

## Being careful what you wish for

### *Checking the inheritance*

Richard Farthing, Chairman

No, not that sort of inheritance! I mean becoming chairman and inheriting the Society's paperwork mountain. In a longstanding Society ritual, I've inherited a mini-mountain.



Back in the day, developers used to produce reams of bound paperwork to support their proposals, and in some ways they still do, albeit mostly 'electronic' now, and printed out for just for exhibitions. For several years, we've maintained an archive on a shared committee Google Drive for the electronic material, and the value isn't entirely in paperwork reduction, although as I sit in front of the mini-mountain, that's certainly looking like an important consideration!

No, it's the fact that Google's 'AI' – perhaps too strong a term – but it's ability to read photographs containing text, which includes pdf's, even those that are just images, of course as well as any text in a document, means these things are searchable even if not originally intended to be. There. I've let you into an open secret, which I verified for myself in a roundabout way a few years ago, using a photo of a chemist's shop from 1970... Now if, for example, we're looking for the background of a project, type 'Town Hall' into the search box, we can find related files of all sorts, rather more easily.

The *mountain* gives an incoming chairman the opportunity to reflect on what was originally proposed, promised, or simply a kite that was flown, and to compare it with the objections, challenges, revised proposals, and even – shock, horror – what was eventually built.

## Taking a View

A member contribution published by The Hammersmith Society

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Not everything comes to pass, having been publicly examined and commented on, and perhaps that's a Good Thing – a recent example being the 2018 proposals for West London College – shown adjacent.



### A Cautionary Tale

When looking at these documents, sometimes ten to fifteen years later, a realisation sinks in. Just as the fact that houses are, and always have been outlandishly expensive, and therefore must surely come down if you just wait... and wait... they actually don't. So you should have plumped for that house costing an absurd £3000 in 1966, now worth... *how much?*

Similarly there are occasions when the first *outrageous* proposal was no worse, or could it possibly have been as good as one that was later proposed, or even built, once a few tweaks had been applied? Or, were the proposals all just rather ordinary? *Sacré bleu!*

Here I give you Earls Court and CAPCO. For all its faults a decade prior, the CAPCO scheme wasn't as dense as the current proposal, and didn't involve several 39 storey towers. There was the problematic issue of the proposed demolition of the social housing estates at Gibbs Green & West Ken, but they remain tired and thermally inefficient, with lots of money still needing to be spent to improve them for climate change reasons at least, part of which is the £600m earmarked by the council for improvements, and funded we know not how. But when actually enacted, this could still involve decanting the residents, and objectively, how good might the end result be?



CAPCO 2013



ECDC 2023

Now I'm going to step onto a couple more pieces of hallowed ground, making this is very much a personal opinion. How bad was the original Town Hall proposal? Well there was the silly bridge proposed over the A4 using up a significant chunk of Furnivall Gardens, there were the excessive 15 storey towers, a rather ordinary lump of a building where the old Town Hall extension sat, right in front of, and obscuring, the arched windows of the main 1939 building, and there was the proposed demolition of the cinema and Pocklington flats...

OK, quite a few issues, but the developers did reduce tower heights by 4 storeys under duress from the GLA and us, as part of '*Save Our Skyline*', and perhaps with a bit less hubris, an improved scheme might have appeared a decade earlier, and we might not have had to campaign quite so vigorously. The current development has its issues, and in my opinion, stated clearly to the developer at their exhibition – overbuilt in some places – particularly where it faces King Street, now seen from Ravenscourt Park Station, unnecessarily overbearing at twice the height of the adjacent Pocklington flats; we still lost the cinema, though the Quakers gained a very nice award-winning meeting house by

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the by. There are many things to like about the scheme under construction, including the refurbishment of the actual Town Hall - though some take issue with the glass additions to the roof - the Town Square, (minus the dreary name “Unity Square”, apparently fetched up from behind the iron curtain. Where was the public debate? And what’s wrong with Hammersmith Square?). I digress.

In summary, problems could have been avoided with a bit of listening. One mouth, two ears and all that good *management speak*.



181 Talgarth Road – 2019  
original scheme



West London Magistrates  
hotels – RSHP – April 2020



181 Talgarth Road – 2020  
scheme compared to 2019



181 Talgarth Road –  
proposal 2021

I am yet to be convinced that the magistrates court replacement buildings, already overshadowing the rather wonderful and award-winning Ark of 1992, are very much better after no less than three iterations. With a small amount of advice from us, local residents under the banner *Save Our Hammersmith*, echoing the Town Hall campaign a decade earlier, worked hard to get something they could live with from the other side of the tracks, and unusually the developers listened - mostly. Perhaps that’s good enough? But after changes of architects and two years of rearrangements, it remains significantly overbuilt and closer to Wooden Spoon territory than I’m comfortable with.

A significant issue here, apart from the high price paid for the site (a long story), is the continuing absence of a Town Centre Supplementary Planning Document to the 2018 Local Plan on which to base any planning considerations. In the light of the very general requirements for the Hammersmith Regeneration Area (HRA), specifically policy HRA2 which mostly still talks about the Flyunder, now financially highly unviable, the rest being largely aphorisms, the planners rubber-stamped the first 2019 proposal, having no specifics to argue over. The Local Plan didn’t mention the site by name, though less than a year old at the time. Caveat Emptor: once consented, a proposal of similar size is very much harder to reject. The SPD has been in the works since Tom’s days with the Hammersmith Residents Working Party of 2015, momentarily appearing as a glossy by Grimshaw in 2019, that wasn’t agreed to by all of the Working Party, so never adopted as a formal SPD. We continue to press the council to properly reawaken this subject, the latest iteration is AHMM’s rather more limited work on King St. which we’ve yet to see.

What have I concluded from the paper mountain? Simply this, we must try harder to **improve** initial proposals – and much earlier – and developers would do well to be less precious and defensive over their initial concepts. Then, having uncovered the snakes, we need to find some ladders for them to climb down, so less *face* is lost. Perhaps that’s my experience working in the Far East coming through. A lesson from there is to consider the importance of the *smoke break* - and we’re not talking about fire safety here - our squeaky clean world is doing its best to eliminate this useful safety valve, where agreements are cut and face can be saved. Marie Colvin would have understood.

Developers, in turn, could be a little more realistic about their overbuilding ambitions, and resist unnecessary kite-flying, knowing that they’ll get knocked back to something that we can agree to, even if through gritted teeth – M&S might be such an example. If we can have an early constructive dialogue, and some genuine listening from inception, then new developments will be quicker, cheaper, and better for all.