



Friends of St. James's Park and The Green Park

39 Westminster Mansions Great Smith Street London SW1P 3BP Telephone (020) 7222 2449

Ms. Rosemarie MacQueen, Director of Planning and City Development
Conservation Area Audits Team
12th Floor
City Hall
64 Victoria Street
London SW1E 6QP

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Dear Rosemarie

**Westminster Abbey and Parliament Square
Consultation Draft March 2008**

The Thorney Island Society has considered the Consultation Draft and welcomes the opportunity to comment.

Firstly we very much welcome the inclusion of **4 Matthew Parker Street** within the Conservation Area, for the reasons already given in the document.

As regards the main Consultation Draft, it is detailed and comprehensive as such documents on Conservation Areas should be. However as we have observed and commented elsewhere, there is singular lack of recognition of buildings and structures from 1940's onwards - some 68 years. This omission suggests a peculiar bias in such audits. Two items are of immediate concern: Parliament Square and the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. The former receives a smattering of references and modest descriptions of facts, while the latter receives little comment.

General comments

Given that Parliament Square is at the heart of the conservation area, we are astonished by this lack of consideration, of the outstanding quality of the planning, design and the spacial linkages to the surrounding buildings. This being the case we have found it essential to draw attention in some detail to the truly outstanding design merits of what may be considered as one of the most outstanding examples of post World War II urban landscape achievements. We have included photographs as supportive evidence. It is as though the fact that the proposal to include the Square in the World Squares for all Project, has emasculated the process of genuine and proper appraisal. There is no consideration of the qualities of the very high standard of Grey Wornum's masterpiece, which demonstrates the ability to incorporate different elements which in themselves provide a truly English setting for the monumental surroundings.

Access and repairs

The Consultation Draft is critical of there being no provision of any, let alone adequate pedestrian access across the very heavily trafficked routes, into the Square. As a result it is both difficult and hazardous for the public to gain access. The Consultation Draft is also critical of the management of maintenance and the obvious neglect, lack of adequate repair or replacement of damaged paving materials. Such is the result that the failure to provide access is used as a reason to fail to either recognise the qualities of the Square itself, or are used to describe the Square as being the most significant area of neglect. On this point we would agree. But remedies are clear - address the access and refurbish the Grey Wornum scheme. By comparison an example where access was virtually impossible was remedied at Hide Park Corner, to great advantage. That sets the precedent. The Consultation Draft's comments are not about the merit of the existing Square but the failure over many years of bodies to do the 'right things'.

The significance of grass Nowhere in the Consultation Draft is there recognition of the significance of grassed areas, where grass is the most universally appreciated of materials at the heart of England. Grass has a relevance in its adjacency to the symbols which are at the heart of England - the Church, Democracy and Governance. These symbols are themselves surrounded by and in touch with that which epitomises "England's green and pleasant land". English grass is the envy of many a country because of its quality and sustainability. It is no accident that the House of Commons sits surrounded by grass, as does Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's; the new Supreme Court is fronted by grass as is the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. Grass provides a psychological and practical setting for the monumental buildings; and also provides calm and uplift for the soul, a rare attribute in the burly of Westminster.

Grey Wornum's achievement (See the accompanying photographs)

In essence the planning and layout of the Square is simple and modest. It is bold in its lack of pomposity and is easy to understand, in its quiet setting as a stage from which to relate to the great buildings surrounding it. But in its detail it is strong. Avoiding a rigid doctrinaire approach it consists of two major axes, one north/south aligned to the north door of the Abbey, and one west/east to the Palace of Westminster. These two axes are like outstretched arms which give the direction within which the full staging of Governance and Church are related - seen across an unfettered simple foreground of grass. The latter offering informal relaxation, enjoyed even now by those who have been able to cross the traffic.

Different methods of discretely supporting the planning principles are employed for the two axes; the north/south by a line of plane trees, an upper terrace of calming from the traffic, and a lower grand pavement with seating and formal stone planters. The west/east axis has two parallel raised beds, one planted, the other with grass and Catalpa trees - now only two but should be three. Disposed around these two axes are statues on high plinths. Careful and gentle scaled detailing is everywhere - from the simple pattern of the paving, the shallow steps, the curved steps and the gentle sloping paving to where access was envisaged, the moulded kerbs and dressed copings, and to the accommodating of a lamp standard in a recess to the retaining wall. The lamp being also to the design of Grey Wornum

The mastery of the design is the achievement of a balance between the formal and informal, the serious and the trivial, and a demonstration of supreme compromise which is the underlying essence of all that the surrounding buildings represent as the spirit of Englishness. See the photographs, and visit the Square to know that this is no ordinary piece of landscaping, nor just a traffic island, cut off for far too long by the insensitivity of traffic management. Then demand to know why the Westminster City Council has produced a Consultation Draft that has failed to make a single complementary comment.

Detailed comment

The Consultation Draft is very much at fault in not giving due recognition of the high quality of design of Parliament Square. There is not a single reference nor picture in **Section 5 "Local Townscape Detail"**. It is an inexcusable omission, and that which should be recognised for its true merits, is shamefully marginalised or ignored

The existing design of Parliament Square should be regarded with the same sensitivity as is given to the King George VI steps. Very regrettably, where comments are made, it is as though the Grey Wornum design of Parliament Square is of no significance; not to the setting of the surrounding monuments, nor to the conservation area, and nor to Westminster nor London as a whole. We clearly cannot agree with this view and the Thorney Island Society very strongly urges that the Consultation Draft is amended accordingly.

4.18 Under the heading **Streets and Spaces** the description is negative - "Parliament Square does not have the formal composition typical of a Victorian Square, but merges into a number of other small spaces around it". This immediately implies condemnation firstly because it is not formal as claimed to be the nature of Victorian city squares (which in itself is a spurious proposition); and secondly that it is an inferior space because it 'merges into other smaller spaces'. It does not 'merge', but is distinctive because of its design and geographical position. The link between the areas identified arises out of the use of grass, and affords visual continuity which unites the individual areas of grass and space forming the horizontal plane surrounded by the large and diverse assemblage of buildings.

4.26 We find **Figure 19** and the description in this paragraph to be misleading and ill considered. From our comments above it is clear that there is great significance in the visual and physical aspect which is derived from the collective areas of 'green grass'. The definition by colour in Figure 19 to signify 'secondary' spaces is clearly misleading. While it would be appropriate to attempt the definition of a hierarchy of spaces this is not a successful representation here. The difficulty lies in combining the two classifications - hierarchy of streets, and hierarchy of spaces, which leads to conflict and confusion.

4.118 Under **Landmark Buildings** it defines - **“those that due to their height, location or detailed design stand out from their background. They contribute to the character and townscape of the area being focal points or key elements in views”**. Singularly the glaring omission on **Figure 82 Landmarks and Views** is the deliberate lack of identification of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. This is despite recognition elsewhere that the building is “unlisted and of merit”. Why is this so treated other than to conclude that WCC in the Consultation Draft cannot admit to greatness in architecture as well as landscape produced after World War Two. Yet the significance in townscape and urban design are readily apparent, and it may be argued that the building is as significant in these terms as Central Hall.

5.54 We consider the description of two Catalpa trees being “small” is misleading and incorrect - given their actual height and age. We would also point out that until relatively recently there were three Catalpa trees, and it is very much regretted that the missing tree has not been replaced. Yet another instance of failure of management. The trees are important as part of a balanced planting scheme which relates to the Catalpas at the side of St Margaret's.

7.1 **Negative Features & Enhancement** We agree with **“It may be that simple maintenance works can remedy the situation”**. In our description of Parliament Square above, it is clear that remedial work could be carried out - and indeed should have been done, as the Square increasingly suffered from neglect. Why was it not carried out ?

7.3, 7.4, 7.5, & 7.6 **“Parliament Square although of key importance to the setting of the World Heritage Site, is perhaps the single most significant negative feature in the conservation area due to the quality of the experience in the public realm around the Square itself “** What more damning statement of the failure of the bodies responsible for the management of the Square, could there be. But equally how singularly insensitive does it show the Consultative Document to be in its complete failure to present the real qualities of the Square, and in doing so separate that from the status of total isolation caused by the gross lack of traffic management.

The layout of the existing Square includes locations for pedestrian access which have been ignored for many years, due to treating the Square purely as a traffic gyratory, rather than as a space for people.

While it is stated that there is an **“initiative involving the GLA, Transport for London, and the City of Westminster”**, which is later referred to in Management Proposals, if there is no recognition of the value of the Square as it exists, we are sceptical of the outcome, since the same agencies have presided over the continuous failures for many years.

7.7 This paragraph repeats that the management of the public realm and traffic problems are to be addressed, by a joint public realm initiative involving the GLA, Transport for London and the City of Westminster: the initiative derived from the World Squares for All programme, the World Heritage Site Management Plan. But where under this 'super conglomeration' is the Grey Wornum Parliament Square if even Westminster City Council has not recognised the qualities ?.

8.1, 8.2, 8.3,8.4 States that **“it is expected that the effective management of the conservation area can, for the most part be met through an effective policy framework and positive use of existing development control..... “** However it is the management in the past that has not maintained the high standards set by Grey Wornum's plan for Parliament Square; for which it must follow that Westminster, the Greater London Authority, the Crown and other bodies failed to pay due regard to the management and maintenance of this most special place. Can it really be believed that it will be done better in the future ?

Management/Ownership Responsibilities Under the table in 8.4 **“Proposals”** referring to the whole conservation area, the first item listed is Parliament Square. It is particularly pertinent to

read **“Work in partnership with the GLA, Transport for London and other relevant bodies to promote improvements to the quality of the experience of Parliament Square.** To the ordinary reader, it would be construed that “improvements” meant refurbishment, addressing the neglect of the fabric; and the provision of proper access to the Square. But the wording here and elsewhere allows probably deliberately for improvement to extend to wholesale demolition and replacement as “improvement”, which we consider totally negative and unwarranted.

Since no information has been made available to the public regarding the proposed ‘improvements’ we are left in the dark as to the possible consequences of this overly secretive process. We can only be suspicious, since this Westminster City Council draft document has failed so to recognise the stature of the Grey Wornum scheme of Parliament Square.

The Thorney Island Society cannot stress strongly enough its grave concerns regarding Parliament Square coupled with the complete absence in the Consultative Draft by Westminster City Council to recognise as a matter of first principle the masterly and exceptional qualities of the public space conceived by Grey Wornum. If Westminster City Council fails in this respect on an issue at the heart of its city, how are we to view the likely impact of all the assembled national and international agencies gathered to oversee the future of the ‘heart of England’ ? We urge the Westminster City Council to reconsider it’s position, and to include a full appreciation in the final document for the Westminster Abbey and Parliament Square Conservation Area.

Kind regards

Yours sincerely,
for and on behalf of the Thorney Island Society

pp Tom Ball

June A Stubbs
Chairman

