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Weasel words used to condemn Smithfield General Market and replace it with a fake.

Application to demolish most of the General Market and Annex, including their magnificent interiors to be decided at Planning Committee meeting in the City on 16th July.

A hundred years of protection for England's heritage is under attack by a new official definition of harm to historic buildings. The Department for Communities and Local Government, the ultimate arbiters on planning issues, has opened the way to a new wave of destruction and mutilation of historic buildings by adopting a new definition of "less than substantial harm" which favours speculative developers and is an open sesame to insensitive and damaging schemes.

SAVE argues that the current application for Smithfield General Market, if approved by the City Corporation Planning Committee, will open up a new era of horror for conservation areas and listed buildings.

SAVE's President Marcus Binney says "The current proposals by Henderson Global Investors will replace the largely intact market halls of the Victorian General Market and Fish Market Annexe, with their characteristic iron columns and glazed roofs, by a new interior masquerading as an original with just a few reused and truncated patent Victorian Phoenix columns".

The General Market is a classic open plan food market with four parallel aisles with arched roofs and two shorter ones around a large central dome (this last sensitively rebuilt after World War II). All these are to go and be replaced by a 'pretend' Victorian market hall, greatly reduced in size and entirely losing the existing lofty and airy open market space which is larger than Leadenhall Market.

The main arcade running across the triangular Fish Market annexe will also be savagely mutilated. At present the arcades here follow the triangular form of the building. Under Henderson's plans the two shorter sides will be retained but the main gallery, which opens on to the surrounding streets at both ends, will be rebuilt, though the replacement is disguised to give the impression of a preserved original.

As designed by Sir Horace Jones, the arcade consists of a graceful glazed roof supported by floating arches – a carefully contrived and intact view through a perspective of arches. Henderson’s architects remove all this, replacing it with a series of new half arches – a cynical token gesture to the character of the original.

One reason why Henderson want to replace full arches with half arches is that they are seeking to gain more office floor space above and preserving the full arcade will present this.

The City concludes that this virtual gutting of the General Market and substantial gutting of the Fish Market causes “less than substantial harm” to the conservation area; English Heritage calls it “moderate harm” but say they will support the City should they decide to give the green light. In SAVE’s view it is worst mutilation of a landmark Victorian building in 30 years, combining insult with injury by pretending no damage has been done.

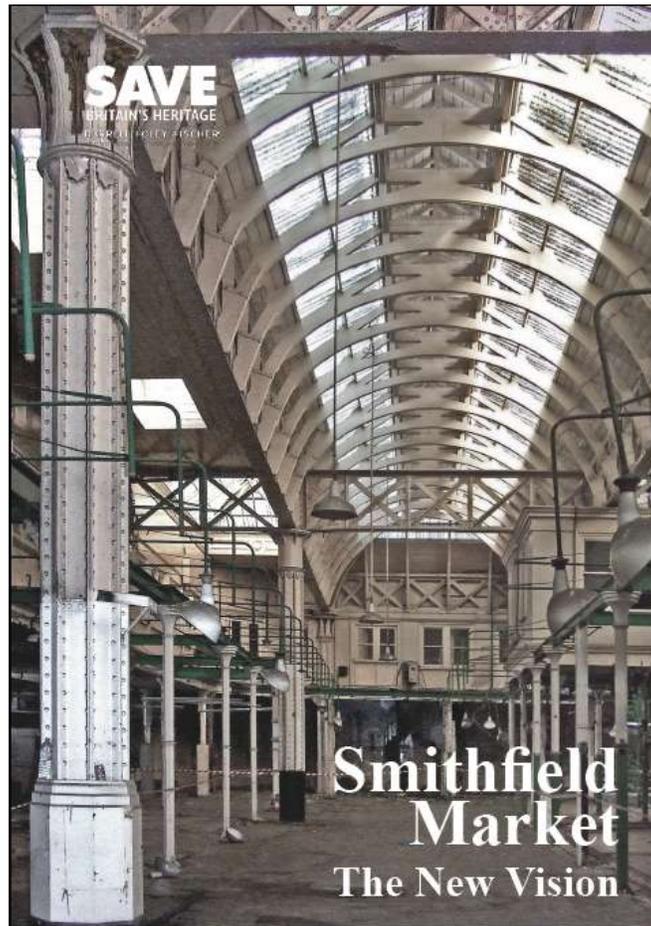
SAVE President continues “the applicants are resorting to the language of George Orwell’s 1984 by avoiding all use of the word demolition. They describe their proposals as a conservation scheme. In fact it runs contrary to every principle of respect for historic fabric established since John Ruskin tiraded against the wholesale replacement of original stonework on English cathedrals and William Morris founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877.

The Henderson proposals leave no more than three of the perimeter buildings wrapped around an entirely new interior largely filled with new office accommodation.

Henderson’s ground floor view of new General Market interior



The Existing light filled Market Hall



The existing interior consists of handsome parallel ranges of arched truss roofs with toplighting and louvred ventilation supported on X-trusses and tall 'Phoenix' columns.

Patented in 1862, the Phoenix column was a hollow cylinder much lighter and stronger than the solid cast iron columns hitherto used in industrial architecture. They made it possible to support wider spans with fewer columns and without internal load bearing walls.

The Henderson image shows Phoenix columns and X-trusses but the original arched market hall roofs are demolished and replaced by three 'matchbox' office blocks with modern glazing between. The Phoenix columns are replacements shorter than the originals and the X-trusses are entirely new though built to a similar pattern. New shallow brick arches (known as jack-arches or fireproof vaults) are introduced beneath the new offices blocks, again a repro element foreign to the market hall, giving a false impression of preserved construction.

The Henderson view along the internal arcade of the Fish Market or Annexe.



The Current Interior of the Fish Market



Like the General Market this has arched toplit roofs arranged as a triangular arcade reflecting the site. The Henderson view shows the major part of Horace Jones's trusses and arcades stripped out and an entirely new roof introduced, half of it aping the historic construction but clearly a modern fabrication supported on drainpipe columns.

The City Corporation's report states: "On balance it is considered that the scheme provides a development which does not cause substantial harm to designated and non-designated heritage assets and that it provides public health benefits which outweigh the less than substantial harm." In SAVE's view important historic landmarks should not be condemned with such obscurantist mumbo-jumbo.

Over 250 letters of objection have been lodged with the City, and a petition of over 2,700 to Ed Vaizey asking him to list the General Market and stop it being gutted.

The scheme has been called 'Butchery', by the Victorian Society and criticised by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Islington Council, the Charterhouse, the Council for British Architecture, the Twentieth Century Society, the Ancient Monuments Society, the Heritage of London Trust, many local residents and businesses.

Writer Alan Bennet objects, Fergus Henderson of St John, has registered an objection as has playwright Patrick Marber resident of Carthusian Street.

Writer Jeanette Winterson says:

'This Smithfield Market scheme is without beauty or integrity'

Alan Bennett says:

"It is ironic that the developers should be trying it on within site of Cloth Fair and John Betjeman's backyard."

Fergus Henderson says:

"You can't stop change but you should be able to recognize when something is extraordinary which Smithfield General Market is! This is the time to say no."

For more information and images, please contact the office on 0207 253 3500 or office@savebritainsheritage.org

NOTES TO EDITORS: SAVE Britain's Heritage has been campaigning for historic buildings since its formation in 1975 by a group of architects, journalists and planners. It is a strong, independent voice in conservation, free to respond rapidly to emergencies and to speak out loud for the historic built environment.

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