President: Sir Nicholas Underhill Chairman: Miss June A Stubbs MBE M.C.S.D FRSA

THE THORNEY ISLAND SOCIETY

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

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

John Walker Esq.,
Operational Director
Development Planning
Westminster City Hall
64 Victoria Street
London SW1E 6QP

By e-mail southplanningteam@westminster.gov.uk

For the attention of Matthew Mason esq., 9th April 2013

Dear Mr Mason

Ref 13/02214/FULL
Portland House Bressenden Place London SW1E 5EE

Partial deconstruction, alterations and refurbishment of Portland House, including remodelling, extensions, recladding and provision of external balconies to provide 206 residential units (Class C3) with associated ancillary facilities. Provision of four units for either shops (Class A1), and/or financial and professional services (Class A2), and/or restaurants (Class A3) and/or drinking establishments (Class A4) at part ground floor, part first floor and part basement levels. Reconfiguration of existing car parking to provide up to 151 car parking spaces, 294 cycle spaces. Hard and soft landscaping proposals on Cardinal Walk, Cathedral Walk and Bressenden Place and associated highway works. Replacement canopy over Cardinal Place arcade and Cardinal Place roof garden, replacement stairs and escalator to Cardinal Place roof garden and re-landscaping of roof garden. Alterations to public art.

Thank you for your letter dated 21st March 2013 along with the CD containing all the 120 documents including the Design and Access Statement and additional illustration documents. Earlier in the year we received a presentation from the developer and architect. We have also visited the City Hall to see the original application documents - some of which we could not download from the CD.

Introduction

While making our comments we have included some copies of illustrations taken from the Application and these are included at the end of this letter. They are chosen since they clearly indicate a number of issues such as the size of the building and its impact locally and from a distance. The increased size of the building is regarded as unfortunate and unnecessary in the process of converting this significant building into a residential one. A substantial part of the increased size is as a result of a relatively arbitrary choice, rather than a practical necessity, and as such the consequences should be seriously evaluated before reaching a Planning Application decision.

The impact on the surroundings are significant both locally and from a distance. Portland House is a highly visible building on 360 degrees. One of the most sensitive is the impact that the building has on the park lands - including Buckingham Palace and St Jame's' Park. The images included in the Application show the building to be big, and fatter than the existing, which is to be very much regretted. And we consider it need not have been so, if a different approach had been taken; and one that could have still met the commercial requirements.

Documentation

This application includes a large number of drawings and documents (120), along with the many paged Design and Access Statement and even longer report on context. Together they provide a very comprehensive indication of the proposals, often simulating the result as if the proposals are a reality. Yet there is missing information which should be provided. This is the relationship of new Portland House to its immediate surroundings - the buildings opposite along Bressenden Place; but also to the changes proposed to the upper level 'garden 'and its access. Cross-sections will make clear new Portland House's spacial relationship to its surroundings and particularly the impact of the larger building on its neighbours.

Style and size of the design

The applicant makes the point that in his opinion the form of existing Portland House does not compare well with others such as in Italy and New York - the Olivetti Building and the Pan Am Building respectively. Not everyone would be of the same opinion. If anything and unlike the two buildings referred to, Portland House is a modest and straightforward architectural expression - appropriate for the time when it was built. It is made more attractive by the use of its three faceted elevations on either side. This design feature means that when viewed from either end, One may see the first facet which to all intents and purposes appears at that moment to be the whole building, and which thereby reduces the apparent size of the building. The proposed curved elevation on the other hand does not have that quality and that as the illustrations indicate, one is very much more conscious of the building is a continuing curve which may continue out of sight.

A bigger building created by a curved facade

Having studied the drawings and the documents the proposals make new Portland House much larger physically than it is at present. Firstly by adding a continuous balcony to the elevations, this increases the building by that depth . Secondly by expressing the building as two halves each being extended, one to the south and one to the north, the building is substantially greater. These extensions have a substantial affect on the building as can be dramatically seen in the several photographic illustrations in the reports. But there is a third component which adds substantially to the size of the building. By choosing to have curved facades for the front and back elevations as a curved facade, it requires an enlargement where the greatest increase is at the mid point of the building in order to achieve a uniform curve. And because of the length of the facade the required projection is very significant. To have some idea of the proposed change to the front of the building, it will be to the furthest point of the existing curved entrance on Bresenden Place. The same expansion will be required on the other major elevation.

Not the ideal site for an expanded building

Were the building set in landscaped space such proposals might be acceptable. However that is not the case. There are buildings close by as illustrated by the many photographs of the models and the coloured lifelike pictures. The distant views will be of a much fatter building than exists at present; and where the existing building benefits markedly from the faceted design with its end elevations appearing relatively 'slim'. The actual scale and size, and the impact on the immediate surroundings will be made clearer, once he cross section drawings have been made available.

The sections which are called for above, will make the position very much clearer, and are a necessary part of the review, in determining the acceptability or otherwise of the proposals.

Additional line of columns clutter the public area

As a consequence of providing support to the continuous balconies around the building a new line of columns is positioned around the building. These severely impact the circulation space at the point close to the steps and escalator access to the upper garden terrace. They also impact on the route through to the northern route of exit or access to the centre This is another example of an impact that the enlarged building has on the building and in this instance on the general flow and circulation as well as visual obstruction in a narrowing area.(there appears to be only one escalator which is unacceptable for the linkage to the modest area of 'public realm' as a garden area)

Wind turbulence and roof enclosure of the central ground space

Reference is made to earlier studies relating to wind turbulence at the centre of the site. However we are not aware that there has been a wind tunnel test carried out on the current proposals; and if there has been one what were the results. This is an essential requirement for any development proposals of the Building and its surroundings. It is a very serious matter and cannot be ignored. The existing situation has remained intolerable, despite the claim that a wind tunnel test had been carried out in connection with the proposal to build Cardinal Place and its associated roof over the open square. To our knowledge at least one pedestrian was blown off her feet resulting in a serious accident. Claims are included within the report that by adding or removing certain existing planting, including trees, would assist in calming the wind turbulence. ? No planing decision could be made prior to there being adequate evidence that wind turbulence would be much reduced.

The roof enclosure

The proposed roof enclosure is crude in design and very heavy in appearance. We do not understand why this proposal should visually look so over powering, and lacking in elegance. The illustration perspectives emphasise the visual oppressive nature of what should be uplifting where light should be the dominant factor not structure. We are also very concerned by the circular opening - here shown as 'just' large enough in diameter to allow a single tree specimen. There are a number of practical concerns and criticisms. This is unconvincing proposition , because - presumably the tree will grow so what happens to it. A single tree of necessity relatively small tree looks lost having no relationship to anything around it. If a landscape element were deemed desirable then should it not be relatively low in height, associated with seating around it - a place for rest or to meet or both ? This may be the intention but the presentation does not achieve that.

Landscape.

The landscape proposals fors the upper level are not clear form the material we have seen. We understand that existing trees are to be removed as being now considered unsuitable - these will be replaced by mounds and new planting. Just how the garden may be used under the proposals is not clear. It may be that we did not discover larger scaled drawings than the 'master plan' for landscape.

Summary key points

The Society is disturbed by the application and does not support it as it stands, for the reasons described in the letter, and itemised below.

1 We consider that the consequences of the course of the design process taken by the proposals do not respect the limitations of the surroundings, both locally and further afield.

2 The physical changes to Portland House increase the size of the building; and to a size beyond that which would be necessary to meet the essential requirements of the 'change of use'.

3 The building under the proposals becomes much 'fatter' and is bigger in length, by the chosen design format: while the actual elevation design is bland.

4 The circulation at ground level is compromised by the major design proposals; and the access to and from the upper level garden is inadequate if there is only one escalator.

5 The enclosure roof is a very 'heavy' in appearance; whereas it could be 'light' and 'transparent' which would be much preferred.

6 The proposals for the landscape at the upper level were only found as a small scale drawing; as such they were more to describe removal of existing trees than proposals.

7 It is questionable whether the supposed clumping of trees in the highway in front and to the side of Portland House would be practical given the ground services etc.

We trust our observations and comments will be of assistance and ask that our comments be made known to the Committee

Yours Sincerely

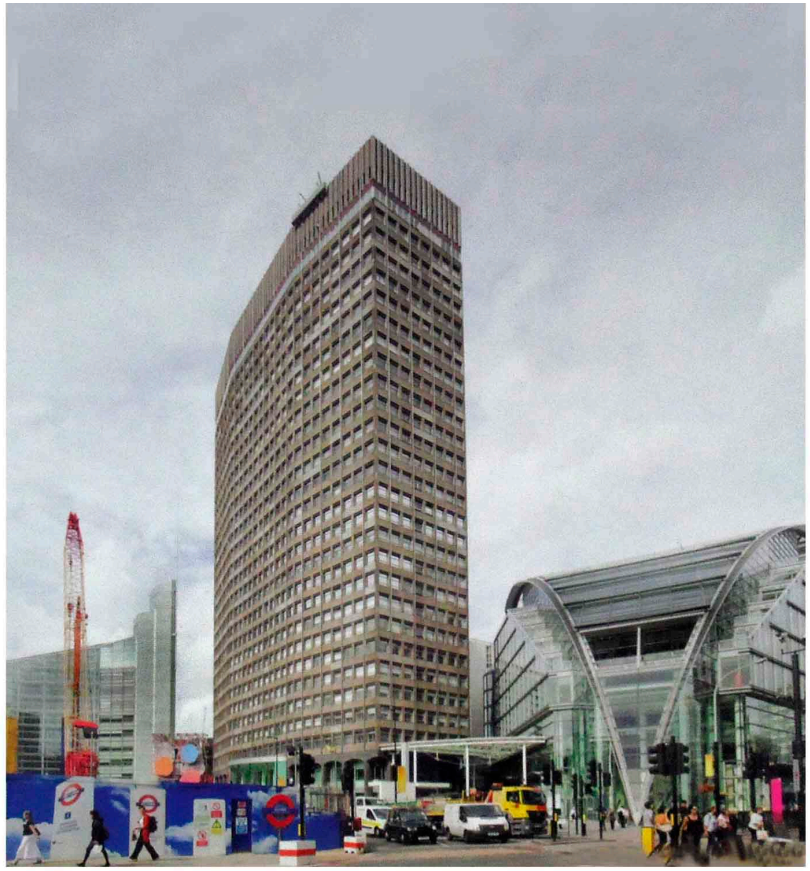
for and on behalf of the Thorney Island Society

pp Tom Ball

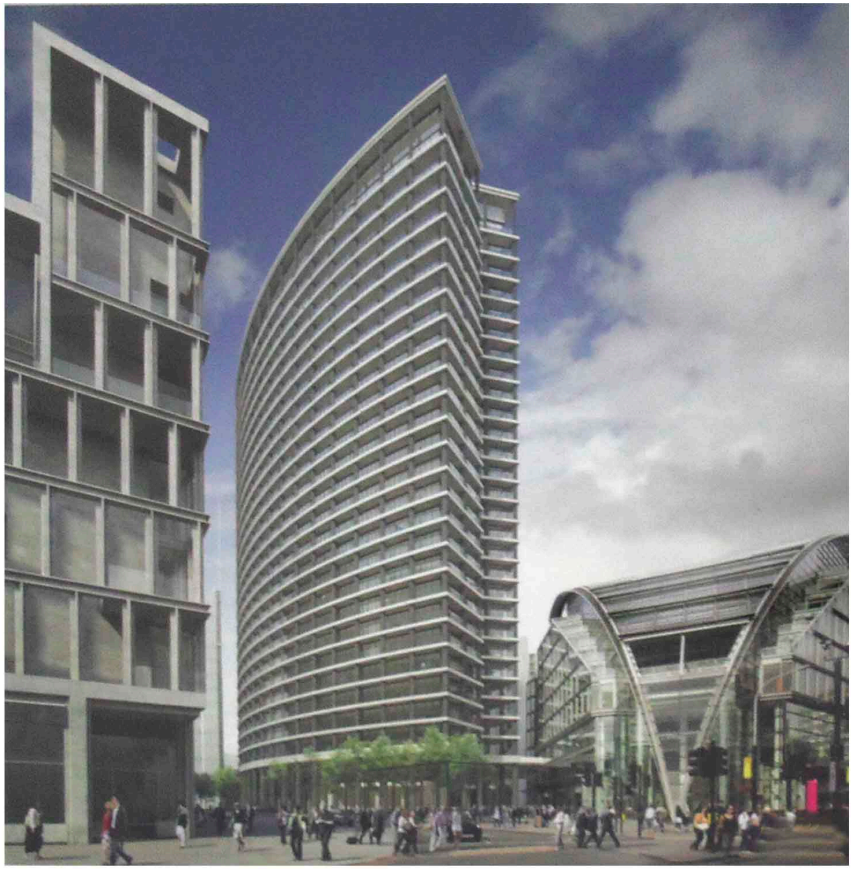
June A Stubbs

Chairman

Attachments : Illustrations taken from the application documents



EXISTING



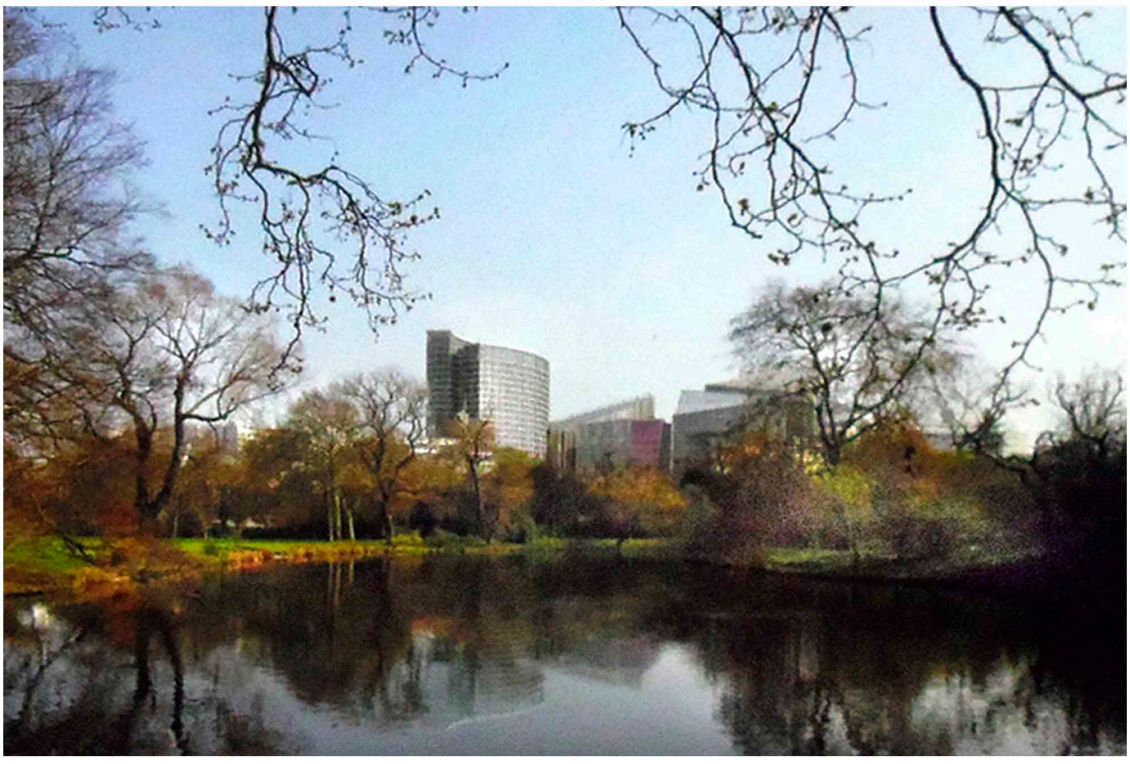
PROPOSED

Increased size of Portland House : Contrast beween the existing and the proposed

Portland House proposals based on the artist's illustrations in the Planning Application

Thos 08.04.13

PROPOSED

The proposed dominating roof and isolated tree in the 'public space' ; and below the excessive impact of the enlarged building on the park-land

Portland House proposals based on the artist's illustrations in the Planning Application