

John McAslan versus SAVE as second battle of Smithfield begins

Ahead of the public inquiry, architect John McAslan and SAVE's Marcus Binney present arguments for and against the Smithfield Market overhaul

PLANNING Six years ago KPF's controversial proposal to flatten Smithfield General Market and replace it with a huge office scheme was thrown out by communities secretary Hazel Blears. Next month a less dramatic but similarly contentious scheme by John McAslan for developer Henderson will run the gauntlet at public inquiry on 11 February. The £160 million project, if approved, would see the Victorian landmark converted into 5,700m² of shops and 21,220m² of office space. *Richard Waite*



FOR



John McAslan, executive chairman and founder, John McAslan + Partners

For decades, the future of the western end of Smithfield Market has presented one of London's most engrossing placemaking challenges. This is a site of quite unusual complexity in terms of its composition of original buildings, gradient and infrastructure. Such complexity is not unusual in our work: the restoration and adaptive re-use of historic buildings is a long-established area of expertise.

A key feature of our Smithfield Quarter scheme is that it retains the majority of the original fabric of the four historic buildings within the development envelope: none are listed, but they lie within the Smithfield Conservation Area. We initially explored designs that retained all the original fabric, but they were unviable in every sense. Our subsequent mixed-use proposals gained a resolution to grant planning permission

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John McAslan

from the City Corporation and clear support from local residents and businesses, English Heritage, Design Council CABE, and Boris Johnson.

A significant factor in the design of our scheme is that it has grown gradually, across five years, allowing my practice to develop a thoroughly detailed understanding of this segment of Smithfield and the Conservation Area. This tempered our reactions to the possibilities regarding retention of the most historically significant original fabric.

We admire, without question, the best of the old buildings. In 1889, as Smithfield Market was being extended westwards to Farringdon Road, William Morris said of historic fabric in general: 'All continuity of history means is, after all, perpetual change.' Morris also insisted that, in the process of change, old buildings must either be entirely swept away, or retained, unchanged, as 'relics of the past'.

Neither option is valid at the western end of Smithfield. The question here for any client or architect is: how can change be inspired by both precedent and modern ideas to produce a Smithfield Quarter scheme that will ultimately be experienced as a place where 19th and 21st century architecture co-exist to produce new activities, spatial character and contrast – a place where people can live, work, relax, or simply amble through with pleasure? I believe only a fusion of history and new

architecture can make this site fully active and attractive to a wide range of people and uses.

This fusion of old and new has been crucial to our other transformations of historically important buildings or sites. For example, my practice's modernisation, restoration and extension of King's Cross station produced a range of interventions appropriate to the ensemble of buildings and infrastructure, combining sensitive repair of Grade I-listed fabric with an absolutely contemporary architectural and engineering design. This scheme won the 2013 Europa Nostra Award for Cultural Heritage, adding something vivid, operationally successful, and widely praised to Cubitt's tough, stripped-down Victorian original.

Our scheme for Smithfield Quarter has drawn on the same design, engineering and placemaking instincts: in essence, it is founded on a balance of restoration, spatial clarification, and new build pavilions inserted on the slope behind retained Victorian buildings.

The detailed design evolved through a prism of key potentials: the retention of the most significant historic fabric; the need to bring new social and commercial energies into play; a careful consideration of scale and townscape issues in the new buildings; refinement of materials and design details; and, most important of all, to create a scheme that is clear in deciding which original buildings and features are historically valuable – and which are not. Old and new fabric has been brought together in a way that creates honest contrast, a freshly convivial sense of place – and change.

The longer-term sustainability of Smithfield Quarter depends on

the synergies of these ingredients. It's a balancing act of uses, building types, the creation of greater physical permeability, shifts in vista and atmosphere, and commercial viability.

To those who question our scheme, I would say: we need to retain the best of the old and complement it appropriately with the best of the new. That is why our design makes the substantially retained historic fabric central to the coherence of our scheme. We want to accentuate what is historically potent – key elevations, and historic features such as the Phoenix Columns, remain. Thus, retained fabric can work as literal evidence of the past, but also play a full part in activating the tableau as a whole.

William Morris spoke of the 'startling' gulf between the past and the present. At Smithfield Quarter, it's surely a bridge across that gulf that is needed – a development that serves change by giving the old and the new a living and enduring future.

AGAINST



Marcus Binney,
chief executive,
SAVE Britain's
Heritage (SAVE)

I salute John McAslan for his brilliant work at Peter Jones and King's Cross, but part company completely over his proposal for Smithfield General Market. This is not an enlightened reworking of historic buildings. It is needless destruction of both authentic fabric and public realm, and is also strongly opposed by the Victorian Society.

SAVE's *casus belli* is McAslan's complete demolition of the handsome Victorian market halls. Amazingly, both Henderson Global Investors, the clients, and McAslan avoid the D-word, talking mischievously of 'soft strip' and 'dismantling'. Let's be clear: all Sir Horace Jones's light and airy roofs supported on elegant trusses and flying ribs will be

destroyed, as well as the neat saucer dome, a very good piece of war damage reconstruction in the manner of Pier Luigi Nervi, designed as early as 1948 by George Halliday, City Surveyor. In place of Jones's extensive General Market hall of 2,166m² will be a food hall of just 873m², just 5m high and without Jones's sunlight and natural ventilation.

Henderson's CGIs suggest that Jones's lofty market halls are being retained. Look carefully and you will see the majestic Phoenix Columns, which create Jones's spacious open layout, are cut down and put back in shortened form, with new steel infill to support the huge area of new offices above.

Even more misleading are the images of the Annex or former Fish Market, with its clever triangle of top-lit arcades in the manner of Leadenhall Market. The main arcade running through the site, connecting with the lovely railway-style canopy across the street, will be entirely destroyed, as it has to be rebuilt to support another seven-storey office block above. Natural daylight here will also be lost.

McAslan's external interventions are just as brutal to the townscape. Smithfield is an area of low-rise buildings providing a welcome contrast to the high-rises of the City and Holborn and the soulless canyon of Farringdon Road, London's architecturally most dismal, ugliest thoroughfare. McAslan doubles the height of the lively Victorian facades and scoops out one side of the island block facing onto West Poultry Avenue, where there will be a clumsy junction between old and new.

The main justification for all this is a simple shotgun argument: if you don't let us proceed, the buildings will decay and in 10 years' time you will have to accept

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Marcus Binney

something much worse. English Heritage has argued that, as the City Corporation cannot be compelled to repair its own market buildings (though it has had no problem looking after the Meat Market), the market halls have to be sacrificed.

There is, anyway, a fully-fledged alternative to Henderson. SAVE, with Eric Reynolds's London's leading market entrepreneur, has submitted a planning application for straightforward re-use of the market buildings for market and retail uses. John Burrell is our architect and he points out that it is the whole grand architectural composition street frontages and covered halls of Sir Horace Jones which makes Smithfield a distinctive composition of world stature.

This is one of the most historic quarters of London, with Bart's Hospital, the Charterhouse and St Bartholomew the Great. Yet it was not the City Corporation which extended the conservation area to protect the market but the Greater London Council. Just as much as Covent Garden or the Marais in Paris, this is an area where historic fabric and historic public realm must be protected.

An intriguing item in McAslan's evidence is a photo of his dazzling reconstruction of the 19th century market halls in Port-au-Prince in Haiti, with a handsome range of lofty iron and glass roofs. John, if you can do it Haiti, you can do it in Smithfield. ■

