

# Mayor's undemocratic move is a blow for housing

LONDON Mayor Boris Johnson is using his initiative to protect that vanishing species – the London pub.

He says he will back boroughs that want to protect them as "community assets".

A good move by the Mayor. But then he goes and spoils it all by agreeing this week to "call in" a plan by Royal Mail to redevelop the massive Mount Pleasant site in Clerkenwell.

This would have been initially scrutinised by both Camden and Islington councils – and whether well done or not, it would be local

## Camden New Journal Comment

democracy at work.

Now, Mr Johnson has snatched this from the jaws of local democracy in an unprecedented move.

The stakes are high for all parties.

First, the development of the site will probably cost

millions and is reported to be able to yield about £2billion in revenue from sales of housing units. In today's overheated London property market, with overseas investors, often Chinese, hovering to snap up flats as long-term investments, the

sale of homes on the site will probably produce more profit per acre than any other sole site in the capital.

Second, by responding – some might say obsequiously – to the overtures of the site's new owners, the recently privatised Royal Mail, the Mayor has agreed, quite speedily, to adjudicate on the site himself.

Both Royal Mail and the Mayor are known to favour a lower proportion of affordable housing on London sites than local authorities.

All this bodes ill for those who were hoping that a site as

big as this would produce hundreds of affordable homes, something so badly needed in London which is now facing its biggest housing crisis in the past 100 years.

It is not, essentially, a question of why did the Mayor abrogate this matter to himself, though the action is obviously debatable. It is more a question of why was this deed done so speedily without allowing time for a proper public discussion?

As long as this question persists, an unpleasant smell will now hang over all

proceedings that will follow. We have long argued that only a massive council building programme will make dents into the housing crisis. Critics who are enamoured of the belief that private is best, public is bad, naturally oppose such a view.

But support for this kind of programme is growing, albeit too slowly, across all parties.

By the Mayor's action of snatching back adjudication on Mount Pleasant from Camden and Islington, it looks as if housing crisis is now set to worsen.

## 18 LETTERS

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### How cynical can you get?

□ YOUR readers need to know, yet again, how developers manipulate the democratic process to gain profits against local will.

The local position (for both Camden and Islington) is that while everyone is pleased that this waste and is being developed for much-needed housing, this proposal is wholly inadequate and turns its back on the five surrounding neighbourhoods like an exclusive fortress. The plan is badly laid out, has

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unacceptable density, (over 1,600 new residents), is overwhelmingly private accommodation with well below the targets for affordable housing. It reduces local residents' right to light and privacy to an unacceptable level; it will add enormous pressure on local infrastructure, services and social cohesion. Above all, it is a second-rate suburban design totally unsuited to a prime historic site in central London.

There is an opportunity to create a development of excellence and true long-lasting worth, generating decent financial returns for the RMG shareholders, but instead the RMG have gone for the quick and easy money while leaving us with a slum for the future!

Last week it was revealed that while Camden and Islington councils were almost certainly going to reject

# Mount Pleasant, slum of the future

□ MAYOR of London Boris Johnson's decision this week to call in the Royal Mail Group's (RMG) planning application is the latest unpleasant twist in the Mount Pleasant saga.

First the sham public consultation. Then the indigestibly obese 5,000-page planning application. Then the RMG's undervalued privatisation and the free transfer of 8.7 acres of public land into private hands.

While the public were thrown scraps from the master's table – promises of jobs and affordable housing – the RMG feasted on their prize: free land now worth approximately £500million. Then came the bribing scandal, revealing the RMG's secret offers to local residents of up to £27,000 to shut up and to release their right to light.

And then, finally, the pièce de résistance. Knowing Camden and Islington councils were likely to reject their applications at the forthcoming planning meetings (not least on the grounds of a paltry 20 per cent affordable housing



The Mount Pleasant site

PICTURE: ANGELA COBBINAH

when both boroughs' targets are 50 per cent) they stage a coup.

Mr Johnson, love him or loathe him, cares less for affordable housing and so the RMG reduced their offer of affordable housing to just 12 per cent. The gesture is a colossal fingers up not only to the two councils and the communities that have fought so hard to demand a better scheme than this commercially-driven future slum, but also to our nationwide efforts to

resolve the chronic housing shortage.

Mr Johnson's justification for calling these applications in might come back to haunt him. Hoping to speed things up, he claims "it appears unlikely that the boroughs will be in a position to determine the two applications in the near future." Does he know that Camden was meeting on February 27 and Islington on March 10?

Mr Johnson, on the other hand,

"hopes the planning application will be brought before the mayor in the summer." This does not make sense unless, of course, it is a fait accompli and the summer deadline is not actually a review of the planning application, but an approval.

Too much has changed since the planning brief was published. He has closed the adjacent Clerkenwell fire station. A new state secondary school and a residential block are to be built on two other corners of the site.

Two Transport for London studies are addressing the horrendous Farringdon Road corners. And there is no sign of a developer to finance these proposals.

Mr Johnson says he "will now address the concerns expressed by the boroughs and local residents before taking a decision on the planning application."

The Mount Pleasant Forum is waiting for your call.

**EDWARD DENISON**

for Mount Pleasant Forum

mountpleasantforum.wordpress.com

the proposals because the 20 per cent affordable housing quota fell well below the 50 per cent demanded by both councils, the RMG have now reduced the affordable housing to a less than paltry 12 per cent! This is unacceptable.

This they have done, no doubt, because they requested Boris Johnson called in the planning application – removing the whole process from the local level before the plans have been formally discussed. This will subvert the normal democratic process, since the Mayor of London alone will decide.

And now Mr Johnson is to call in the application. How cynical can you get?

First the RMG gets the

public land virtually free of charge in the privatisation process, then they seek to maximise their profits at the expense of the very public who, until three months ago, owned that very land.

The RMG will say they have fulfilled all planning requirements... and we say they have gone through the motions with no intention of any meaningful participation. Their consultation was a token gesture from the start and we have said so – only now are the local politicians realising how underhand the RMG have been.

The councils and the local people want a distinguished and worthwhile development on this site, and we can

all contribute to make this happen. We want this development to go through the normal process of planning consideration at local level, which starts with the councils' rejection and then we should all be part of building something outstanding for future generations of Londoners.

Shame on us if we let this pass!

**JUDY DANTON**

Secretary Calthorpe Street  
Residents' Association &  
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member

### Dark issues

□ THOUGH seemingly small in the case of Grafton Terrace the rights-to-light issue is set to become huge across the country (*Property News*, January 16).

And residents surrounding Royal Mail's Mount Pleasant sorting office site have been offered up to

£27,000 to give up their rights to light – on condition they don't oppose its appalling development proposals.

"Rights to light appear to have a disproportionately negative impact upon the potential for the development of land", a Law Commission summary suggested.

And the Department for Communities and Local Government asked the commission to examine changing the law.

Residents fighting to retain the daylight to their gardens, as the Victorians intended, are doing us all a favour.

Is a dark, dense, (greedy developers') London what we want?

Karl Marx lived at 9 Grafton Terrace – renumbered 46 in 1888 as more buildings were erected – for seven and a half years. Time for a blue plaque?

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