

The former Dickens and Jones Department Store. the present House of Fraser Department store – The site comprising nos. 75 to 81 (consec.), George Street, nos. 21 to 26 (consec.), King Street, nos. 4, 6 and 8, Paved Court, and the building fronting the south-eastern end of Golden Court, Richmond

## COMMENTS ON THE DESIGN ASPECTS OF THE EMERGING PROPOSALS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE RECENT '80 GEORGE STREET' EXHIBITION

### SETTING THE SCENE

In considering and commenting on the emerging proposals it is essential to understand how the existing group of buildings came into being, and to assess the qualities of the group and their existing relationship with their settings within the Central Richmond and Richmond Green Conservation Areas and their relationship with nearby listed and other historic buildings.

The existing, main building of ca 1968 takes the place of the former, late-Victorian Gosling & Sons' Department Store at nos. 75 to 80 (odd), and the former, late-Victorian *Queen's Head*, P.H. at no. 81, George Street (at the corner of King Street), and a series of modestly-scaled, late-18<sup>th</sup> century/early-19<sup>th</sup> century retail properties at nos. 21 to 26, King Street. Regrettably, the external elevations of the Dickens and Jones' building possess none of the richly modelled architectural character of the earlier buildings on the site, and are substantially over-scaled in relation to the surviving historic buildings in King Street, Golden Court and George Street.

The retention of the existing, modestly scaled, historic, retail properties along Paved Court against proposals for their demolition and redevelopment is attributable to the efforts of the Richmond Society and officers of the GLC's Historic Buildings Division at the critical planning stage in pressing the Richmond-upon-Thames Council to secure their effective conservation-based incorporation within the overall Dickens and Jones' development.

Despite the absence of real architectural quality in the external design of the existing, main building, the Dickens and Jones and now the House of Fraser department store has always been regarded as an important and much valued retail asset by the local Richmond community and by a wider community over the last fifty years. Accordingly, the potential closure of the store and the replacement of the long-established retail (and former part-café/restaurant use on the third floor) on its first, second and third floors with office use must inevitably be viewed with considerable regret. Clearly, such a potential change in use will require the most convincing justification and offer relevant and adequate benefits.

The most significant deficiency of the external design of the existing, main building is the vast and unsightly height and bulk of the M+E plant-room at roof-level, and its highly damaging impact on the immediate settings of the grade II\* and grade II listed, late-17<sup>th</sup> century and 18<sup>th</sup> century properties comprising nos. 29, 30 and 32, The Green, nos. 1 to 6 (consec.), Old Palace Terrace, and no. 18, King Street, as seen from across The Green. See below:



Given the existing harm caused by the plant-room on the setting of the historic buildings at the southern corner of The Green and to the character, appearance and significance of The Richmond Green Conservation Area, any possibility of extending the building at roof-level with an additional storey of office-space at fourth floor level, let alone adding yet a further plant-enclosure above, should surely be completely out of the question. Indeed, any proposals for the development of the existing building should provide for the removal of the existing, grossly over-sized plant-room or a reduction in its height and bulk and other design measures to mitigate its present damaging impact.

The excessive height and bulk of the existing plant-room is also clearly evident in views from Hill Street and King Street. See below:



Given the existing harm caused by the plant-room on the setting of the grade II\* and grade II listed and other historic buildings in King Street and at the corner of Paved Court, and to the character, appearance and significance of the Central Richmond and Richmond Green Conservation Areas, any possibility of extending the building at roof-level with an additional storey of office-space at fourth floor level, let alone adding yet a further plant-room above, should surely be completely out of the question. Indeed, any proposals for the development of the existing building should provide for the removal of the existing, grossly over-sized plant-room or a reduction in its height and bulk and other design measures to mitigate its present damaging impact.

The solid, stone-faced, projecting canopy that runs along the George Street and King Street frontages of the existing, main building above the polished, black-granite faced ground-storey containing the shop-windows and corner-entrances, is not a feature of great architectural interest or quality. However, if it is to be removed, it is essential that it should be replaced by a modestly projecting, stone band clearly separating the ground floor storey of the building with its shop-windows and fascias, from the upper storeys of the building. There should be no question of omitting a clearly defined horizontal feature at this level and extending the plain, featureless, ashlar stone treatment of the upper storeys down to street-level. Such an approach would simply accentuate the sheer height of the building and leave no framework for the installation of shop-fascias and/or signs.

## THE EMERGING PROPOSALS

The following comments are put forward with full regard to the relevant national, London-wide and local planning policies and guidance.

The prospective developers state that their 'vision is to breathe new life into the site by proposing a sensitively designed scheme'; that their aim is 'deliver a sensitive design which reflects its setting'; and that 'there is an opportunity to reinvent (sic) the building and ensure it relates to its surrounding context'.

Sadly however, save for the proposal to clean the Portland Stone of the elevations at first, second and third floor levels, the alterations and extensions to the main building as currently proposed will have a seriously damaging impact on the settings of the listed and other historic buildings at the southern corner of The Green and in King Street, and substantially harm the character, appearance and significance of both the Richmond Green and Central Richmond Conservation Areas. Regrettably, the exhibited proposals reflect a complete failure to recognise the particular scale and character of this part of the heart of Richmond and the need to ensure that the proposals should serve to sustain and enhance the settings of nearby listed and other historic buildings and the two conservation areas.

- The proposed addition of a further floor of office-space across the entirety of the present roof of the building, only modestly set back from the perimeter parapets on the street frontages – seriously understated in the exhibited drawings - is fundamentally unacceptable, as too, the proposed addition of a large plant-enclosure on top of the proposed additional storey. Such proposals will only serve to increase the height and bulk of an already over-sized building in relation to its historic context.
- The external design of the proposed additional storey and plant-enclosure is entirely insensitive to the established roof-scape of the heart of Richmond, and the character, appearance and significance of the Richmond Green and Central Richmond Conservation Areas.

- The proposed removal the existing projecting canopy that runs along the George Street and King Street frontages of the existing, main building above the shop-windows and corner-entrances at ground floor level and the extension of the plain, featureless, ashlar stone treatment of the upper storeys down to street-level, without any clearly defined, intermediate horizontal feature will simply accentuate the sheer height of the building and leave no framework for the installation of shop-fascias or signs.
- The proposed, significant increase in the clear-glazed areas in each of the recessed window-bays at first and second floor levels and in the continuous band of glazing at third floor level will only serve to expose potentially brightly lit office-interiors, emphasizing that the upper floors of the building are no longer in retail use.
- The scale and design of the proposed main entrance to the offices on Golden Court is entirely insensitive to the established scale and character of this important pedestrian thoroughfare and the buildings that front it. In particular, the very extensive area of double-height glazing emphasizes the non-retail function of this part of the development, contrary to the established functional character of Golden Court.
- The proposal to 'sensitively refurbish' the frontages to nos. 4, 6 and 8, Paved Court is welcome. However the proposal needs to embrace a commitment to the retention of the existing 19<sup>th</sup> century shop-fronts at nos. 6 and 8, Paved Court, and the introduction of a correctly detailed shop-front at no. 4, Paved Court, and the adoption of a sound-conservation-based approach to the works for the remainder of the individual buildings.
- It is to be hoped that the exhibited proposals will be fundamentally reconsidered and redrafted before they are progressed.

**Paul Velluet, M.Litt. RIBA, IHBC, Chartered Architect**

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Paul Velluet lives and works in St Margaret's, Twickenham. As an architect, he has some thirty-five years' experience in working in both private practice and the public sector specialising in building conservation and development in historic areas, including serving for ten years as Regional Architect and Assistant Regional Director of English Heritage, London Region. In past years he has served on the RIBA's Planning Group and Awards Group and on the Richmond-upon-Thames Council's Conservation Areas Advisory Committee. He currently serves as a trustee of the Covent Garden Area Trust, and is a former Chairman of The Richmond Society and its Conservation, Development and Planning Sub-Committee.