

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

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AT THE ENTRY TO
VICTORIA STREET,
THE LEADER OF THE
FLOTILLA WON'T BE
A STUNNING
FLAGSHIP

Last October's Westminster Society Newsletter no. 34 introduced the story of Mitsubishi Estates trying to rapidly adapt 1 Victoria Street for mixed commercial usage after the government tenant for which it had been built had perfunctorily pushed off. Our story anticipated planning stresses ahead for Mitsubishi and their architects Allford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM). (Planning app documents can be seen at The City of Westminster, 24/00977/FULL.)



*The proposal, looking east along
Victoria Street*

But no stresses ensued. After three consultation meetings with the Society's review team, we were left unhappy with what's likely the final scheme. The proposed Victoria Street facade configuration is being given an unrelenting modular grid, with the eastern end, sometimes referred to as "the prow," receiving an ungraceful, chunky, end-ignoring un-prowlike form. An insignificant so-called "pocket park" below the prow mainly offers a clutch of bollards for public benefit. Overall, we think that the scheme's proposed massing on Great Smith Street will brashly and adversely affect the setting of Dean's Yard and the adjacent Westminster World Heritage Site.



*Looking west, the bulky "prow" end is
more like a steamshovel plough*

The applicant's team disagree with our views, but have chosen not to address them. They say that because Historic England is satisfied with discussions they've had with AHMM on height, massing and details, such issues have been effectively signed off.

We don't believe that outcome to be right. The new height of the building on Great Smith Street, clearly to be seen from Dean's Yard, could easily be addressed by setting back the top storey. We think that to contribute to the World Heritage Site there should be no encroachment on the view of the Sanctuary when viewed along Victoria Street, and the amended building's prow should be no higher than it now is. The scheme's "pocket park," just two raised planters, could be effectively increased by removing an overhanging balcony, allowing space for more significant greening with trees.

We assume commercial considerations have prevailed and that time pressures have precluded any further amendments, but our original concerns could be easily addressed. We are disappointed that for such an important site there has not been a more uplifting design.

OVERNIGHTING IN WESTMINSTER



The Arts Theatre building, 5-9 Great Newport Street, Soho

Not so long ago, a few nights in town meant finding a convenient hotel somewhat priced to equate with the Automobile Association's range of stars denoting quality standards. Well, goodbye to all that. Today's potential urban visitors often start with an AIRBNB web trawl, then if necessary they move on to a online choice of glimpsed hotels emphasising their luxury looks, which have essentially supplanted the AA's former, less pictorially checkable quality-choice range.

In Westminster, both ends of the luxury-look range seem to be booming. At Grosvenor Place's new Peninsula Hotel with rooms that are neo-palatinal in appearance, you can bunk down at an average £1400 - £1900 per night, while-- to those of us who thought that the mini, navigable-in-the-dark standard cloned American motel room must be at the bottom-- some astounding new cubbyhole-roomed "pod hostels" are now appearing that can put up families in near file drawers, with many rooms configured as windowless capsules and bathrooms shared with strangers.

Planning issues concerning two pod hostel proposals were discussed in our last Newsletter. The prospective developers of the latest, who envision its being fitted above and around **the Arts Theatre, 5-9 Great Newport Street** (ref. 24/03540/FULL), consulted our Society early. To the scheme's important credit the theatre itself would be retained and improved, augmented with an integral theatre bar for the audience, and new dressing rooms for performers with a useful new stage door entrance. The added bulk proposed for overnight accommodation seems achievable. The new capsule-room parts could stack up with little apparent, er, *overloom* (to frame a suitable neologism), and probably manage the daylight obstruction for neighbours. Within, the overnighting mole-people would find food and drink on the premises only via vending machines. That lack of amenity might be countenanced in foodie Soho, as it wouldn't be in many other neighbourhoods.

Overall, the proposals are carefully thought through and we consider them to be acceptable in conservation and townscape terms. The intensification of use with pod hostel occupancy will have to be carefully managed by both the hostel and theatre. The improvement of the theatre to ensure its long term viability is welcome, as is more affordable sleeping accommodation for younger people.

Another new hotel development, one plainly aimed at "luxury" on the price scale, concerns a proposed partial demolition, refurbishment and extension of the existing **61-71 Victoria Street** office building adjacent to Strutton Ground and opposite Christchurch Gardens (ref. 24/03540/FULL). We raised issues on a previous withdrawn application (see Newsletter no 32), but with a few niggles we are supportive of this one because of its targeted



61-71 Victoria Street, opposite
Christchurch Gardens

higher commercial aim, the retention of the existing structure and cores, the reduction of dining covers on its existing upper terraces, and the addition of some "privacy glass" to address loss-of-privacy issues with the adjacent property.

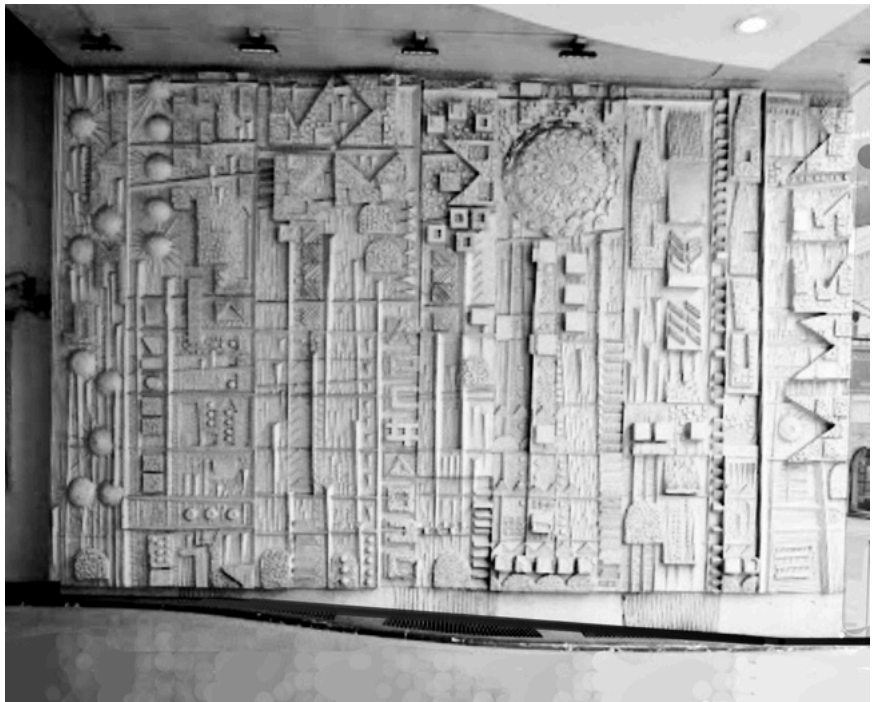
Next in our Westminster overnighting list, the long-established **Cavendish Hotel, 81 Jermyn Street** has applied for consent for an internal and external refurbishment including works to the Jermyn Street and Duke Street entrances, the external façade, and the added provision of green roofs at terrace levels. (See ref. 24/03521/FULL.) This 1960s building sits prominently in the St James Conservation Area and is one of its tallest, with the bedroom tower having a balance of vertical and horizontal elements. Our review team thought that although the Cavendish lacks special design distinction it displays the confidence of the era, and new works should enhance and compliment the style of the building. They were pleased with no proposed increase in the building's height.



The Cavendish Hotel, Jermyn Street:
a building design with the confidence
of the 1960s

The main work would be an upgrade of existing elevations to improve environmental performance. The proposed alterations to the two entrances and foyer area have been well designed to enhance the appearance of the building and are in keeping with the original 1960s aesthetic. We have expressed agreement with the need to upgrade the exterior curtain walls to address failing cladding and improve environmental performance. The design of the bedroom windows are under consideration for change to add some shadow lines to window bays that would crisp up the visual appearance of the tower.

William Mitchell fibreglass bas-relief wall at the Cavendish's Duke Street porte cochere entrance



We note with approval that the large William Mitchell fibreglass bas-relief sculpture at the Duke Street entrance will be retained and restored. This is the only integral artwork remaining in the building, and is a significant piece in the artist's canon of public architectural sculpture. (Some William Mitchell fibreglass panelling also appears in the lobby of the Curzon Cinema in Curzon Street.)

Next in our hotels roundup is **Haymarket House, 28-29 Haymarket SW1Y 4SP**, ref. 24/02980/FULL. Its 1930s building's plan is like a reversed, squared-off capital G with another building folded within, extending a long way from Haymarket to Coventry Street. It accommodates some attractive uses, including a popular restaurant and the Comedy Store. The intention of its complex mixed-use planning submission is to retain the existing building with its retail facilities, consolidate and envelop a variety of roofs and ungainly external building service equipment, and modify the fenestration of some intermediate floors to suit their conversion into hotel rooms of intermediate booking price (though the developers operate some pod hostels). We advised the applicants and Westminster planning officers about a few suggestions we had, but took no main issue with the proposals.



Haymarket House's Coventry Street end, opposite The Trocadero building

Our first comments about **202-206 Buckingham Palace Road**, ref. 24/02294/FULL, the former Belgravia Police Station, appeared in Newsletter 34, when we mentioned the site's acquisition by The Other House, an Anglo-Dutch property group specialising in what they call "lifestyle hospitality;" i.e. clublike hotel accommodation for wealthy travellers. A planning application for the cop shop's conversion has now been lodged. We followed it with interest as it is the first scheme we know of that references the "Belgravia Neighbourhood Forum Design Codes" (BNFDC), which seems

Proposal for 202-206 Buckingham
Palace Road, from Ebury Square



intended to be a measured and conservative interpretation of the character of Belgravia. EPR Architects, the applicants, have within or close by our Westminster patch recently refurbished the Ritz Hotel, have done elaborate conversions of The Ned hotel and the Old War Office, and are working on likewise for 55 Broadway.

Our review team appreciated the reduction of the building's height by one storey for its contribution to townscape views across Ebury Square, its proposed height and massing relationship to Fountains Court, and its safeguarding of an important existing tree. It was less enthusiastic about the design's devotion to the BNFD C precepts, which as applied seem more appropriate for domestic architecture and at a smaller scale. We hope for some rethinking.

MORE TIMELESS THAN MOSS BROS?



103-105 Jermyn Street as is

An application is in progress for alterations and extensions of 103-105 Jermyn Street (ref. 24/02154/FULL) to achieve more Class E (shops and offices) floorspace. The ground floor is the long-time address of Moss Bros, famed for its temporary formal dress hire.

The unlisted building lies within the St James's Conservation Area. A lot of discussion has concerned the Westminster design officers' unwillingness to sanction an increase of the main Jermyn Street front façade height that would crowd the adjacent listed building's pointy-roofed turret. The solution likely to be accepted proposes a simplified redesign of all the Jermyn Street windows, with the projection of an extra storey upwards for two thirds of the building's width, leaving a notch of sky to provide some visual space adjacent to the pointy turret.

In our opinion the indicated scheme would be unnecessarily complicated, though with some improvements over the existing façade. We have therefore raised no objections, but have requested that our detailed advice on the design of the Jermyn Street elevation should be taken into consideration.

38 GILLINGHAM STREET REDUX

38 Gillingham Street is another building the Newsletter has discussed before (see last October's issue 34). An office block originally built in 1975, it terminates the axis of Guildhouse Street so it ought to be something especially worth looking at. But what we see (we then said) are "facings of dark glass, which with the typical grouped window arrangements of its bygone era, somehow suggests that working within, gloomy descendants of Edward Hopper clerks and stenographers must be eking out their days."

We went on to say that in our view, "the design's most thoughtful and original proposal, which we (have) commended, is to turn the previous entry tunnel for car parking into a wide passage to an entrance garden, and have a cafe in the place where cars were previously garaged."



Proposed cafe passage, 38 Gillingham Street

The attractive outcome about to be under construction is seen in the rendering above. Its square-arched opening to the internal garden provides the entrance to a ground floor cafe on the righthand side of the passageway, with cafe tables able to be set out within the unroofed courtyard and garden.

Our report suggested that Westminster should negotiate the requirement for at least a five-year lease on the cafe, to encourage the survival of an amenable business that can successfully settle in to its neighbourhood operation before the use becomes allocated to something else.

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