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Councillor Robert Davis
Chairman of Planning Committee 5th March 2009
City Hall
Victoria Street
London SW1

10th March 2009

Dear Councillor Davis

I attended the Planning Committee meeting on Thursday 5th March 2009 to hear the considerations leading to a decision being made regarding item 1 on the agenda - Selborne House and Wellington House submitted as one application. I was very alarmed by the application proposals particularly for Selborne House and the explanations given at the public exhibition. As a member of the Thorney Island Society I supported their formal Objection which you will have had an opportunity along with other local community objections to take into account.

There are many aspects about the meeting which left me with frustration and a variety of emotions. I left once you had pronounced "consent". It did not appear to be put to a vote; and I would not know whether such a small membership was quorate. Following are some of my personal reactions; and I have restricted my comments to matters relating particularly to the Selborne House Proposals. It may be that I missed some of the discussion.

1 I consider that a Committee of only three members, reviewing such an important site, impacting on Victoria Street, to be quite inadequate to do justice to the site or represent the interests of the community. Although Cllr Mitchell was present at the opening of the planning meeting, he withdrew before item 1 was announced. No explanation was given.

2 The presentations made by the two officers were not probed by you as Chairman, nor the other two councillors as I would have expected. A number of statements made by the two officers should have been questioned. If my understanding was correct, Mr Mason on a number of occasions, added to his statement that the officers and the Council's consultants, accepted that while certain parts of the proposals were not wholly in conformity with 'policy', they nonetheless were found acceptable because of the advantages of the proposals as a whole. This was never questioned but appeared to be accepted by the Committee.

3 A specific instance which I would have anticipated being seriously questioned was when Mr Mason identified a number of short comings in the micro climate analysis. One referred to being at the corner of the building, at the junction of Victoria Street and Buckingham Gate. Given the history of the serious wind turbulence problems with Land Securities' Cardinal Place, I would have thought this shouted out as needing to be fully probed.

4 The Officers did not draw the attention of the the Committee to the comparison between the relative foot prints (area of ground cover) of the existing building and the proposals. On the former the building is set back from the site boundary affording space, light and some greening; in the latter the building takes up almost the entire site. With the increased height of the proposals and the considerably greater mass, the impact on the public realm both at Victoria Street and from St James' Park, is one of huge over development. When Councillor Burbridge sought to pursue the subject of the increased presence that the proposal would have on Victoria Street , and in her words "wishing that it were set further back.....to reduce a feeling of enclosure", you discouraged further consideration of this point.

5 On the topic of housing, Mr Mason had stated that the officers and the consultants were of the opinion that Selborne House was not an appropriate place for some residential accommodation. No explanation was given nor sought, even though Wellington House was not providing the total provision obligation, and some 25 units were being found elsewhere. When Councillor Burbridge sought a better understanding and information on the matter of affordable housing and the way in which the credit system had been applied as stated by Mr Mason, you as Chairman were disparaging and curtailed her questioning, not for the first time resorting to matters being acceptable since you had been told they were in accordance with policy. That may or may not be so, but as a Committee member she was seeking to probe the policy, and possibly even question the rightness of policy. It is more than a certainty that some 'policies are not as appropriate as they should be and that those who operate daily with policy interpretations must be vigilant as time and circumstance change. If it is policy that has lead to over development including building to the site boundary, and thereby reducing the quality of the urban environment to such an extent, then reassessment needs to take place.

6 With regard to the elevational treatment of Selborne House, I was surprised by the presentation made by Mr Gray. He may have more information regarding the detailing of the glass walling than I have, which was gained from the application material, the exhibition and the attendant architects. In my opinion he expounded its attractions without expressing any concerns for the details of the multiplicity of varying conditions arising out of the angles of the planes of the elevations and the individual junctions at each floor level. Whereas it might be thought that as with the model the elevations are comprised of simple planes set at varying angles and offering in your words "a beautiful building", the essential of any architecture's success lies in the detailing. The objection of the Thorney Island Society referred to this matter as a specific issue. You might consider revisiting that.

7 You stated several times that you considered the proposals to be a 'beautiful building'. Such a statement is a personal opinion only. And the more you repeat it the more you will possibly believe yourself. It is by and large an erroneous statement since the setting is so marred that the notion of beauty can not be upheld. The damage that the over development and its height and the questionable detailing, the proportions of the ground floor to the rest of the building etc, etc show that it is not a beautiful building. But the more you use the mantra the more the delusion is self sustaining.

8 The true urban planning process seems not to have been applied - the consideration in the round and its context; and you seem to be unaware of that since you understand that "policies" have been correctly followed. You appear not to appreciate nor visualise the adverse impact that the proposals would have on the public realm. The demolition of existing Selborne House along with all that it affords to the quality of the existing public realm, affects much more than the property boundary. The quality of Victoria Street as a place will be devastated by such over development, and by a building form and style completely out of scale with its

setting. The space in front of the existing Selborne house adds to the quality of Victoria Street even from as far away as Little Ben clock. Land Securities have identified a sum of some £2,000,000 to be spent on the public realm in the vicinity of Selborne House. But you conceded that as there was virtually none in the vicinity of Selborne House, the major part would have to be spent elsewhere in Victoria Street. Surely this is a damning position and very strong indication of the over development of this key site.

These are my personal reactions derived out of my substantial concerns for Westminster's urban design and civic environment. I have written at some length since simply stating that "I thought the meeting was little more than a charade" would not have been constructive. There was a time when that part of Victoria Street from Artillery Mansions to Bresenden Place was one of the best centre of London urban environments. It was the result of careful three dimensional thinking and modelling carried into planning and implementation. Today that quality has been and is being destroyed without quality replacements. It is the responsibility ultimately of the Planning Committee to see that quality is maintained in this and future projects. The land ownership is only a part of the conundrum but the fact that Land Securities is the overwhelming land owner should allow for proper and appropriate urban planning and design, but not be a free hand for over development where maximising floor area predominates. Who is in control of Westminster's environment for Westminster's community ?

Yours sincerely

Tom Ball

copy Cllr Susie Burbridge
Cllr Barbara Grahame
Cllr Tim Mitchell

the whole site to the east and west boundaries with a modest set back on the north and south.

I have written at some length since simply stating that “I thought the meeting was little more than a charade” would not give some explanations for

quality building. I am not alone in being both alarmed and questioning of the meeting. I would also

5 On another occasion you as Chairman appeared to be disparaging of Councillor Burbridge. During the review of housing provision, when she sought a better understanding and information on the matter of affordable housing and the way in which the credit system had been applied as stated by Mr Mason. On the topic of housing, Mr Mason had stated that the officers and the consultants were of the opinion that Selborne House was not an appropriate place for some residential accommodation. No explanation was given nor sought, even though Wellington House was not fulfilling the total provision obligation, and some 25 units were being found elsewhere.