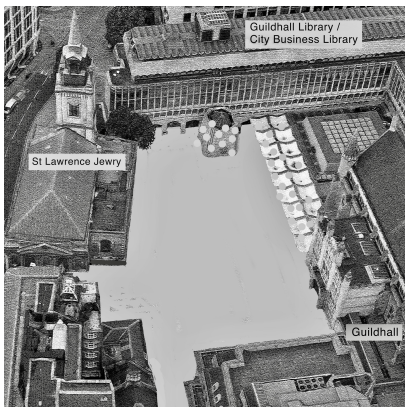
URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

(No. 32) January 2022

THE NATIONAL HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL NEEDS A RIGHTEOUS SITE

Since our last newsletter, the Planning Inspectorate has denied a site reconsideration of Victoria Tower Gardens for the National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre-- on the cockeyed grounds that "public benefit outweighs any harm;" i.e. the memorial's virtuous manifestation deserves to flatten all objections. A small hopeful window then appeared at the beginning of November when leave was granted to pursue an appeal by London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust. Among a number of challengeable issues, a major one is that no alternatives to David Cameron's choice of site were appraised. *(The Westminster Society strongly supports the appeal. To help with legal costs, online contributions can be made to London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust, account no. 20442596, sort code 60-83-01, reference VTG and your name.)*



Guildhall Yard with St Lawrence Jewry left and the Guildhall Library above (its existing entrance pavilion subject to modification). It would be a superb and righteous Holocaust Memorial site.

Though proposing an alternative site is not deemed a responsibility for objectors, this Newsletter's editor presumed to do that in an article for the May 2021 issue of *The Architectural Historian*. "It is undeniable that a monument's conceptual strength attains some of its most profound power through historical propinquity," I said, and on those grounds argued that the "best historic choice would be a site within the area of the medieval Jewish ghetto that existed around Old Jewry Street in the City. ... Rationalising the clutter in the Guildhall Yard, a Holocaust monument could be built adjacent to Wren's St Lawrence Jewry. And on the west side of Guildhall Yard, an enlarged, partly redeveloped Guildhall Library and City Business Library could grow and be modified to encompass the Holocaust learning centre. Guildhall Yard would amply meet the sponsors' desire for a juxtaposed British political association, and no place would be better."

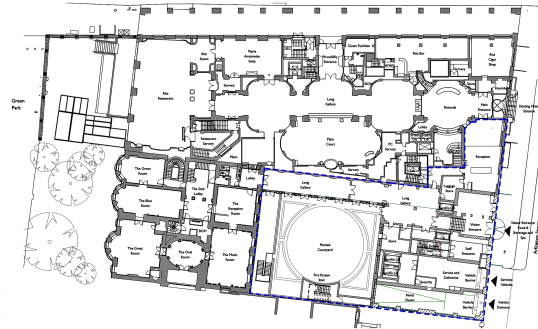
THE MILLS OF THE GODS GRIND SLOWLY

Many of the other recent planning issues the Society has been discussing are matters coming by for the second, third, or who's counting, time. Our views and comments sometimes changed in response to scheme improvements (or retrogressions).

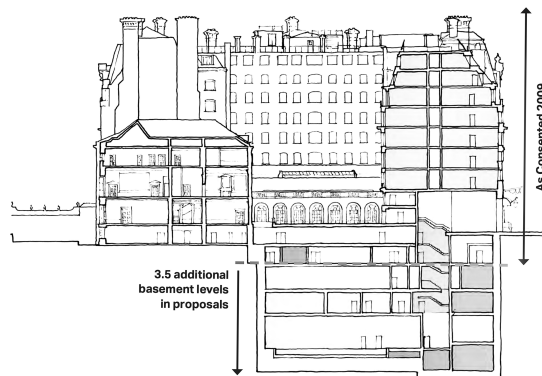
The London Ritz Hotel's smooth consolidation with a new wing around the corner at 22 Arlington Street has been going on since

some time before 2009, the year that we bestowed on the Ritz the Westminster Society Biennial Award for Renovated Architecture "in recognition of the restoration and adapted use of a former urban palace ... designed by William Kent for Henry Pelham a few years before he became Prime Minister...". But that denoted a mere fragment, gilded and polished, of the Arlington Street property that is now being taken much further (see 21/02959/FULL). A 1970s building will be demolished to extend the Arlington Street wing,

Proposed Ground Floor plan. Top, Piccadilly. Lower left, existing William Kent House facing Green Park. Lower right, new wing extending upwards to match the vintage Ritz design.



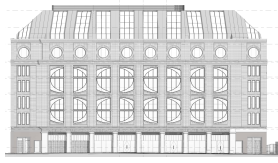
Section through proposed new wing. The bottom level of the new basements will be a swimming pool, far below the planted courtyard that lies between the new wing and William Kent House.



The new wing, the last five bays seen at the far end of the Arlington Street facade, left, will be a virtual, almost imperceptible extrusion of the design of the 1906 Ritz.



to be couched in old Ritz design language. for the inclusion of new hotel accommodation, car and cycle parking, relocated hotel plant, four basements for better hotel support spaces, and general upgrades. We were impressed by the calibre of the proposal, the extensive supporting documentation and the appropriate experience of the design team, and raised no objection.



10 Greycoat Place again



The café outside 10 Spring Gardens would be much more inviting with awnings extending from the building



The future 62 Page Street, perhaps

We wrote up **Premier House, 10 Greycoat Place** (see 90/00507/FULL) in the last Newsletter saying that "the architects had wrestled to achieve an evocation of old warehouse-ness expressed in modern terms that doesn't suggest fanciful insincerity." Providing further advice at meetings with the developers, the Society managed to argue successfully for a roof design that we felt was more appropriate for a building in this context, and some changed scale in the round windows and those with curving mullions. They didn't fully overcome the to-be-built design's distractions.

Also first discussed in Newsletter 31, the Society has now expressed its views about **10 Spring Gardens** after its planning application was submitted (see 21/02401/FULL). We approved of the general upgrading of this 1975 building adjacent to Admiralty Arch, but we said we thought the overriding issue from a design and user perspective should be tackling what is a currently unsatisfactory arrival experience through a dark windswept undercroft. The proposed café on the Mall side could also play a bigger role in the reworked ground floor and be given higher visibility from Trafalgar Square. We'll say more about the Crown Estate's separate proposals for the open "public realm" space when they are further along.

The particular grinding mill that the gods reserve for supremely slow work continues to make barely audible boggler-boggler-boggler noises while chewing on **62 Page Street** (Newsletter 31 again). Its planning application (see 20/06123/FULL) was submitted on 1 Oct 20, but remained unvalidated by the planners until 29 Jan 21. In Nov 21, with planners' apologies that the application hadn't been looked at in months, the architects were advised that the City Council Core Strategy is to be updated to virtually ban basement bedrooms in Flood Zone 3, in case the Thames Barrier fails (which presumably makes a few hundred thousand Westminster residents sudden uninsurable occupants). For 62 Page Street this news mandated a reconsidered professional flood risk assessment, followed by design changes to raise the basement windowcills and raise the floor level at the street entry. The planners have now sent out another round of invitations to neighbours for comments. Heigh ho.

The Marble Arch Viewing Mound was publicised by Westminster Council with high excitement last year. It was just starting to be under construction when we wrote it up in Newsletter 31. It is now being taken down, accompanied by a resignation and what seems to be Ignominy Max for the attendant Councillor who got it going.

We are genuinely sorry about the failure of any attempts at vitality and congeniality in Westminster. (See our motto at the top.) But, well, how could anyone in charge be expected to anticipate the surprising cost multiplication of the planned budget to £6 million; the annoyingly slow growth of natural plants; and the unexpected and mortifying failure of tourists to wish to pay £8 for a climb over scaffolding half-buried in rolls

The Marble Arch
Viewing Mound complete.
The large applied white triangle
appears to have been a design element
hinting at a relationship to the white
rectangle of Marble Arch.



of turf in order to gain an unfamiliar high view of the Marble Arch, and a near-glimpse of Primark round the corner? Gosh, those outcomes were easy to unforesee.

164 VAUXHALL BRIDGE ROAD



Since the closure of the HSBC bank branch at this strategic neighbourhood street corner a few years ago, the upper floors of the building have remained empty. The Society is keen to see the whole building back in prosperous service, following a long history of planning applications for various residential configurations for the upper floors, and most of the ground floor and basement remaining in C2 use-- currently occupied by Foxtons estate agents.

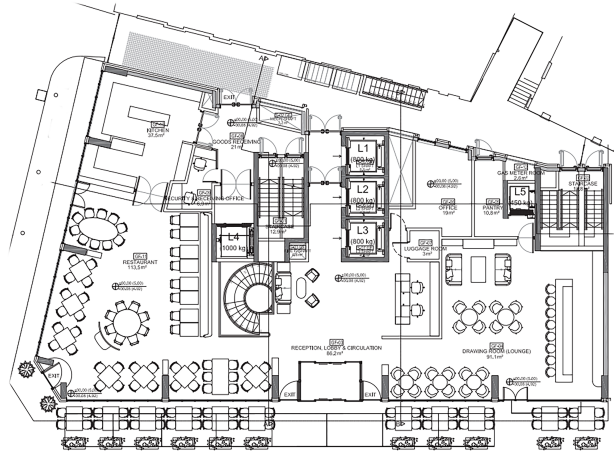
The schemes have ranged from a consented single residential unit (see 12/11895/FULL), to seven consented residential apartments with a single storey mansard extension (14/11365/FULL), to the current scheme proposing 19 serviced apartments (20/06299/FULL). All of these proposed uses seem to us acceptable, subject to the provision of sufficient service space and the appropriate involvement of on-site management.

The current proposal includes a straightforward restoration of the building exterior, with an extension in the familiarly approvable mode of a 70-degree pitched mansard roof. (A proposal for a double storey mansard was withdrawn in 2013.) The 19 apartments, 24 to 27 square meters each in size, would essentially be small hotel suites, to be rented for short and long term tourist or business use. Given the proximity to Victoria Station, we think this is acceptable.

Our concerns are about the lack of any amount of ancillary space sufficient for servicing the flats to the degree required for the practical efficiency of the operation. A high turnover of visiting occupants requires committed amounts of space for both luggage in transit and removal-generated refuse, accompanied by some settled plans for how waste and recycling would be dealt with by the occupants and management. Bicycle parking is also desirable. Because of these issues, we don't feel able to support the scheme until workable proposals for them can be shown.

READY TO DINE AT A NEW LUXURY BOUTIQUE HOTEL?

The best news for some time from Westminster Planning is about a development that local residents might look forward to. It includes the encouraging possibility of a good local restaurant and bar on the ground floor of what is to be called the Victoria Hotel, as well as a rooftop cafe-- within a new lodging, if smallish, that expects to trade at the upper end of the market; or to use tourist trade lingo, is aimed at becoming a new Luxury Boutique Hotel. The site is well located, and pretty cool: on the corner of Strutton Ground and Victoria Street, overlooking Christchurch Gardens across the road.



The Victoria Hotel ground floor plan.
Will that kitchen be big enough?



View of the Victoria Hotel looking
south, towards Strutton Ground, left.

The existing building on the site is a late '80s office originally owned by Standard Life. The owners obtained a planning consent for a change of use to benefit the Travelodge company for a budget hotel, the structure to be retained with new facades. But Travelodge had financial difficulties due to the pandemic, and so pulled out of the purchase deal. Standard Life then sold the building to Victoria Project Ventures, who made a new planning application (see 21/08144/FULL) on the grounds that analysis shows the existing

building to be substandard for hotel use. The new structural frame would provide more functional hotel room heights, and would allow the facade to line up well with that of the adjacent Artillery Mansions.

The Westminster Society thinks the new design could make for a good building with plenty to offer to the local area, but we wish the rebuilding justifications were stronger. We would also like to see the applicants and Trehearne Architects provide further information about how the hotel can be adequately serviced without an integral loading bay; reconsider the building's expression at roof level and its exposure of exterior tables to the residential neighbours; rethink the position of the ground floor kitchen so it wouldn't make for a large blank exterior; and to further study how the exterior at street level from the corner can help to suggest an inviting pedestrian funnel from Victoria Street into Strutton Ground's daily street market.

1 ST JAMES'S SQUARE



This existing building of deeply depressing appearance was designed by Sheppard Robson as the headquarters for BP. It was completed in 1997 with a design perhaps able to claim that it reflected the office market at that time, with a small atrium and deep plan offices. But as is nowadays thought, the building's low ceilings, inefficient air conditioning and poor interior daylight don't meet the projected office market for the next 20 years. We agree with the desirability of a comprehensive reconstruction in the circumstances, and are certain that the aim of substantially improving the functionality of the building for the next owner should refresh and supplant its present dead look.

Foster + Partners are the capable practice that has got the job of reconsidering all aspects of this building. As discussed with our team, their proposals are to re-use the existing concrete frame of the lower levels, rebuild the upper levels in steel, and to replace the existing elevations in order to create "the most sustainable and carbon-neutral retrofit which will command some of the highest rents in the West End."

Our team commended an exemplary environmental analysis, and the stated net-zero ambitions. We thought there would be need for more analysis on the rebuilding's potential impact on St James's Square (though it's sure to improve on what exists), and we expressed slight concern about potential "height creep." But we look forward to the design's next stages of development at its further pre-app and final planning presentations.

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