

and one of the more impenetrable and the richest City Livery Companies) has proposals to develop a chunk of their property in Covent Garden. The site is a huge and historic one, bounded by Shelton Street, Long Acre, Mercer Street and Langley Street. The scheme includes a large restaurant/bar, a new office block, a massive increase in retail units along Mercer, Shelton & Langley Streets and private luxury penthouse housing. It also proposes to chop the site in half (thereby increasing the retail site frontages) with a new pedestrian route parallel to Long Acre from Mercer Street to Langley Street that discharges into a new service area (euphemistically called a Piazza by Mercers' Agents) indented into the west side of Langley Street. The Urdang Ballet School which currently occupies the warehouse on the corner of Shelton & Langley Street will be obliged to move and, unless they can afford the new rent that the Mercers will charge in a replacement "cultural" building, the school will be lost to Covent Garden.

The number of luxury housing dwellings is deliberately below the threshold that would require the Mercers to provide some affordable housing. Despite the Mercers being a charity, a major beneficiary of tax breaks and mouthing its "community" responsibilities, they have no intention to provide any accommodation where locals may live. Westminster Council could insist that some low rent housing is provided as part of the scheme as Camden did with the Hospital Group's development of St Paul's Hospital in Endell Street.

The Mercers' representatives and



agents have met twice with the CGCA prior to the recent submission of their proposals to Westminster City Council for planning approval. These meetings were ostensibly to discuss their proposals and to incorporate local concerns before finalising the designs. However, no significant change in the designs is discernible following the local views expressed at those meetings.

Their surveyor, Colette O'Shea, had the effrontery to claim that the Mercers Company, over the years, has gone out of its way to protect and enhance the quality of affordable homes in their Covent Garden Estate. In fact over the past 20 years The Mercers Company has gone out of its way to reduce the quantity of affordable housing so that now over 80% of all their flats are let at exorbitant rents on short hold tenancies - not a form of tenure conducive to a policy of taking care of the local community.

The reaction of Westminster City Council to this application is critical, especially the reaction of the local Westminster councillors who have in the past stated that they are concerned

to keep a good mix of uses and residents in the area.

The CGCA intend in the very near future to hold a public meeting at which the Mercers will be requested to present their scheme. If anything is to be learned from the neighbourhood's previous experiences, a concerted campaign will be required to alter the current scheme. Apparently over 70% of all the Mercers income every year derives from their Covent Garden estate. What the Mercers give back to the neighbourhood is by comparison paltry pennies and long term problems.

Stop Press:

Neal Street East, one of the few remaining specialist and independent shops in Covent Garden recently closed because it would otherwise have faced a rent increase of approximately 260%. The landlord is the charitable Mercers Company. The shop has now been let to yet another fashion and shoe store. Who can stand up to the invasion by multinationals and preserve us from becoming "just another high street"?

Jim Monahan



Neal Street East – another specialist shop leaving Covent Garden