

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

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WESTMINSTER SOCIETY BIENNIAL AWARDS 2022

The proper year for The Westminster Society's biennial awards should have been 2021, but the Covid lockdown comprehensively prevented getting members out and about to appraise award candidates, so the awards were deferred until this year. (In future, the shunted event will be held in even-number years).



Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners,
architects: The Centre Building, LSE

Another difference was that the award certificates were delivered to the office premises of recipients rather than being presented at the Society's Annual General Meeting. Attendance at our AGM has been dwindling in recent years, and members of the executive committee decided that we need a membership drive before allowing our authoritative award evaluations to run the risk of appearing to be unimportant acclaim if our community support seems feeble. That's a matter we hope to address next year.

Pandemic notwithstanding, the quality of work in receipt of awards was extremely high, and we were delighted to be able to honour some powerful and worthy winners. As usual, the Westminster Society awards were presented to both clients and designers. The winners, with the citations stated on award certificates, were as follows:

The **Biennial Award for Architecture** was presented to The London School of Economics and Political Science, client, with Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners, architects, and also with Grafton Architects, for "The Ongoing Achievement of Design Excellence on the LSE Campus with the New Centre Building and the Marshall Building, London WC2." The citation:

THE LSE'S UNIMPEACHABLE DISCERNMENT OF DESIGN TALENT, SUPPORTED BY ITS MUNIFICENT BUILDING ENDOWMENTS, HAS IN THE LAST FEW DECADES PRODUCED ACADEMIC ARCHITECTURE OF INTERNATIONALLY MATCHLESS DISTINCTION THAT ALSO HAS TRANSFORMED THE BEAUTY AND GRACE OF ITS URBAN QUARTER. THIS AWARD HONOURS THE LSE AS AN EXCEPTIONAL CLIENT, AND ACCLAIMS THE ARCHITECTS OF ITS RECENT CENTRE BUILDING AND MARSHALL BUILDING.



Grafton Architects: The Marshall
Building, LSE

The **Biennial Award for Renovated Architecture** was presented to The Courtauld Gallery, client, with Witherford Watson



..Witherford Watson Mann Architects:
The renovated Courtauld Gallery



..Grimshaw Architects: pedestrian
ways, The Elizabeth Line



..Weston Williamson & Partners,
architects: Paddington Station,
The Elizabeth Line



..Hawkins\Brown, architects:
Tottenham Court Road station, The
Elizabeth Line

Mann Architects, for “The Renovated Galleries, Somerset House, The Strand, London WC2.” The citation said:

THE ARCHITECTS HAVE TRANSFORMED PART OF HISTORIC SOMERSET HOUSE WITH ASTUTE AND SUBTLY ACCOMPLISHED IMPROVEMENTS, SOMETIMES STRUCTURALLY DEMANDING, THAT MAKE THE RENOVATED GALLERIES EMERGE WITH EFFECTIVE AND BEAUTIFUL CLARITY FOR THE BENEFIT OF BOTH PRESENT GALLERY VISITORS, AND FOR THE FORTHCOMING RETURN OF COURTAULD STUDENTS IN ADJACENT TEACHING ACCOMMODATION.

The **Biennial Award for Urban Vitality** was presented to Transport for London, client, with Grimshaw Architects, Weston Williamson & Partners, Hawkins\Brown, and Foster + Partners, architects, for “The Elizabeth Line’s pedestrian passageways, and the design of new stations at Paddington, Tottenham Court Road, and Canary Wharf.” The citation said:

BEYOND MERE TRANSPORTATION, URBAN UNDERGROUND TRAVEL’S TIME-SHORTENING DIMENSION—CONDENSING, AND THE THRILLING LINKAGE OF PLACES, CONTRIBUTE POWERFUL NEW CAPABILITIES TO CITY DWELLERS THAT EVOKE ACCLAIM AS ENHANCED URBAN VITALITY. THIS AWARD HONOURS THE SIMPLE BUT VIVACIOUS TUBULAR ENVELOPES OF THE ELIZABETH LINE’S PEDESTRIAN CONNECTIONS THROUGHOUT, AND THE OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NEW STATIONS AT PADDINGTON, TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD, AND CANARY WHARF.



Foster + Partners, architects: Canary Wharf station, The Elizabeth Line

TRAIN STATION IS UNPUNCTUAL



..By John McAslan and Partners

The official explanation for the Elizabeth Line’s Bond Street Station opening months after the rest was that the delay was caused by tunnelling problems, and the extra impact of work force quarantines at the constricted and therefore low-staffed site.

Additionally, the original building contract was terminated and temporarily taken over, then a new builder assigned— an administrative shuffle that always costs extra time and money. At any rate the station is now open at last. We might assess it for a Westminster Society award in 2024.

COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY



Venturi-Scott Brown's dimly glazed grand staircase rising to the 2nd floor main gallery rooms

The main façade of the Sainsbury Wing chamfers the corner of Trafalgar Square's space.

The architectonic elements of its façade are complex, bending and folding in response to scenographic rather than functional demands.

Overall, they amount to a magnificent exercise demonstrating Venturi's display of "inflections" in response to context— but not just physical context; also contexts of decorum, image, and history.

Fantastic inflections shown here include the unexplained vertical folds of walls above rectangular openings; the mixture of flat pilasters with a single column in full relief; the sudden bunch of overlapping pilasters to the right as if they were curtain folds, or perhaps a street gang; the memorous and sculptural effect of blank windows of different sizes as if windows really had once been in existence there in a different life.

In 1967 a book was published that fundamentally affected architects' thinking about the design of buildings. Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* aimed at enriching architects' concept of effective creation. The splash of interest wasn't small, and the ground today remains wet with the same torrent of ideas.

Venturi's core principle of belief was that good architecture is complex and contradictory rather than plain and simple. Among other bones of contention, he encouraged us to view the ideal model for architecture not as a singular precious Greek temple, which Le Corbusier had upheld, but as an almost reverse archetype: the building of Italian towns with rich, inventive and adaptive forms. Created incrementally over time with basic technology, heeded relationships and common aims, this model takes its authority conveying the perception of complex but satisfying spatial containers that define their streets and squares functionally and artistically.

Complexity and Contradiction was followed five years later by *Learning From Las Vegas*, with Venturi's wife Denise Scott Brown and a graduate student of theirs as co-authors. The new book clinched the case against the design enemy of the day, the familiar modernism that had become mute and vacuous. Almost as influential as *Complexity and Contradiction*, *Las Vegas* became the abiding manifesto of the emerging postmodern style. When Prince Charles called the semi-modernist winning design for the National Gallery's expansion "a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much loved and elegant friend" on 30 May 1984, and four months later Environment Secretary Patrick Jenkin shockingly declined the



winners' planning application, the worm had truly turned. In April 1985 the Sainsbury family gave the nation £50 million to aid completion. The Venturi-Scott Brown practice was invited to the competition, and in January 1986 they were awarded the job.

The recent steep rise of visitor numbers should have led the National Gallery's current curator and board to plan for more entrance space and access for the disabled in or near the original central portico, but instead they decided to make a provisional main entrance through the Sainsbury Wing its permanent one— disregarding the Venturis' vigorous design logic and carefully worked-out plan. The undiscerning alterations that Selldorf Architects, the new team leaders, proposed were not well received by The Westminster Society and most others, with extra aggrieved complaints from Denise Scott Brown, now aged 91 (Robert Venturi died in 2018). Nevertheless, Selldorf Architects received listed building and planning application consents last month. So it goes, but probably it shouldn't have.

Venturi-Scott Brown's original design for the Sainsbury wing entrance lobby, with low height, scenographic architectural elements, modulated lighting and low lit but spatially overwhelming grand staircase, were all intended to play dramatic parts in a promenade architecture leading to the rooms on Level 2, where the gallery's greatest works are displayed.



Selldorf Architects' redesign of the same space, to express it as the new main public entrance lobby of the National Gallery. It removes part of the first floor, the dark staircase glass, and the Venturis' sophisticated historical / monumental feel. A stylistically tone-deaf glass balcony edge is added. Though strongly opposed by commentators, it has now received planning permission.



Selldorf Architects' unconvincing shot at Venturi design principles proposes that the newly carved name should boldly cross over stonework folds and the projecting metope.



PORTLAND HOUSE (AGAIN)



This newsletter has written about Portland House in issue 28 of June 2018 (concerning an affordable housing set-off when Portland House was seeking planning approval for an all-residential conversion); and in issue 29 of May 2019 (back to offices, but then concerning an app for an added 14-storey wing). This time it's for a high-ceilinged porch between the existing Portland House slab up to the Bressenden Street pavement (see 22/05428/FULL). The building is now unfinished concrete but will be given a tonally smoother coating. Land Securities, the owner, would like the porch to be clad in contrasting brick coloured medium green. That, and the proposed arch shapes of the porch bays unrelated to the rest of the building, plus half-arch corners, strike us as ingenuous and unsuitable.

THE FORMER DEAN BRADLEY HOUSE



The Horseferry Road façade of the proposed private care home units

A planning application has been made by Medici Lifecare for the demolition of Dean Bradley House in Horseferry Road, an office building with ground floor retail space. (See 22/05282/FULL.) Medici Lifecare is proposing its redevelopment for dual/alternative use—either to provide 126 care home units and associated facilities such as library, restaurant, communal lounges, quiet rooms, therapy rooms, art studio and hydrotherapy pool (Class C2), or alternatively to provide part 31 postoperative care units and part clinical uses, hydrotherapy pool and diagnostics equipment, with reception area and two non-food retail units at ground floor (Class C2/E[e]/Ea).

We have raised no objections. Though the existing building has merit, the established need for such care facilities in Westminster justifies the loss of office space. Medici Lifecare actively manages the movement of vehicles on its other care home sites to minimise disruption and noise. We thought the external appearance of the proposal was appropriate.

VINCENT SQUARE HOTEL (?)



Wellington Hotel, Vincent Square

There is no Vincent Square Hotel. Perhaps it is a more appropriate name than the Wellington Hotel, or The Rochester next door, both attractive-looking places run by Blue Orchid Hotels facing Vincent Square. The Wellington, on the corner of Rochester Row, was built as a hostel for ecclesiastical students, and seems to have slowly been acquiring the actual leisure hotel characteristics that its appearance has long suggested. It's not yet as glamorous as one of HBO's fictional White Lotus Hotels, but some day, here's hoping.

The Wellington has applied for permission to add two floors of new guest rooms above with a mansard roof (see 22/04691/FULL), which the picture shows, and also do lower level and garden work. We are fully in favour of their worthwhile improvements.

BRIEFLY:



At 166-173 Piccadilly, AKA **Egyptian House and Dudley House**, a range of superb houses—now offices and shops—are a hymn to the fine London architecture of 1905. The owners are currently presiding over a well-organised job of refurbishment conducted by dmfr Architects, commendably without seeking additional space from Westminster planners.



Detailed planning considerations that are unnecessary to illustrate here continue to be entertained concerning **268 Vauxhall Bridge Road** for a new hotel development. (see 22/01305/FULL.)

STOCKLEY HOUSE: DESPERATE OWNER



Too tall and wide for where it's at.



Flatbed lift access to car park and rubbish, centre; tiny cafe, right.

Real estate disaster might seem to loom if you own a small triangular site with a road going through it, alongside the distressed and forgotten eastern flank of Victoria Station. It's like a crushing misfortune in Genesis that befalls Esau. Or even Cain!

The chairman of Hammerson plc probably thought, somehow I've bought into problems I don't deserve. It's so unfair! Now I'm desperate. Could I be convincing if I attach fur to my smooth skin with Velcro? Or would God make me kill as well as lie?

Luckily for us, the landlords of Stockley House stopped at Esau.

Facetiousness aside, the Velcro solution to their property difficulties amounts to pretending that there is no problem. Small triangular site? Regardless, seek approval to build very high. Access for basement car parking and rubbish removal? One flatbed lift in a narrow drive-through corridor should do it. Tiny ground floor triangular area? Call it a cafe, since five people could fit in.

The Westminster Society's consultation team advised in several sessions with the architects, Squire & Partners, but got to feel that the design had hardly changed. So when the planning application came up for public comment recently (see 22/01807/FULL), with a heavy heart we raised objections.

CHANNEL 4 LIVES? (PERHAPS)



The Channel 4 atrium

Channel 4 has long been a plaything to Conservative Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, or whatever the department is currently called. It recently obeyed orders to decentralise many of its functions from London, and partly moved to Leeds. It has since learned that it will, and then won't, be sold off to become fully private. So this is as good a time as any to catch up with urgent maintenance in Horseferry Road.

Some panes have popped out from the Richard Rogers practice's complex and innovative atrium glazing system, now 28 years old, making the main entrance area unsafe and unusable. The tested detailing overhaul soon under way will have slightly thicker laminated glass that won't fall out, with a corrected tint to control solar gain and improve heat loss in the winter. The existing spider clamps will be retained if possible, so the overall look should be almost no different.

The Channel 4 office workers love the building, and the company's efforts to look after it sympathetically have been applauded by the Westminster Society. My only difficulty is with the 3D logo of a supersized number 4 that the company added, dominating the exterior and suffocating the delicate entrance way design.

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