

London Borough of Lambeth
Town Hall
Brixton
SW2 1RW

23rd March 2016

Dear Cllr. Jack Hopkins, Sue Foster Strategic Director & Sean Harris Chief Executive,

On Thursday 24th March you will make your decision on the changes to the lease held by the Coin Street Community Builders for the South Bank public space which would be the site of the Garden Bridge south landing building, a commercial unit, nine public toilets (for over seven million visitors) and a rooftop with built-in queue-system for 2,500 people.

We the undersigned urge you to consider the huge implications this change will have for legacy of public space in London and for the sense of citizen ownership and use of public space across the capital and to refer this matter back for consideration by a fully elected committee after all existent issues relating to planning, procurement and purpose have been dealt with.

THE EXISTING LEASE PROTECTING PUBLIC SPACE

It must be remembered *how* the original lease came to be created as it is critical to any decision you take. Coin Street Community Builders (CSCB) was a grass-roots movement comprised of local residents fighting for affordable housing and improvement of public spaces. The CSCB you are working alongside now may well be an entirely different beast with different powers, financial responsibilities and interests, but the lease relates to those core values of the original organisation and the reasons of its creation precisely as it was are as pertinent and relevant now as they have ever been – especially given the current controversy surrounding the Garden Bridge. A private space is NEVER a replacement for a public one, especially in this instance when the very essence of its existence is wrapped up in the current lease stating it remains public.

The core purpose of the existing lease over its term is that it protects “...*an open space for use by members of the public for recreational leisure or educational purposes...*”. The proposed changes to the lease will not make this critical element of the original lease possible. As a ‘privately owned public space’ (POPS) both the Garden Bridge and its south landing building are not a replacement for what is protected under the current long-term lease. The lease is carefully written as it is to protect an open space for the duration of the lease for members of the public. The proposed POPS will be a tightly controlled and congested space with a queue system, CCTV, over 7m visitors a year with associated service requirements which can in no way be considered similar or fair replacement to the open space which it replaces.

Public space has no *programme*, it does not restrict or control behaviours beyond what the law permits and it does not restrict certain members of the public from engaging in the space. It has no restrictions on when the public may use it or ways in which they choose to use it. Private spaces are the absolute opposite and when the public are unclear about the legal or acceptable boundaries are then they police themselves, driven by a subconscious fear of encounter with the security or being seen to behave not as is expected in the environment. It may be subtle, it may not seem important, but the psychological usage of a POPS is hugely different from the sense of collective ownership and relaxed behaviours as protected by the current lease for the South Bank park. Richard Sennett, the celebrated sociologist, suggests that POPS are “dead public spaces” because that sense of ownership, encounter and potential has been

removed in favour of programmed behaviours with a far reduced potential range of spatial engagements for the users.

The land on the South Bank may not be one of London's most *beautiful* public parks, but it *is* a public park and therefore worthy of considering with the same level of importance as any other part of London's public greenspace. It may not have many sunbathers or be big enough to host a game of cricket (though I have seen people use it often for picnics, sitting to read, family photographs etc.) but it is this kind of small public space which is critical to a network of publicly owned spaces which connect the city and critical sense of ownership of it by the population who live in it.

THE VALUE OF THE SOUTH BANK PARK

The planning application for the Garden Bridge states three times that this existing park "under-utilised" though without once evidencing what "utility" is lacking. The Garden Bridge Trust appear to consider 'utility' as the means to generate financial capital, and this is reinforced by the language used in the Lambeth report into the proposed lease change where income generated from the land is referred to far more than the numerously than the many non-financial benefits the public park offers to visitors and the local community.

Your report furthermore makes note that Lambeth will be receiving 50% of profits from this permanent commercial unit after costs and baseline figure due to CSCB:

"The baseline figure will be the opportunity cost incurred by CSCB as the Garden Bridge extinguishes some of the riverside areas which CSCB currently hire out to third parties for temporary events. Any 'income' above the agreed baseline figure, will, after costs, be split equally between the Council and CSCB."

The conflict of interest apparent in Lambeth's current recommendations is not adequately evaluated with regards to the wider interests of London or the Borough; when considering this park as a much cherished, valued and important public open space and the proposed financial benefit proposed, by in effect selling off Lambeth's public assets:

"2.11 The Council's view is that the construction of the South Landing Building is an unprecedented windfall opportunity because it will enable a new and valuable and, most importantly, permanent income stream to be generated, albeit that the overall area of land available for temporary promotional events will be significantly reduced."

It reads dangerously like this piece of land is of no value to anyone except when it is used to generate capital, and this is a deeply problematic – as well as extremely sad – way to consider the public realm of a city which is inhabited not by 'consumers' but by citizens. There is no social value ascribed to the existing asset, and the fact that an public park could be transformed into "a permanent income stream" should be of no interest to public custodians who serve to protect it as open public space as per the terms of the existing lease.

To extend this logic wider would be to open up Lambeth Council to potential other "windfalls" by building over parts of, for example, Brockwell Park or Myatts Fields. The income stream Lambeth Council could generate would be enormous, but we doubt the council would ever consider such actions. Thus, such actions should not be considered on this park, even though it doesn't possess the grandness or romance of the Brockwell or Myatts parks.

The park may not be the crown jewel of Lambeth's greenspaces, but that is not relevant to your decision. It may be of financial value to Lambeth to cash in on their "windfall", but that is not relevant to your decision. It may be that you consider there is some level of beneficial return from building on the park, but that is not relevant to your decision. What IS important to your decision is the promise to the public

to retain that land for public use as is set out in the lease which was carefully constructed to avoid disposals of the space to ever occur. To ignore that is to ignore the terms of the current lease and the important contract between political authority and citizen, between representative body and the public it purports to represent.

THE UTILITY OF THE SOUTH BANK PARK

A park's utility is about how people value it and whether it is appreciated by the public it exists for. The Garden Bridge Trust argue the existing park is "under-utilised", we would argue that it serves fantastic 'utility' as it is both now and in the future:

- It is a rare city public open space that is un-programmed, simply landscaped and flexible. This is important where every area otherwise has been designed with a particular use in mind or is part of a private developments.
- As one walks along the South Bank promenade heading west the path narrows in front of the IBM headquarters. As soon as this building is passed the open space fills the foreground and the peripheral vision of the pedestrian comes into play. In spatial terms the enlargement of the peripheral reading of this area is valuable, important and powerful to the sense of openness and framing of views towards the city.
- As an un-programmed open space, diverse pop-up events and commercial activities can occur sporadically, contributing to the changing atmosphere of the place which is key to the experience of London and, in particular, the South Bank – a space of temporary festivals, seasonal changes and unexpected encounters.
- For the local community all open space is valuable. As with any residents of a central London location unbuilt on land is a premium and even the smallest moments of grass and nature offer a respite. This is especially the case with this space which is frequented by the local community regularly and for who, primarily, the original lease had in mind when protecting the open space from development.

Transforming this open space into a heavily developed and privately owned one would compromise all these and other profound benefits the current park area serves. This is entirely counter to the currently protected freedom and openness of the public space and deeply goes against the reasons the land is currently protected and the intent of the existing lease.

The new building, which is not of insignificant massing and aesthetic, will totally destroy the feeling of 'opening-up' the eyes and mind experience when walking eastwards along the promenade. It will in effect squeeze a higher number of people into a smaller space and completely change that momentary experience, forever – coupled with the shadow of the bridge flying over, crowds of people clustering around the steps and toilets of the building, this experiential change a visitor has when entering the existing area will be destroyed.

Night-time use should also be considered. Unlike the existing public space it is proposed that the Garden Bridge will be closed between midnight and 6am each day. The use of this public space will therefore become be restricted. A public space which is available for 24 hr public use is not being replaced with the same access which is also against the principles of the existing lease.

THE SOUTH BANK IN THE CITY

The importance and sensitivity of this Coin Street site needs to be considered in the context of its influence and impact on the whole of the South Bank destination and how it is experienced by tourists,

residents, local workers and businesses. This includes the footpath in both Lambeth and Southwark as well as the views from both Waterloo and Blackfriars' bridges. Destinations need to be considered through the eyes and the experience of visitors and users, irrespective of administrative, political or land ownership boundaries. Covent Garden, Maritime Greenwich, Soho -- these are considered singular destinations by their visitors irrespective of their political jurisdiction or land ownership.

The South Bank is the same. In the cognitive geography of the tourist and the day visitor, the South Bank destination is that which runs along the uninterrupted riverfront promenade, from County Hall to Tower Bridge. It is, today, one of the world's great tourist promenades, easily the equal -- in terms of visitor experience -- of La Rambla in Barcelona, Via del Corso in Rome or the world's great waterfront walks in Sydney, Vancouver and Stockholm, amongst others.

It is distinguished by a number of factors, all of which are heavily impacted by the proposed landing building and Garden Bridge project as a whole, not least that it is a contiguous and uninterrupted stretch of waterfront which the visitor can walk almost the entire length of without ever leaving the riverfront. It contains world-famous extraordinary views of the north bank, including the most celebrated and iconic views of St Pauls Cathedral and the City of London skyline, specifically from the Coin Street site and which change and evolve as the visitor walks the promenade.

The existing array of world-class cultural institutions is complemented by small, unexpected spaces -- including the park under question -- which are used for pop-up and unexpected events all co-located within a destination that feels like a real and authentic part of a living city which makes the South Bank so unique and loved. The fabric of this area has the distinction of being a single great destination in which residents, tourists and workers happily co-exist. This diversity of functions, uses and users makes the area unique. This balance is so unique because of the precariousness of how urban change can tip an area from one of genuine mixed-use and designed for all users to an area for the single touristic experience drawn by the imagined icon of an over-enthusiastic designer.

Londoners have essentially abandoned the County Hall stretch of the South Bank just as they plot routes through the city to carefully avoid Covent Garden and Leicester Square. These once great urban sites have been surrendered, almost in their entirety, to the tourist crush which has profoundly cheapened them even as their underlying land values have soared for those with property interests.

The South Bank sense of chanced upon activities and pop-up events will be damaged forever. This space will in effect become a permanent tourist attraction all year round, and consequently that feeling one has when discovering an unexpected usage of the open-space -- through public usage or organised event - will be lost. Instead, an entirely expected consumer experience similar to that outside the entrance to the London Eye and County Hall will greet pedestrians who still choose to attempt to navigate this stretch of the river. This will fundamentally change the nature of this part of the river and is deeply rooted in the differences between public and private spaces.

The local community will lose an important part of the small amount of public greenspace offered to them. The 'replacement' space offered by the Garden Bridge will be a crowded space which in no ways offers the same relaxing, owned feeling that the current park affords.

This development which you have the chance to halt would be a real tragedy not just for the South Bank but for London as a whole. Memories are short. This was not always one of the world's great waterfronts; as late as the mid-1990s it was still considered derelict and dirty, possibly unsafe, with little or nothing to do there. It was transformed by visionaries and pioneers, by risk takers and place makers, and by politicians and civil servants of character, dedication and integrity. CSCB, formed of the same local residents who deeply understand the site as those who now fight the Garden Bridge development, was once a part of that great community of dedicated professionals keen to create a destination out of the

derelict remains of dying industries. For this project to go ahead is to deny the depth and breadth of their achievement and to take ridiculous risks with the extraordinary legacy that they left for the city.

OPPOSITION

In the report into this proposed lease change we acknowledge that a very large number of objectors responding to the proposal are recorded, but that consideration of such objections is largely dismissed in the report determination of the recommendations on the lease amendment.

We believe for these reason the report on the lease is lacking in due diligence and is unreasonable; as those objections are legitimate concerns that also relate to the terms of the existing lease and the principles covenanted within it.

There is overwhelming public opposition to this development, with significant questions arising as to the legitimacy of both the planning process and the procurements leading up to the current situation and its reporting; whilst the Garden Bridge Trust still have a huge shortfall in private finance with no signs of having raised much in the last 8 months. Such pre-construction developmental and legal work is being leveraged by public finances; which in the circumstances is wholly unjustifiable.

The advancement, and continuing further expenditure of public resources on this project should be deferred until such time as the requisite matters have been fully, adequately and transparently explored, and that in the interests of London and the Borough such proposals for an amendment to a lease to transfer public land to private ownership be determined by a committee of elected representatives.

With regards, the undersigned

Will Jennings - artist & organiser of A Folly For London

Dan Anderson - director Fourth Street, a consultancy that advises public & private sector developers

Bradley Garrett - social & cultural geographer

Owen Hatherley - architectural writer and journalist

Edwin Heathcote - architecture and design critic of The Financial Times

Phil Marson - Chair of Inner London Ramblers

Jonathan Meades - writer & film maker

Walter Menteth - architect & RIBA Presidents' Award for Research winner

Anna Minton - writer & journalist Caroline Pidgeon - Liberal Democrat candidate for Mayor of London & London Assembly Member

David Roberts – co-director of art collective Fugitive Images and part of architecture collective Involve

Adrian Searle - arts critic for the Guardian

Jack Self - Director of the REAL foundation & curator of the 2016 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale