LEICESTER SQUARE CONSERVATION AREA DIRECTORY

1. Designation and Extension
CITY OF WESTMINSTER

STATUS : FOR GENERAL RELEASE

COMMITTEE : PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

DATE : 21 NOVEMBER 1989

REPORT OF : DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND TRANSPORTATION

SUBJECT : PROPOSED CONSERVATION AREA EXTENSION DESIGNATION AT:
(i) MILLBANK, SW1 TO INCLUDE PONSONBY PLACE, PONSONBY TERRACE AND FRONTAGES TO MILLBANK
(ii) STRAND CONSERVATION AREA TO INCLUDE THE NORTHERN HALF OF THE RIVER THAMES FRONTAGE, WC2
(iii) SOHO, WC2 TO INCLUDE EAST SIDE OF LEICESTER SQUARE AND ADJOINING FRONTAGE OF CHARING CROSS ROAD

WARD : MILLBANK, ST JAMES AND WEST END

BACKGROUND PAPERS : NIL

1. SUMMARY

1.1 (a) As part of the City Council’s policy quoted in the District Plan (Chapter 10 para. 10.44(ii)): “to review its conservation areas and boundaries periodically, and whilst doing so to take account of any representations of interested parties”, three further small extensions to existing conservation areas are proposed:

1. Millbank, SW1
2. Strand, WC2
3. Soho, WC2

(b) It is also proposed that the southern portion of the Soho Conservation Area should be renamed “The Leicester Square Conservation Area”.

1.2 This report therefore seeks the Committee’s approval in principle to the designation of the three areas as conservation area extensions and the renaming of the southern portion of the Soho Conservation Area as “The Leicester Square Conservation Area” (see Map No. 4). Authority to proceed with the consultation necessary prior to final designation and renaming is also sought.

1.3 The findings of the consultations will be reported back to Committee for final designation and renaming.
2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 (a) That the proposed extensions to three conservation areas:

(i) Millbank, SW1 - as shown on Map No. 1
(ii) Strand, WC2 - as shown on Map No. 2
(iii) Soho, WC2 - as shown on Map No. 3

be approved in principle for designation as conservation areas and that the southern portion of the Soho Conservation Area is renamed “The Leicester Square Conservation Area” - as shown on Map No. 4.

(b) That consultations be undertaken with the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, The Victorian Society, The Georgian Society, local amenity groups and other such consultees as the Committee directs before the final boundaries as defined are formally agreed.

2.2 That the results of the consultations be assessed and reported back to Committee to approve the areas as subsequently defined.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The Proposed Extension to Millbank Conservation Area

It is proposed to include Ponsonby Place and Ponsonby Terrace and the adjoining portions of John Islip Street and Millbank which lie close to the north-east end of Vauxhall Bridge.

The area comprises stuccoed terraces of three storied, mid-nineteenth century houses with basements but without mansards and includes a few local shops and the “Morpeth Arms”, a public house on Millbank. It has a good environmental quality and is wholly worthy of forming an extension to the existing Millbank Conservation Area.

The properties in the neighbourhood which are built on land owned by the Crown Estate, have recently been renovated as part of a programme of redevelopment and renovation of this part of their holding.

3.2 The Proposed Extension to the Strand Conservation Area

There is an anomaly in the boundary of the Strand Conservation Area compared with the riparian conservation areas adjoining it within Westminster in that its boundary is along the river edge of the Victoria Embankment and not along the centre line of the River, which is also the City boundary. This frontage of Kings Reach is of particular importance because for almost half its length it is the setting for Somerset House and Kings College, and boats moored to landing stages are outside the Strand Conservation Area as it exists at present.

At the present time there are several of these: There are River Police boats moored to their station adjacent to Waterloo Bridge, “The Wellington” close to Temple Pier and three others moored to a landing stage approximately opposite the end of Surrey Street. These three are the “Wilfred” which provides a wine bar and restaurant, the “Naticia” which is a
double-deck pleasure craft and “The Katherine” where an estate agents board described it as an “All floating leisure opportunity”.

A conservation area designation would provide additional control so that the amenity of this stretch of the River frontage is preserved.

3.3 The Proposed Extension to Soho Conservation Area

Another anomaly in a conservation area boundary is the exclusion of a small area comprising most of the east side of Leicester Square and the adjoining frontage of Charing Cross Road, from the Soho Conservation Area.

All other parts of Leicester Square already enjoy conservation area protection.

The properties proposed for inclusion are The Odeon Cinema, which is one of the more dramatic “picture palaces” of the 1930s and older buildings to the north. Similarly, the adjoining frontage to Charing Cross Road is the only portion of the Road south of “The Hippodrome” which is not within a conservation area, though it includes some good quality late nineteenth century red-brick properties and several earlier buildings which, though modest, have a good scale.

The area is in a conspicuous part of the West End where protection and enhancement is particularly needed.

3.4 The Proposed Renaming of the Southern Portion of the Soho Conservation Area as the Leicester Square Conservation Area

It is considered that the individual character of Leicester Square and its environs should be expressed by renaming the southern portion of the Soho Conservation Area as the “Leicester Square Conservation Area”. The area around the Square with its cinemas, hotels and office blocks has a different scale to the more domestically-scaled Soho and the existing lack of definition could cause confusion particularly at a public inquiry.
CITY OF WESTMINSTER

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE - 20 DECEMBER 1983

REPORT OF THE CITY PLANNING OFFICER

PROPOSED EXTENSIONS TO THE SOHO AND REGENCY STREET CONSERVATION AREAS:

REPORT ON CONSULTATIONS:

1. SUMMARY

At its meeting on 12 May, the Town Planning Committee agreed, subject to consultations, the designation or proposed extensions to the Soho and Regent Street Conservation areas. Additional authorisation was given to consider including with the designation, Coventry Street, Leicester Square and Irving Street. This consultation has now been completed and formal designation of the several complementary extensions are recommended for the Committee’s approval.

2. CONSULTATIONS

2.1 Consultations have been carried out with the Westminster Society, Soho Society, Victorian Society, Civic Trust, Greater London Council, London Borough of Camden, The Leicester Square/Coventry Street Association and Richard Ellis, managing agents for the Electricity Supply Nominees, who own the freehold of the Trocadero site and the adjacent street block bounded by Coventry Street, Wardour Street, Shaftesbury Avenue and Rupert Street.

2.2 The Historic Buildings Division of the Greater London Council welcome the proposed extensions, especially the inclusion of Cambridge Circus, but regret that the northern boundary of the Conservation Area has not been altered to include the north side of Great Marlborough Street. They consider that although the buildings are not especially distinguished, it is a fine thoroughfare which should be included in its entirety within the Conservation Area.

Additional informal comments from the GLC are included in their letter, which is appended.

2.3 With regard to the GLC’s observations, the north side of Great Marlborough Street has been carefully considered, but the character of the buildings is so mixed in quality that it is not considered that a further extension in this area can be justified. The GLC’s contention that the architectural quality of the Conservation Area has deteriorated since its original designation is not without foundation, given the complex problems caused by the expansion of the sex industry in the area. However there is evidence that the townscape of the Conservation Area is now being improved with the restoration of listed and unlisted buildings in Broadwick Street, Newburgh Street and on the Trocadero site, as well as positive initiatives being undertaken by officers to secure the co-ordinated facelift of Lisle
Street and Gerrard Street. Peachey Properties are proposing to undertake works of improvement in the Carnaby Estate, and a joint effort is being undertaken with the GLC to secure the restoration and repair of some of the best shopfronts in the area: the Historic Buildings Division has set aside a small sum of grant money for this specific purpose. Positive action is also being taken to remove unsympathetic signs and advertisements from important groups of buildings on a co-ordinated basis. Whilst a town scheme for the repair of selected groups of listed buildings in the area would be desirable, the City Council does not have the financial resources to participate in such a venture at present.

2.4 The London Borough of Camden have no observations to make. The Westminster Society found the proposals “fully acceptable” and expressed their appreciation of the care, thoroughness and sensitivity with which the report was prepared. The Leicester Square/Coventry Street Association acknowledge that there are undoubtedly buildings of merit in the areas covered by the proposed extensions, but considers that listing of individual buildings is more appropriate than a blanket extension of the Conservation Area. Objection was also raised to the siting of two automatic public conveniences in the square. The Soho Society and Victorian Society are both minded to support the designation. Their detailed comments will be reported orally.

2.5 Richard Ellis, acting on behalf of the Electricity Supply Nominees, freeholders of the Piccadilly Estate, have confined their comments only to the Coventry Street area. They consider that, at first sight, the proposal is “a logical and sensible extension of the policy that the City Council has been following for some time in this part of the centre of London”. However they conclude that the extension is “unnecessary and potentially inhibiting”, and that for many years their clients have adapted a sensitive approach of restoration and refurbishment of their own volition on the Trocadero site conferring a beneficial influence on adjoining sites. They express concern that designation will encourage short term lettings to “undesirable users”, as it will “provide circumstances where it is difficult to economically retain old buildings”. Additionally, their observations conclude with a plea for a co-ordinated and accepted plan for Leicester Square emphasising:-

“This would include the extension of the pedestrianisation over New Coventry Street and improvements to the existing pedestrian areas of the north side of Leicester Square, all to complement the existing pedestrian area on the western side of the Square. The proposals prepared by the Leicester Square and Coventry Street Association and approved by the Highways Committee in November 1982 appear to answer the current problems created by ineffective design”.

Conclusions

2.6 It is considered that the extension of the Conservation Area would acknowledge the fact that for some years the emphasis has been on the refurbishment and restoration of existing buildings fostering a sustained improvement in the character and appearance of the whole area. Fanum House, Victory House, Coventry House, the former London Hippodrome and Queens House have all been rehabilitated or are being refurbished at present. There is no evidence to suggest that designation will retard this process; on the contrary experience suggests the reverse and that once the character of an area is acknowledged by its designation as a Conservation Area, the actual removal of uncertainty about the future encourages investment and improvement of the existing buildings facilitating long term improvements rather than short term activities; it is this kind of economic support which is
needed in the area. Furthermore, the expressed desire for a co-ordinated plan for the area reinforces the desirability of extending the Conservation Area as this will provide a framework within which environmental improvements and infill developments of the highest architectural quality can take place. Outside Conservation Areas the Council’s ability to secure high quality design is more limited.

2.7 In devising the boundary around Leicester Square officers have sought to identify that area which can reasonably be considered as having both an architectural and functional role in contributing to the character and appearance of the square. Although some of the buildings in the area proposed for designation are of limited townscape value, it is considered that their inclusion within the proposed boundary is desirable in that it would facilitate a coherent and consistent control over development, as and when it might be proposed, and also it would avoid a potentially anomalous and irregular boundary definition.

The gradual redevelopment of these buildings and their replacement with high quality new buildings would not be impaired by the designation of the Conservation Area extension, and it would enable the City Council to ensure that existing buildings are demolished only when good quality replacements are envisaged.

2.8 The detailed study of buildings carried out to establish the appropriate line for the southern boundary for the proposed designated area has revealed the highly anomalous situation with regard to the block of buildings on the west side of Whitcomb Street to the south of Orange Street, which although comprising mostly late 18th century properties of substantial townscape value does not fall at present within a designated conservation area. It is suggested that early considerations should be given to the correction of this anomaly by the inclusion or the block within the extended boundary of the adjacent Government Precinct Conservation Area.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) That officers be authorised to proceed with the designation of the extensions to the Regent Street Conservation Area, indicated on drawing No. CD/CO 0020C (to be displayed at Committee) under the provisions of Section 277 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1971.

(ii) That officers be authorised to proceed with the designation of the extensions to the Soho Conservation Area, indicated in drawing No. CD/CO 0013E (to be displayed at Committee) under the provisions of Section 277 or the Town and Country Planning Act 1981.
LEICESTER SQUARE CONSERVATION AREA DIRECTORY

2. Historical Background
The Development of Leicester Square

Early records indicate that the area was owned by the Beaumont family and the Abbot and Convent of St. Peters Westminster Abbey. The lands were surrendered to King Henry VIII around 1536 and an early map shows the area as fields, with a path crossing diagonally between enclosures. The area known as “Lammas Fields”, passed to the Earl of Leicester around 1630-1648, with Leicester House being built on the north side in the 1630’s. By 1682 the shape of the space was fixed by the Square laid out in 1670 with good quality houses.

From 1717-1727 Frederick the Prince of Wales, later to become King George II, lived in Leicester House (the father of the future King George III, he died in the house having been hit on the throat by a cricket ball). The first formal garden was established in 1727 with elm trees and a brick wall with iron railings replacing the earlier wooden enclosure used for grazing livestock and drying washing. An equestrian statue of King George I was erected in 1748 at the centre of the Square. By 1792 Leicester House had been demolished and the Square had started to decline. In 1808 the fields, then owned by the Tulk family were again sold and the new owner allowed decay to set in until the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was described as “very ruinous and dilapidated”. In 1843 the square was opened up to traffic by the formation of New Coventry Street and the enlargement of Cranbourn Street. This heralded the beginning of Leicester Square as a centre for entertainment. Private residents moved out and hotels, shops, exhibitions, Steam Baths and Oyster Rooms, were established. In 1851 James Wyld, the geographer, erected a model of the Earth in a dome-shaped building which occupied the whole of the gardens.

After the demolition of the Great Dome in 1862 the gardens declined in condition and tone. In 1866 pranksters vandalised the equestrian statue of George I, painting it in black and white dots and adding a dunce’s hat and broomstick. When later the figure of George I was dislodged form his horse, the resulting publicity generated the impetus to refurbish the gardens. In 1870 a Parliamentary Bill enabled the Metropolitan Board of Works to acquire the land. In 1874 the Square was boarded off and purchased by Albert Grant MP for £11,060. He commissioned James Knowles to design a new public garden with the Shakespeare memorial at the centre and four busts of famous local residents set in the lawns. The layout was typical of the Victorian era, with serpentine paths winding around the gardens and geometric flower beds set into the lawns. The works cost £28,300 and the gardens, reopened in July 1874, were handed over to the Board of Works for management. The London Plane trees were planted later. Theatres like the Alhambra (1858), Empire (1884), and Hippodrome(1900) dominated the area till its peak as a place of “frothy, light entertainment” prior to the First World War.

During the 1930’s, cinema displaced the theatre as Leicester Square’s medium of entertainment, with the Leicester Square Theatre (Andrew Mather) being completed on the south side of the square in 1930, The Odeon Theatre (Anthony Mather & Harry Weedon) being completed on the west side in 1937 and the Warner Theatre (E A Stone in association with T R Somerford) being completed on the north side in 1938. The latter was redeveloped behind its retained Art Deco facade in 1995. The Odeon was the largest and most striking of these new theatres, and with its simple black marble clad exterior and distinctive tower, it has become a national icon, representing the popular image of 30’s cinema architecture. A series of office buildings were also constructed within the square during this period, including Fanum House, which occupies the entire west side of the square and Leicester House on the north side of the square, the latter clearly influenced by Eric Mendlesohn with its streamlined form and ship like structure.
Under emergency powers during the Second World War, air raid shelters were constructed beneath the gardens and the railings scrapped for their metal value. Post war the entire block bound by New Coventry Street, Wardour Street and Sydney Place was redeveloped as the Swiss Centre, which was completed between 1963 and 1968. The exterior is simple and uncompromisingly modern and the Swiss Clock at ground floor level serves as both a tourist attraction and meeting place. By 1970 Leicester Square had become rather shabby, dominated by motor cars and a gloomy garden that was difficult to get into. In 1975 a traffic closure experiment by the Greater London Council reclaimed space for pedestrians on the North and South sides. However the concrete planters, trees, seats and decorative light columns proved to be focal points for anti social behavior. In 1990 Westminster City Council redesigned the whole Square with spacious and well lit promenades, keeping the railed garden at its centre. A new theatre ticket and management kiosk were built at the south of the Square. To improve the appeal of the gardens, broad paths and lawns were constructed, with the inherited monuments placed at the corner entrances. The statue of Charlie Chaplin was located facing the Shakespeare memorial fountain embodying the entertainment tradition of the Square.
LEICESTER SQUARE CONSERVATION AREA DIRECTORY

3. List of Buildings of Special Architectural and Historic Merit
CONSERVATION AREA NUMBER

Distribution of Listed Buildings

The listed buildings in the Leicester Square Conservation Area are:
The Hippodrome block, 1 Charing Cross Road, 34/5 Lisle Street, 6 Rupert Street & 3/4 Coventry Street,
The Shakespeare Memorial and 4 memorial theatrical busts in the square itself.
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<th>NAME/ADDRESS</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>GRADE</th>
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<tr>
<td>The London Hippodrome Theatre, Charing Cross Road (West side) and No 43 Charring Cross Road (Crown PH) (including Nos 7 to 10 consec, Cranbourn Street)</td>
<td>Theatre</td>
<td>1895 to 1900</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Charing Cross Road</td>
<td>End of terrace house</td>
<td>Early to mid 19th Century</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Former Rialto Cinema and Cafe de Paris</td>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>1913</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>3 Coventry Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Shakespeare Statue and fountain with busts of Hogarth, Hunter, Newton, and Reynolds in garden of square, Leicester Square</td>
<td>Statue</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>34 and 35 Lisle Street</td>
<td>Terraced houses with shops</td>
<td>1791</td>
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4. Key Features
CONSERVATION AREA NUMBER 42

Map shows underlying topography of the Conservation Area.
CONSERVATION AREA NUMBER 42

Map shows the historic layout of streets and squares with associated plot pattern infill of the Conservation Area.
CONSERVATION AREA NUMBER 42

Light Industrial Special Policy Area -
Historically, certain specialist economic activities have located in parts of the Soho area. These provide essential supportive or ancillary services to important economic and cultural activities - such as film processing laboratories associated with the media industry. The City Council recognises the importance of these industries in maintaining the diversity of the economic and employment areas in the City. As such, the City Council would not normally grant planning permission for redevelopment which would result in the displacement of industrial activities which contribute to the character and function of the area.
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CONSERVATION AREA NUMBER 42

London Squares Preservation Act, 1931 -
this Act was introduced to provide for the preservation of certain squares, gardens and enclosures of London. The existence of which was considered to be of great benefit by reason on the amenities provided and by reason of the advantages to health afforded. The provisions of the Act are to ensure the use of the squares only as ornamental garden pleasure grounds or grounds for play, rest or recreation and to prevent any building or other structure or erection on or over any protected square except such as may be necessary or convenient for or in connection with the use and maintenance of the squares for the authorised purposes.
The protected square shown here is Leicester Square
**Lundenwick and Thorney Island**—This area is primarily located adjacent to the Thames and the Strand and stretches form The Place of Westminster to Middle Temple. Lundenwick was a middle Saxon trading settlement (7th to 9th Centuries) located in the vicinity of the Strand and Covent Garden. At this time London appears to have comprised two distinct elements: the old walled town, located in what is now the City of London, and Lundenwick, which comprised a much larger mercantile centre. Lundenwick appears to have been abandoned during the period of Viking raids in the mid to late 9th Century.
LEICESTER SQUARE CONSERVATION AREA DIRECTORY

5. Adjacent Conservation Areas
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<th>General Reading Relating to the History and Character of Leicester Square</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>A Prospect of Westminster</td>
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<td>Westminster City Council 1989</td>
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<td>Survey of London-</td>
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<td>The Parish of St.Anne, Soho</td>
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<td>Greater London Council 1966</td>
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<td>Cherry and Pevsner, Penguin</td>
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<td>The London Encyclopaedia</td>
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<td>Weinreb and Hibbert, Papermac</td>
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