

Installation of a Humanitarian Aid Memorial at Gunnersbury Park P/2024/0324 planning reference 00885/A/P30

Response from the Friends of Gunnersbury Park & Museum

Representatives of the Friends group attended two events at the Museum in 2023 where the promoters of the scheme gave presentations to small audiences. The events were essentially promotional rather than consultations, presenting the current design and location. Our Honorary Secretary also submitted comments to the online questionnaire, though its structure steered the answers and was very limiting. It is disappointing that the application has not provided any detail of the outcome of the consultation exercises which would have shown the level of public support.

The Friends' committee has discussed the proposal in detail and this response to the planning application has taken the outcome of their discussions into account.

Our key issues

- we support the idea of a humanitarian memorial but, reluctantly, cannot support this scheme
- there is no request for Listed Building Consent and the pre-application comments from Historic England have not been dealt with fully
- the heritage impact has been misjudged. The site lies Furnese's 18th century Kent-inspired parkland and is highly sensitive
- the design lacks gravitas for such an important purpose
- the site is not a good place for quiet contemplation
- we have concerns about the hard landscaping, the path and the location of the seat
- the application form lacks some information and denies any local authority link

And, while the above are planning issues, we believe the scheme cannot be evaluated fully without greater clarity about the issues below to ensure its sustainability:

- the infrastructure needed to maintain an online database of humanitarian aid workers has not been thought through
- more detail is required about the endowment fund offered and how it will be managed

Our comments

We support any proposal to create a memorial to humanitarian aid workers. However this memorial would be installed in a Grade II* Registered Park with a large number of Listed Buildings. After some years of investment in the regeneration of the estate and great care taken in its maintenance, we would have expected not only a planning application but also an associated application for Listed Building Consent. We have considered in detail the impact of the design and the location upon the heritage of the estate and, reluctantly, we have come to the conclusion that we cannot support this project.

Design

This circle of fifteen life-size (5' 7" tall) cut-out figures has no gravitas. It is rather childish and it does not carry the weight which might be expected of so worthwhile and significant a memorial. It appears to be much more an installation of 15 text panels than a sculpture. The cut-out figures are a version of an earlier Transport for London project commissioned from Michael Landy and called

Acts of Kindness. Though the supporting letters underline the quality of Landy's work in general they do not specifically support this installation.

Since 2016 the design of this installation has been considered for several other potential locations, including the University of Manchester, the South Bank and the grounds of Kenwood House. However, it has failed to proceed each time. Indeed, in June 2019 the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood and Queen's Park Committee considered the proposal in great detail, and decided that the proposed site was inappropriate and so did not support it.

We find it very disappointing that this was presented as a ready-made scheme whose location needed to fit their criteria. It was not designed specifically for Gunnersbury. There has been no engagement with the local community in developing a final design and, as far as we know, no public discussion about suitable sites within the Park. Enthusiasts for public art usually engage in a more developmental process.

The design in the report submitted from the Contemporary Art Society *Consultancy shows hand-painted information panels on the figures; we have a number of concerns about these. They appear not to use a clear and legible font. Nor do they appear to be sufficiently large or appropriately positioned for comfortable reading, despite the application's emphasis on ease of physical access to the memorial and the potential for an associated learning programme. Telling the stories of humanitarian aid workers is a key element in commemorating their lives and inspiring others, and this installation could benefit from museum techniques of interpretation. It is difficult to imagine how the minimal opportunity for interaction and the quantity of reading involved could be easily used as an effective resource for learning.

The memorial is intended to have a life of at least 25 years and has to commemorate thousands of humanitarian aid workers not only now but in the future. There are no plans for the stories on the installation to change, and over time it may become stale. The compensating proposal is to instruct visitors to refer to a page on the museum web site, via a QR code, where they will find more stories. This idea depends on many assumptions – that numerous people will want to read a lot of stories on the web, that the technology of QR codes will not change, that the memorial committee will stay in existence and supply new stories, that the staff at Gunnersbury will have the time to replenish the website, that the internet will not change significantly. It was a feasible idea for Landy's short-life, small project on the London Underground, but it is hard to see how this successfully transfers to a permanent memorial. There is a strong chance that within a few years what should be a significant memorial will look tired and neglected. The applicant should be asked to look at this again.

Location

The Contemporary Art Society Consultancy set up criteria so extensive and restricting that they are hard to fulfill at Gunnersbury. Critical criteria include being close to parking, toilets and museum, with access to wi-fi as well as wheelchair access. It must be conducive to quiet contemplation with space for seating and an annual commemorative event. Desirable criteria are that it is close to a food and beverage offer, set amongst trees and away from traffic, accessible from all sides.

Attempting to fulfill all of these criteria places the memorial in the busiest part of the Park, where there is already the Museum, the café, an outdoor exhibition area and a children's playground. The site meets the requirements of being within a short walk of parking and public toilets.

However, this is absolutely not a place conducive to quiet contemplation because this major route across the Park becomes very congested on busy days

In terms of the heritage impact, Para 5.17 of the *Planning Statement* claims that because "the memorial is of circular form and visually permeable" this "softens its effects and aligns with other circular features across the Landscape Character Area. It would become a feature within the landscape and is not intended to be hidden or obscured". Other sites considered within the Park were rejected because the memorial would be more visible. Here it would rely upon the installation being tucked away, sheltered by trees and with a dark green painted finish to minimise its impact. "The proposed location balances the objectives of the memorial against the heritage significance and sensitivities of the park ensuring that it is a recessive but accessible new component of the landscape". These quotes recognise the difficulty of placing a modern installation into a significant historic landscape.

Also, the site selected is very close to the area which has been fenced off each summer in recent years to funnel crowds into major events and festivals in the south of the Park. This may conflict with the plan for an annual event every August beside the memorial.

Heritage Context

The *Heritage Appraisal* relies heavily upon, and quotes from, the *Conservation Management Plan* compiled by Purcell in 2018. More research has been undertaken since then. An article examining in detail the changes to the landscape made between 1740 and 1760 was published in vol 23 of *The London Gardener* in 2019. (Copies were supplied to the Museum for its archive, to Hounslow's Planning Department and to Historic England to supplement Purcell's work.) Despite the claim in para 5.18 that this area has a "historically more intermediate character", the research confirms the fact that the proposed location is fully within the historic 18th century landscape.

In para 2.18 of the *Heritage Appraisal* the proposed site is said to have formed part of "a broader designed landscape since the mid-18th century. The character of the site is broadly unchanged – its location at a point between 'gardens' and 'park' on the fringes of the more formal and structured landscaping immediately around the house and the Round Pond. . . it effectively forms part of a transition zone between the formal landscape and the parkland ". The notion that there is a formal garden landscape and a parkland is a misconception, as is the idea that the selected site is a "transitional space" or a "buffer" between two separate areas – the whole area, as the author had already written in the *Heritage Appraisal*, is a broader designed landscape. Both the 17th century formal gardens and the orchard to the west were redesigned together in the new style now known as the English landscape tradition. This area is in fact a part of the then owner Henry Furnese's work. William Kent, one of the pioneers of this less formal English landscape style, was Furnese's friend. He stayed at Gunnersbury, advised him and was paid for his work. Works undertaken since these mid-18th century changes have remained within that overall redesign, even when the property was divided and then reunited.

So an argument used in 2019 against inserting the memorial into a Repton landscape at Kenwood has a parallel here with a Kent-inspired landscape, also in a Registered Park.

The applicant also uses references to figurative sculpture in the Gunnersbury landscape in the past, mentioned by Purcell, to claim that the new memorial falls into an artistic tradition. Though there were sculptures of mastiffs in front of the Temple and a replica of the Borghese Gladiator in the Italian Garden, which survived until the early 1900s, there is no evidence of sculpture in this location. The claim is irrelevant.

We are especially concerned that the proposal largely disregards the pre-application advice from Historic England (HE) officers who know Gunnersbury well, have provided professional advice for some years and have invested in restoration works. Paras 3.23 and 3.24 of the *Heritage Appraisal* summarise the advice from HE as follows. They felt that in the proposed location, the memorial would "cause some harm to the significance of the designated heritage assets . . . through development in their setting" and required a stronger case to be made for this location by providing an assessment of the heritage impact of alternative sites in the Park. "Its location would be prominent on the approach to the Mansions as a new structure within the recovered and restored parkland, visible from the terrace . . . Given the identified significance of the parkland and the structures within it, it is vital that proposals for any new structures consider heritage impacts from the outset. This can then form the basis of assessment for appropriate siting of development within this important heritage setting."

The Heritage Appraisal includes a detailed table of the sites considered, of which three were described as having moderate sensitivity in terms of the impact on the historic landscape. Having chosen the proposed site, in para 3.32 they claim "For reasons explained above, it is considered that the proposed memorial would cause a low level of less than substantial harm to designated heritage assets, largely due to its effects on parkland recently restored. However, it is evident that the proposed memorial is a significant opportunity to provide wider economic, educational, artistic and communal benefit."

We remain concerned that through a misunderstanding of the historical value of the site the applicant has misjudged the impact as moderate rather than high. We feel that this is far from being a suitable site for the memorial.

Hard landscaping, durability and maintenance

In the *Planning Statement* the application proposes grass-filled X-grid ground reinforcement. The manufacturer's installation instructions specify a requirement for a substantial layer of hard core beneath; this is a piece of construction rather than a little gentle landscaping. Their description of their product suggests that this is not advised for standing upon for long periods such as studying the panels or for a memorial event. It is designed for car parks – we have it already in the park and it is hard for some people even to walk across. If used, the smallest compartments must be specified. On such a surface the grass needs to be cut frequently, so is access for a small mower practicable?

The surface of the path has not been specified – the application suggests defining it "by condition". The slope may be difficult for wheelchair users so the nature of the surface is significant. This should be part of the full application. The position of the seat beside the busy path near the Round Pond hardly makes for quiet contemplation – why has it not been located beside the memorial? It makes no sense that it faces east towards trees and the café and not towards the memorial.

The suggested life is 25 years but it is also proposed that it should be accessioned into the Museum collection. There is a contradiction here. If it is a feature in the landscape with a finite life, then it should not be accessioned into the collection as this implies permanence.

The application indicates that there will be an endowment for the maintenance of the memorial – which implies an investment fund with income for maintenance etc. Who will handle this fund and ensure that it is wisely invested to sustain its value for the future? Or is the fund simply a one-off cash sum? There are potential long-term costs – maintenance, cleaning, graffiti removal, repair after vandalism, maintaining the associated web-site – with the whole thing being transferred to the GM&P Development Trust to carry these costs.

Matters relating to the Planning Application Form

Some of the answers on the application form are confusing or incomplete.

- The cost of the work is said to be "up to £2 million", yet we only know that the memorial committee has raised £400,000. Will any part of the balance have to be funded by the Trust?
- The Existing Use is said to be Parkland. But to the question "Is the site currently vacant?" the response given is "No" – yet it is currently vacant parkland
- The application claims no internal floor area would be lost and in response to the question "Will the proposed development result in the loss, gain or change of use of any open space?" the response is "No". It is a change of use and arguably a loss of open space
- To the question "Are there trees or hedges on land adjacent to the proposed development site that could influence the development or might be important as part of the local landscape character?" the response is "No", yet the application emphasises the proximity of trees around the memorial. If/when those trees are lost and if not replaced, the installation will be in a very different setting
- The application form asks for information about connections to the local authority. It has been completed by an agent, Firstplan, on behalf of the Gunnersbury Museum & Park Development Trust. The response claims that there are no links to Hounslow employees or members, but it should have been made clear that there are two council members on the board of the Trust – one from Hounslow and one from Ealing, the local authorities which own the estate.

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