

Hays Wharf

HC Deb 10 July 1987 vol 119 cc676-86 [676](#)

§ Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn— [Mr. Alan Howarth.]
[1.49 pm](#)

§ [Mr. Simon Hughes \(Southwark and Bermondsey\)](#)

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring to the attention of the House the development of a small but significant part of London—Hays wharf. I am glad to see the Under-Secretary of State in her place and I welcome her to her new office. I know that she is interested in the subject and I am pleased that the traffic problems did not make her punctual arrival too much of a tight squeak.

In my first Adjournment debate in 1983, when I was first elected to Parliament, I talked about planning along the riverside of our capital city. I referred in particular to planning for the south bank of the river from Waterloo to Surrey docks, in the centre of which is Hays wharf. The Minister will be aware of that debate. Her predecessor dealt with the issues in a good and long debate. I was joined by my parliamentary colleague and neighbour, the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms. Harman), who cannot be here today. I apologise on behalf of my other parliamentary colleagues and neighbours who cannot be here. They are aware of the debate and I shall refer to their views. Southwark is represented by all three major political parties which, unusually, are broadly in agreement on this issue.

Hays wharf lies between London bridge and Tower bridge, between the river and Tooley street. In the last century that area was the subject of the great fire of Tooley street. The part adjacent to London bridge is now developed to a substantial extent in the area of the old St. Olave's house and what is now called London Bridge City. The whole of the site is owned by the same company—St. Martins Property Corporation Ltd.—developers for the Kuwait Investment Office, an arm of the Kuwaiti Government and royal family, so it is not in public ownership. This debate concerns the current planning applications and how they should be dealt with.

In January 1982 the Secretary of State for the Environment granted planning permission, on appeal, for the redevelopment of part of the Hays wharf site including 750 sq ft of office space, 50,000 sq ft of shopping space and 35,000 sq ft of residential floor space. He refused to grant planning permission for proposals involving 1,320,000 sq ft of office space and considered the height of the proposed 30-storey building excessive and its relation to surrounding buildings unsatisfactory.

Since 1981 we have been in an unusual position because this part of my constituency comes under the London Docklands Development Corporation and is not governed by the normal planning processes under which a local authority makes the decision. The LDDC is the planning development control authority and is governed by the 1980 Act which set up the LDDC and its planning powers.

In 1983 the LDDC submitted development proposals for the Hays wharf area to the Secretary of State for approval under the provisions of the [Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980](#). Phase one included over 1 million sq ft of office space and phase two over 1.2 million sq ft of offices, housing, shops and open space. The local council and the GLC objected to the proposals because they believed the process to be undemocratic and inappropriate for that development and decision. [677](#) Secondly, they said that the uses did not meet the needs of the local community. Thirdly, they said that it involved an excessive office element. Fourthly, they said that it did not comply with the criteria on design set out by the Secretary of State in his letter of January 1982 and that, in any event, it was not an appropriate development, given that the council was about to draft a local plan.

A public inquiry was requested by the two local councils concerned. In the event, in July—the same month that a debate was held on the matter in this House—the Secretary of State approved the proposals for redevelopment submitted by the LDDC under a special development order. Planning permission was granted for the whole site. Five applications including detailed proposals for phase one—which effectively has now been developed—and outline proposals for phase two were then submitted by St. Martins Property Corporation Ltd. in September 1983 and permission was granted in January 1984.

Phase one is now effectively complete. In technical terms, three applications now lie on the table for the major part of phase two. A park is being developed and the work on that has begun near to Tower bridge on the south side. There are also three separate planning applications. In essence, I want to deal with the central application and the Minister will have anticipated that. The major element of the new proposal that has gone to the LDDC is a detailed planning application for more than 1.2 million sq ft of offices, 306 parking spaces with a basement car park, a riverside walk, alterations to the local highways and the formation of a side and low level walkway on the site bounded by two small local roads, Morgan's lane and Weavers lane. A local council estate, the Bethel estate, would be demolished—in fact it has just gone—and listed buildings would also have to go. The floor space does not differ from that which was approved. I want to make it clear that in planning terms I am not basing my argument today on the component parts of the application. My view is that we already have too much office space in that part of my borough and we need other things. However, I am aware that that is by no means the crucial argument and issue before the Government or the LDDC.

The issue now is the physical layout, massing and appearance of the proposal. That is very different from before and includes land previously allocated for residential use. The proposal is probably unique in the history of planning applications in Britain. I believe that if it were granted, it would be for the largest volume of building in London.

When my late and much lamented colleague David Penhaligon was in the House, he inquired and was told that it was quite proper to produce a plan for the House. I have asked for and been given a copy of the proposed plan. It would be helpful if I showed the House the nature of the design because it is monstrously large. As we look at the plan, on the Minister's right we can see Tower bridge. On the left there are buildings which have now been completed along the riverside. In the centre is the plan of the proposed building. That building is intended to be in the style of this building. However, its total tower height is as high as the tower housing Big Ben. Its whole mass is many times bigger than this building. It is also the same height as St. Paul's cathedral. Therefore, on the south bank we would have a massive modern building that was made to look like this building. I guess, if it was built, [678](#) that some visitors would think that it was this building because it would look more like the Palace of Westminster but be bigger. The very nature of the building and the cheek of its design as well as the sheer volume and other objections all raise serious and national issues. I will leave this plan on the Bench before me for a moment and show another drawing to the House—which the Minister may have seen—which is useful in terms of comparison.

There is a drawing which shows the projected building against the river with Tower bridge in the background and another that shows its height relative to Tower bridge and St. Paul's cathedral. It is a massive, monstrous building. Since the LDDC sent out the application for consultation it has not received an overwhelming number of statements of support. Indeed, no statements of support have been received. There have been several specific objections, however, as well as a few neutral comments from those who do not think that the proposal affects them.

I shall describe the building and then take up some of the criticisms that have been made by those who have expressed objections. An American architect has produced the design for, in all likelihood, one American client, which is probably a bank. The design is described as being related to traditional English architecture". It certainly is. That is the nature of the design. It is described as being loosely based on an enlarged Houses of Parliament". There are two large blocks arranged in the form of a U that are open towards the river with a private courtyard.

There will not be a thoroughfare or roadway. The description continues: The blocks range in height from 6 and 8 tall storeys facing the river to 11 storeys further back, with two 17 storey towers (330ft high) in the middle. Such a building would dwarf the area, where it is not as if it is one that does not have other buildings and sites of significance. The two most obvious are Tower bridge and the Tower of London. The officers of Southwark council concluded that the proposed building would have a devastating effect on the historic and cherished local scene by its impact on the river front, on Tooley street, on the urban grain and historic fabric of the area, on the Tower of London and on Tower bridge. I am sure that the Minister will appreciate the council's conclusion that the proposed building would also fail to satisfy the design criteria

established by the Secretary of State in his decision in 1982 and in the outline permission granted by the LDDC in January 1984.

The general public will be excluded from the large area occupied by one building and will lose the enjoyment of the river. An attempt has been made to provide a riverside walk, but the open space and the streets around the site will be of low amenity value because all the surrounding public areas will be dominated by the overwhelming presence of an enormous building. Anyone who sits in the park or walks along the river walkway or road will have a huge building towering above him. Depending on where he is, the individual will be in the shadow of the building for most of the time.

The council concluded that any future changes in technology or the location of the banking sector could result in a redundant building not easily adapted for other uses. If a building is constructed to one specific client's design and the client's needs move on, one is left with a building that may have no continuing use. We are talking [679](#) about something that could be the largest palatial off-white elephant that London will have seen. If we have difficulty letting other blocks in London such as Centre Point, there will be even more difficulty with the proposed building, especially if the bottom falls out of the big bang and the banking sector in the years to come.

Lastly, the original planning consent, which included the specific floor area to the exclusion of height and, therefore, volume, was given in ignorance of the current demand for increased floor-to-floor heights and its consequent effect on bulk. The result of trading practices is that the height between floors is much greater than the original proposals. Although there are relatively few tiers of windows, they are all several floors in depth in terms of the floor height at the Palace of Westminster.

That is the nature of the application. It went before Southwark council for consultation and unusually—this illustrates the importance of the issue—the planning committee arrived at all-party, unanimous agreement. Southwark is a Labour-run borough and my alliance colleagues are the opposition. The Conservative group is the third party. There was a recorded vote of 11 to nil.

It was decided that the LDDC be informed that if the council were the local planning authority for the determination of the three applications, permission would have been refused in all cases, and that in the light of the substantial departure of the application from the special development order submissions of 1983 and outline permission of 1984, the council requested that the Secretary of State call in the proposals of phase 2 for public inquiry, and that then steps be taken to alert the public to this. It was moved by the Chair and duly seconded that the council opposed outright the proposals contained in the Hays wharf phase 2 development proposal. The floor space is the same, but the volume other than the floor space has increased dramatically because of the increased height. Originally, there were to be several small structures; now there are effectively two, but made to be constructed as one. The LDDC submission to the Secretary of State in 1983 stated that the height should correspond to the height of existing buildings and to the grandeur of the riverside, and should involve an intensive development but of medium height, the majority of buildings being seven storeys high, with a maximum height of 15 storeys. Those proposals have clearly not been adhered to. The height of the two towers exceeds by over 40 metres the maximum height specified in the outline permission of 1984, and the proposals on which the Secretary of State previously based his decision.

The proposals involve the demolition of two listed buildings, in particular 3 Vine lane, which the outline planning permission originally required to be retained. I understand that the design was changed in the latter part of 1986. The present proposals were received on 7 April of this year and, according to the present timetable, should go before the LDDC committee in the autumn. The LDDC asked in April for more information from St. Martin's, which is expected but has not been received.

The responses to consultation have been unanimously critical. The Minister will appreciate the significance of the bodies that have responded so far. The Docklands Consultative Committee, which is a committee of the local boroughs, says: [680](#) The height and bulk of the building signal

an insensitive over-development of the site. The external design ... can only realistically be described as an 'architectural whimsy' which is unfortunately contemptuous of everything around it. The borough of Tower Hamlets and the City of London Corporation, which are opposite the development, oppose it. The corporation says: The height and bulk of the towers would be over-dominant and unduly bulky and out of scale with the general development on the South Bank. Although the design of the buildings would be traditional in concept ... their scale would be deceptive, almost grotesque. The Royal Fine Art Commission has been asked for its views, and has said clearly that it is very unhappy. The commission is profoundly uneasy about the building's hulk, scale and lack of a convincing style. The hulk of the building is too large for the site and impossible to relate to adjoining buildings ... It will overwhelm the existing buildings along Tooley Street. The commission believes that the planning consent which included a specific floor area, to the exclusion of height and therefore volume, was given in ignorance of the current demand for increased floor-to-floor heights and the consequent effect on bulk. The planning status should therefore be re-examined. In its symmetrical and palatial form, the present project disregards the existing street pattern and urban grain, and imposes its own overbearing presence. To double the scale of the buildings"— this may be one of the most significant phrases of all— is fraught with danger. There is the grotesque possibility that the new development may make the Tower of London— which has been there for centuries— across the river, look like a garden folly. So massive will the building be that the Tower of London will look like one of those mini villages that can be seen in holiday resorts and other tourist centres. The Commission is convinced that the relationship between the new development and the Tower of London in terms of both scale and axes has not been adequately considered. The project lacks authenticity and genuine style. The Commission acknowledges the architect's interesting attempt at symbolising the power and glory of commerce ... but finds the effect cosmetic, where it ought to be intrinsic; and an imitation of the past where it ought to be a re-interpretation and a transformation which expresses our time. When it was finally asked to look at the revised scheme, it said: The Commission does not believe these changes to be sufficiently fundamental to alter its view. English Heritage, the guardian of our built heritage, said: The proposed large office blocks do not comply with the Secretary of State's requirement that development 'must be subordinate and complementary to the Tower and Tower bridge'. The two proposed towers would be excessively dominant and intrusive in the riverside setting. English Heritage said about the demolition of 115 to 121 Tooley street: the design currently proposed does not yet seem to me to be satisfactory and I do not consider that consent should be granted for the drawings which show these designs. About the demolition of the Anning and Chadwick warehouse it said: the retention of the listed building deserves more consideration in the light of the Circular than it appears so far to have received. Perhaps most anomalous of all comes an objection, perfectly proper constitutionally, from within the Department of the Environment itself. Its Royal Palaces Secretariat, when asked for its view on behalf of the Tower of London, said: We wish to register strong objections to the main block of buildings comprising part 17, part 11 and part 6 floors. In particular, the towers rising to 99 metres are greatly in excess [681](#) of what was agreed by the Secretary of State on 6 July 1983 when the tallest block at that time proposed was to be no more than 57 metres high. In the Department's view the height and bulk of the proposed buildings, if permitted, would seriously affect the setting of the Tower of London. The scale of storey heights with two actual storeys contained within each apparent giant storey height and the vast scale of the detail of the separate parts of the facade contribute to the main problems of height and bulk so that as a whole, and in detail, the effect on the Tower of London will be adverse. The main impact on the Tower of London would be felt from Tower Bridge, where the fine panoramic view to the west would be dominated by the new blocks on the left. This would by comparison dwarf the Tower of London on the right. From the Wharf footpath the new blocks would be very dominant. Being about half the distance from the Tower they would appear roughly twice the height relative to the Guy's Hospital tower ... The new towers would also impinge on the seclusion within the Tower of London. It is noted that from at least two positions they would be seen to rise above the roof or embattlement level and have a seriously adverse effect on the sense of being surrounded by medieval and historic

buildings. If people in or visiting the Tower will no longer be able to appreciate properly one of our prime national medieval treasures, there must be something wrong.

My political neighbours share my concern. They have not looked at all the documents that I have accumulated this week, but I have spoken to both of them and they both have reservations about the detail of the development. There are all sorts of reasons why I hope that the Minister will realise that this building should not go ahead. For example, there is a risk of an enormous wind tunnel through the centre of the blocks and out into the areas around. The line of sight from the observatory in Greenwich across to St. Paul's cathedral will be interfered with. It does not agree with the only statutory plan for the area, the Greater London development plan. It will have an adverse effect on the neighbouring communities and the chances of their proposed development.

The whole matter raises further the question whether it is appropriate for anybody, let alone for private commercial gain, to be allowed to erect a building that looks like this one. It is unacceptable for somebody to make a pastiche on this building. We are hesitant about the portcullis being used on souvenirs for sale outside the building. The biggest souvenir would be a building like this one, but out of the control of the House.

Lastly, I believe that if the ultimate owners of the site, the Kuwaiti Government and royal family, were to be aware of how sensitive this site is, they would not be at all happy at people acting at several arms' lengths on their behalf intervening on London's skyline with this design in such a way.

I had a difficult choice. I had to decide whether to ask for the decision to be taken by the LDDC, the planning authority, or to ask the Minister and her colleagues to consider whether it would be appropriate for the scheme to be called in and for the Government to hold a public inquiry and then make the decision. I have come to the view that it is so important a site and so grotesque a plan that in London's interests, and in the national interest, we must have a call-in by the Secretary of State and a public inquiry and that, at the end of the day, the scheme must be rejected. I hope that today's debate will have alerted the country to the danger and disadvantage to London if the scheme goes ahead.

[682 2.15 pm](#)

[§ *The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment \(Mrs. Marion Roe\)*](#)

First, I should like to thank the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for his kind comments and his welcome for my appointment.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey on securing time for a debate on development at Hays wharf. I note that the last occasion this subject was debated on the Floor of the House was about four years ago. The hon. Gentleman has put forward his points with his customary clarity. I have listened with care to his speech, but those points to which, on a re-reading of the debate, I have inadvertently failed to respond, I shall deal with in a follow-up letter.

Before I refer to the background and the particulars of the Hays wharf development. I must make it clear that I am necessarily constrained in what I may say about its second phase. The hon. Gentleman appreciates why I cannot comment on the merits of planning applications that are now before the development control authority lest I prejudice my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's consideration of any appeals or call-ins that might come before him in due course. Equally, I cannot comment on possible schemes that might themselves become applications.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the significance of the site and briefly outlined the background to the developments attached to it. There is no doubt that Hays wharf—now better known as London Bridge City—is a very large and important site. It is strategically important because of its proximity to the City of London, and environmentally because of its riverside location opposite London's most frequented tourist spot, the Tower of London. Phase I—on the part of the river frontage nearer London bridge—is now all but completed and is proving to be a remarkable success story.

There is a long history attached to the redevelopment of Hays wharf since it ceased to be operational in the late 1960s, but progress was slow. I do not wish to dwell on the planning

background because it was covered in the debate four years ago. Nevertheless, it may be worth reminding ourselves that a number of applications for the site went to a public inquiry in January 1982, soon after the London Docklands Development Corporation was established. As a result of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's decisions, the developers worked with the LDDC to produce revised redevelopment proposals.

The LDDC subsequently submitted proposals to my right hon. Friend for redevelopment of the area under section 148 of the [Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980](#). After carrying out the procedures fully in accordance with the provisions of the Act, my right hon. Friend approved the proposals in outline subject, inter alia, to the approval by the LDDC of the siting, design and external appearance of the buildings and other matters set out in the Town and Country Planning (London Docklands Urban Development Area) Special Development Order 1981.

The LDDC approved the detailed application for phase I of London Bridge City in early 1984. Work on phase I, which runs eastward from London bridge, began in 1984 and its 120,000 sq m of mixed office, retail, residential and leisure accommodation is now substantially complete and let. When occupied, it will provide nearly 5,000 jobs.

[683](#) Outline permission for phase II to extend the development of London Bridge City to Tower bridge is extant by virtue of the consent given by my right hon. Friend in 1983. That development would provide 151,000 sq m of mixed use accommodation and nearly 6,000 jobs. New applications were submitted to the LDDC in April this year for outline consent to alternative proposals for phase II. Furthermore, the major part of the site is the subject of a full application seeking both outline and detailed consent. The LDDC is considering those applications, and, for reasons that I have already given, I must take special care over what I say.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the call-in procedures under section 35 of the [Town and Country Planning Act 1971](#) and asked about the criteria against which decisions are made.

Most call-ins, that is, planning applications that my right hon. Friend has decided that he should determine rather than the local planning authority, relate to applications for development that the local planning authority is minded to approve and that, in the authority's view, constitute a departure from the development plan. In London that generally means departures from the provisions of the Greater London development plan. Other cases may arise because the development proposal in the application is unusually large, important or controversial.

As announced by my right hon. Friend on 5 May, his general policy is that planning decisions should be left to the local authority in accordance with the general approach set out in the Department's circular 2 of 1981. He intervenes only where there are compelling grounds for doing so, and in general where the planning issues raised are of more than local importance. Such cases may include, for example, those which in his opinion could have wide effects, beyond their immediate locality, which give rise to substantial regional or national controversy, which may conflict with national policy on important matters, and those where the interests of national security or of foreign Governments may be involved.

In the first instance, all objections to and representations about proposed development should be made to the local planning authority where responsibility for considering applications lies. Clearly, there are means of drawing my right hon. Friend's attention to controversial proposals. The hon. Gentleman has used one such means today by initiating the debate. For reasons that I have already given, I cannot comment on the current proposal at Hays wharf, but I can assure him that my Department will keep a close eye on the situation.

I am always surprised at people who appear to resent the success of new developments on derelict land, such as in Docklands, for which there is no viable use in their traditional form. Of course, we all have different views about what should be put in the place of the old use and, of course, we regret the inevitable disturbance that necessarily arises for local interests when wholesale redevelopment is essential.

We must also protect and enhance those elements that are worthy of retention. That has been achieved in the first phase of London Bridge City by a careful blend of old warehouses and strikingly new buildings giving a balanced embankment scene rich with interest, and by the opening up of the river front for public access.

[684](#) The whole development will open up to the public an important stretch of riverside opposite the Tower. It will create a new and lively social and commercial centre for the south bank. I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman will deny that economic and environmental regeneration is a sine qua non for the welfare of those who live and work in Bermondsey. As to the design of the development, as with any development, views are necessarily subjective.

Despite the sheer scale of redevelopment involved—nearly 24 acres of inner urban land—London Bridge City is a microcosm of what is going on elsewhere in London, yet, from that vantage point, the visitor will see development all around. Immediately downstream of Tower bridge the visitor will see new development on the 93,000 sq m site at Butlers wharf. Beyond, and especially on the north bank of the River Thames, there are extensive, and major developments in the heart of Docklands. Development, in progress and proposed, covers almost every conceivable purpose on a scale virtually impossible to achieve elsewhere, from transport—STOLport and the docklands light railway—housing for sale and for rent, office and commercial premises, hypermarkets, recreational facilities, sports stadium, tourist attractions and hotels. For most of this development the LDDC has acted as a catalyst.

The corporation has so far reclaimed more than 322 hectares of derelict land. Seven thousand new homes have been built, or are under construction, on land in its ownership and £2.2 billion worth of private investment commitments have been secured. This has been achieved at a total cost to the public sector of £315 million. The corporation has entirely transformed the western part of its area in just six years.

Further to the east, but still within the LDDC area, lie the Royal docks, which form the largest single inner-city regeneration opportunity in Western Europe. If superimposed on a map of central London, they would stretch from the Tower to Marble Arch and from Euston to Waterloo. The corporation is currently developing a range of exciting proposals for this area with the private sector.

Across the river to the square mile, new developments rise as the City establishes its modern role, not simply as the commercial centre of Europe but as one of the three trading centres of the world. Not all the buildings are to everyone's taste. Some, such as the Lloyd's building, are controversial. But they demonstrate resoundingly the hallmark of confidence in the commercial future of the nation on which the prosperity of all its people depends.

The Government's confidence in the concept of development corporations is reinforced by our intention to establish new corporations elsewhere. Their purpose is to get things done urgently. Wherever regeneration is vital not—just in the UDC areas—we must ensure that it is not stifled through the over-zealous application of planning controls. The livelihood and well-being of those who live there depend on imagination and investment. At the same time, we must endeavour to protect and enhance those amenities, including our heritage, which people—both residents and visitors—value. This twin approach—conserving the best, enhancing the rest—has been imaginatively consummated in the first phase of London Bridge City. The challenge is to replicate the success elsewhere.

I have not dealt with detail because of legal constraints. For the same reason, I have had to avoid commenting on the phase II site and the merits of the applications. I hope [685](#) that I have dealt with some of the points and emphasised the importance of new development and investment not only in this part of London but throughout the country.

[2.28 pm](#)

[§ Mr. Simon Hughes](#)

With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to reply to the Minister.

[§ Mr. Deputy Speaker \(Mr. Harold Walker\)](#)

Mr. Simon Hughes.

[§ Mr. Hughes](#)

I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. I know of the constraints of her temporary position.

Her reply showed that the law allows the Secretary of State and her other ministerial colleagues to consider whether this matter meets certain criteria. Clearly, it appears from all those who submitted proposals and objections that this is more than an application of local significance,

and that it has a national importance. The Minister has helpfully revealed that, if those criteria and others are fulfilled, the applications can be considered by her Department. That is why I brought it to her attention. I think that, when the criteria are examined, people will understand that it is perfectly proper for this matter to come before the Government for consultation, inquiry and decision.

[686](#) That is the right course. This is probably one of the most rationally significant applications in the centre of London for decades and that is why it merits Government intervention, although the Government are rightly reluctant to intervene on most occasions. Whatever our views about the development of docklands, the Government have to look at a scheme of such great impact——

§ It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

§ Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House now adjourn.— [Mr. Alan Howarth.]

§ [Mr. Hughes](#)

In considering inner cities there are always two fundamentals. We have to meet the needs of the community and provide for work, relaxation and homes, but we must also provide a city in which people can comfortably live and whose design reflects our best traditions. Design and design criteria predominate in this matter and I hope that I shall persuade the Government to accept the view that this amazing application does not fulfill the necessary design criteria for this site at all. I am sure that the Government will want to make the right decision and they now have the chance to do so.