

Statement objecting to the siting of the proposed Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens

My name is Paul Thornton. I am Vice Chair of the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies, the London-wide umbrella organisation for the Civic movement. Our membership comprises some 120 civic and amenity societies and residents' associations across London. They in turn have a total membership of about 100,000 households. The Thorney Island Society is a Forum member, though we did not collaborate with them on this submission, nor indeed on theirs.

London Forum's objects include *"the creation of or improvement to open spaces and the avoidance, removal, or improvement of features that are unsightly or undesirable."* Our member societies are vigorous in protecting open spaces on their doorstep, campaigning, for example, against large parts of Clapham Common or Finsbury Park being cordoned off for several weeks at a time for music festivals, or (unsuccessfully, in this case) to stop Harrow School from building a new Sports Centre on Metropolitan Open Land.

I am personally quite well acquainted with Victoria Tower Gardens, having worked within walking distance for about 30 years and having renewed my acquaintanceship at the time of the Church House exhibition in late 2018. It is a unique space, a refuge from the drama of Westminster and its World Heritage site which draws so many visitors from the UK and around the world. The Gardens are used by several thousand people daily, eating lunch, taking a stroll, walking their dogs, meeting friends and providing space and time for their children to play. It is the only public open space of any size within walking distance for the large number of residents, many with families, who live in apartment blocks in the triangle bounded by Victoria Street, Vauxhall Bridge Road and Millbank. The Gardens are teeming with life, yet an air of tranquility prevails. Much of this will be in jeopardy if the application is approved.

We can see that the applicant has gone to considerable lengths to minimise the harm to the Gardens. But the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre is not a small local museum that can readily be accommodated within the existing fabric. It is conceived as a facility of international importance, one which is expected to draw in a million visitors a year; and it probably will. What will that do to Victoria Tower Gardens and the surrounding area? An analogy may be drawn with Sir David Adjaye's hugely successful Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC, which attracts about 1.9 million visitors annually, approaching twice the number of the proposed

Learning Centre. However, that Museum is built on a much grander scale, with a large concourse, wide approaches and almost 40,000 Sq m of floor space over 5 floors. It should comfortably accommodate twice the number of visitors expected in London. Yet despite almost 100% advance ticketing with timed entry, the forecourt is often heavily congested with those still hoping for a ticket on the day, with queues often stretching part-way around the building. It is hard to believe that this situation will not be replicated in Victoria Tower Gardens and on Millbank if this application goes ahead.

Security is also an issue with potentially far-reaching consequences. Regrettably the centre is likely to prove a magnet for extremists. How will the Centre's visitors and other users of the Gardens be protected and how intrusive will those measures be? I was for many years a trustee of Camden Arts Centre and witnessed the construction of the Jewish Cultural Centre, JW3, on the other side the Finchley Road. I'm not sure at what point it became evident that much of the building would need to be surrounded by a high steel fence, but it's hard to imagine that the Holocaust Memorial and Research Centre will be spared a similar fate - at some point in the future, if not from the outset.

The lure of a location next to the mother of parliaments, with its accessibility and symbolism is easy to understand. But at what cost, and to what end? The Gardens will be damaged, perhaps irretrievably for local residents and for visitors seeking respite from the hurly-burly of their surroundings. London Forum fully supports the intention to create a world class facility in the Capital to ensure that the memory and the lessons of the Holocaust endure well beyond the lifespan of those personally involved. But does it really make sense to squeeze the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre into such a constricted and sensitive site, one with so little scope for future development?

Victoria Tower Gardens is an irreplaceable asset, a rare open space in an otherwise congested cityscape, one that is much loved and well-used by the local community. It should only be sacrificed under the most compelling of circumstances, and certainly not to provide what will surely turn out to be a less than satisfactory home for an important new institution, one which in our view deserves better.

On behalf of the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies, I submit that this application should be rejected.

Paul Thornton
Vice Chair, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies
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