

Mitcham Cricket Green Community and Heritage

HEARING STATEMENT ON SITE 35 - MITCHAM FIRE STATION

December 2013

1. Mitcham Cricket Green Community and Heritage is the civic society for the Cricket Green Conservation Area and its environs. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the future planning of Mitcham Fire Station as part of the Sites and Policies Plan hearing and address the issues raised by the Inspector:

- (a) *Is this site a suitable location for the mix of community, residential restaurant/café, drinking establishment and non-food retail uses for which it is allocated in the Plan?*
- (b) *It has been suggested that the site would be suitable for a residential led mixed use development. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this suggestion?*
- (c) *Should this site be considered as part of a wider site?*

2. We urge that Mitcham Fire Station is considered for community and not residential led mixed-use and we provide practical proposals for how this might be delivered through an arts centre. The proposals included in an Annex have been provided by the arts charity Theatre6. We also believe the future of the Fire Station should be addressed as part of the future of the whole “island site” and this should continue to provide a focus for civic and community uses. We do not believe this site is suitable for residential or food retail development or use for the reasons outlined below.

3. Mitcham Fire Station is a locally listed building in the most prominent location in Cricket Green Conservation Area. It is part of an important assemblage of buildings in community use on the “island site”, including the Cricketers and locally listed Vestry Hall and the war memorial. These have significant historic associations and are located on one of Mitcham’s network of town greens which were formally part of Mitcham Common.

4. This site makes an important physical and social contribution to the area. It has been subject to piecemeal change and development pressure and we have long argued that the whole “island site” should be considered as a coherent unit. As part of this process we worked with the future Merton team at Merton Council and with our ward councillors to develop the Cricket Green Charter (see Annex). This is the result of a wide ranging community engagement process and states that:

“The island site – including the fire station and Cricketers – should be a focus of local community activity, and be developed and managed as a coherent whole”

5. We welcome the resounding rejection of the two recent appeals for demolition and redevelopment of the Cricketers pub for flats. It is notable that the Inspector’s decision letter comments that:

“There were also representations that a residential scheme would be at odds with the continuity of community use of both the appeal site and the other buildings in the group, an enclave in what is otherwise public open space and formerly common land. However, there appears to be no planning designation of this site for community use or policy barrier to the principle of its use for housing.”
(paragraph 29)

6. We believe the opportunity should now be taken to provide the appropriate planning designation and policy steer.

7. Mitcham Fire Station is an eminently practical building for community use and we have worked with the arts charity Theatre6 to show how an appropriate scheme for a local arts centre might be delivered. This would comprise a mix of community uses including a flexible cultural, arts and performance space, café & bar facilities, meeting rooms and the option for incubator space for creative and arts-based business. This would also provide an important commercial boost to the area, help tackle social needs and support regeneration.

8. Mitcham is the fastest growing and most diverse area of Merton. Its population is getting younger and includes a growing number of aspirant young professionals. This trend towards a younger, more prosperous population is not being met by the facilities available. It underpins the strong demand now and in the future an arts or cultural facility which is currently lacking. There are also few alternative locations to enjoy a coffee and no evening bar in the area. Such a facility would attract a very different clientele to the local pubs and meet a real need. It would provide a very different offer for a wider range of people, including families.

9. Theatre6 has been searching for an appropriate venue for many months and has failed to find alternative premises which are appropriate. There are no alternative buildings which are as well suited to providing for this need in Mitcham.

10. Mitcham Fire Station is a particularly suitable location because:

- Its size and aesthetic makes it ideal for a cultural and arts facility as proposed
- The auditorium would make good use of the engine bay in this historic building
- It is well located as part of Mitcham town centre and the area has a high Public Transport Accessibility rating due to the nearby tram stop and multiple bus routes
- London Fire Brigade is able to transfer Mitcham Fire Station at less than market value where the community has plans to promote social, economic or environmental well-being via its acquisition and management under the General Disposal Consent (Circular 06/03, DCLG)
- Merton Council has a right of first refusal on disposal of the building and controls its access to the public highway

11. As London Fire Brigade acknowledges:

“Whilst our stations must develop at the same pace as our services, we recognise that it is also vital that we protect and preserve some of our older buildings and their heritage. These historical sites form a major part of our past and are something we are immensely proud of. It’s a delicate balance to strike but we hope that our buildings reflect our heritage of public service and at the same time remain fit for purpose.”

London’s historic fire stations – English Heritage and London Fire Brigade
joint guidance, February 2010

12. We believe that community use as an arts centre would be the most appropriate future for Mitcham Fire Station. It presents an exciting opportunity to

develop and enhance the arts, entertainment and cultural offer in an area where this is sorely lacking and demand is growing. It is the most effective way of ensuring this historic building is kept in good use and it offers significant economic and regeneration benefits to Mitcham. It is also the most appropriate use of the building on the island site given its location at the heart of Mitcham Cricket Green Conservation Area and its long historical associations with community and civic uses.

13. We ask that this site is allocated for predominantly community use with ancillary restaurant/café/bar, office and non-food retail uses.

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AN ARTS CENTRE FOR MITCHAM FIRE STATION

Additional supplementary information by Theatre6

Theatre6: Our proposals

1. Theatre6 is a registered charity, synonymous with creating cinematic entertainment, professional live performance in innovative ways and intimate spaces. Previous productions have included work with the Old Vic Theatre, The New Wimbledon Theatre and developing work with the National Theatre Studio.

2. Theatre6 can convert the fire station into a permanent, multi-use arts centre and flexible auditorium, providing regular cinema, live theatre and music activities for Mitcham and the wider Merton population. This flexible arts space will create jobs and host outreach programmes to tackle Mitcham's highest priorities through year round community engagement.

3. The fire station conversion would allow for:

- A flexible auditorium for performance and events
- A daytime café and evening bar space, unlike anything available in Mitcham town centre
- Rehearsal rooms
- Long and short term lettings for desk and small office space for creative businesses
- A gallery space in the foyer for local artists to exhibit their work.

4. As is discussed later, the creation of the above five items, allows for the arts centre to generate substantial earned income, while simultaneously filling numerous gaps within the needs of Mitcham. The auditorium would host community events, groups and performances, whilst also welcoming professional theatre shows from some of the UK's most notable small-mid scale touring companies. With the Polka Theatre and New Wimbledon Theatre in Wimbledon Broadway, there is no venue in Merton that can host or attracts high quality touring entertainment, and the fire station would solve this.

5. The flexible auditorium can also house a cinema screen and projector facilities, giving Mitcham town centre its own cinema. The café and bar space will be fundamental to the atmosphere created on site and give Mitcham residents a new leisure facility, during the daytime and evening. The Cut Bar at the Young Vic Theatre is a great example of what we'd aim to achieve at the fire station, building a friendly and aesthetically exciting bar/café that brings people to it, even if they aren't coming to see an event, show or film. Mitcham has several pubs in the town centre, but none of them create a friendly atmosphere for diverse attendees, especially not the growing young adult and middle class population in Mitcham. The daytime café facility would offer a meeting place for residents of not only the fire station, but neighbouring Vestry Hall and nearby offices to meet outside of the workplace, as well as local parents and retired residents who currently have only two limited café's on offer in the town centre.

Lack of alternatives

6. Since July 2012, Theatre6 has been actively searching for a suitable venue or structure to convert into an arts centre for Mitcham. This has included numerous site visit, consultations, and negotiations with property owners, agents and lawyers. Sites

included Unit 2 on Majestic Way, above Iceland, the former McDonalds site, former HSS Hire site 34 Upper Green East, the vacant industrial site to the rear of London Road, empty industrial sites on Boundary Business Court and many more. The conclusion after almost 2 years of searching is that there is no alternative in or near the town centre that fulfils this ambition. Property owners, such as ASDA who own the McDonald's site, have no interest in providing an artistic or community hub for the local area, whether rented at market rates or for a charitable peppercorn rent. The fire station is the only solution to this lack of site provision as well as providing an ideal venue in its own right.

Theatre6's experience – case studies

7. Our experience in Mitcham and elsewhere supports the potential of the fire station to make a successful multi-use arts centre and flexible auditorium which brings real benefits to the area.

Invigor8 Mitcham

8. Invigor8 Mitcham is an 8 week pop-up creative hub for artists and residents from Mitcham and Merton at large run by Theatre6. With events still scheduled, Invigor8 has already welcomed over 250 guests and 20 artists through its doors, with a resounding 100% asking either (1) when are you coming back, (2) can you please stay, (3) where are you going to next and making statements such as (1) there's nothing like this on offer in Mitcham, (2) I've never tried this before because it's not available until now [all of these are direct quotes from participants at Invigor8]. With a 100% success rate for residents wanting the activities to stay, and for Theatre6 to run them, there is categorical evidence of fresh and current demand for artistic activities for all ages in Mitcham. A full and detailed Invigor8 Mitcham report will be created after the project closes this December.

The Yard, Hackney Wick

9. Prior to leading Invigor8 Mitcham, Theatre6's Executive Producer was lead producer at the Yard Theatre in Hackney Wick. The Yard is one of the theatre world's great success stories since 2011, inspiring curiosity and support from theatres across the UK and Europe who want to know how it has accomplished so much with such a modest budget. The Yard is a theatre conceived by Jay Miller, designed and built by Practice Architecture, in collaboration with Christopher Daniel. It's a converted, dormant warehouse in Queen's Yard, Hackney Wick, splitting it into two sections – one housing the theatre, and the other the bar, in which the back 'bowl' of the seating rake is fully visible. It took two weeks to build the bar and theatre. Made with recycled and reclaimed material, the theatre seats 100 in a fully raked amphitheatre. The stage is large, with four performer entrances and exits. It started as a pop-up space between July-November 2011, during which the landlords gave the dormant warehouse rent free. Upon its overwhelming success (6,000 visitors instead of the projected 800), the Yard negotiated a 3 year lease with the landlords and it became a permanent fixture in Hackney Wick.

10. Due to the strength of its artistic work over the past year, The Yard was recently appointed as the affiliate venue of the National Theatre Studio, and has won Peter Brook empty space awards two years in a row. It turned an unused industrial site into a vibrant artistic hub for 6,000 visitors per year. The Yard Theatre is situated on the border of Tower Hamlets and Hackney, two of London's most impoverished boroughs. In Tower Hamlets alone, 57% of its children are living in poverty; the highest rate of child poverty in the country [Child Poverty Map, March 2011]. They are also two of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in London, though opportunities

and schemes for children to mix and interact with children from a different ethnic background are incredibly lacking, and there are high levels of racial segregation even within the local education system. [The Times reported in 2006 that 47% of secondary schools were exclusively non-white and that 33% had a white majority] Only 70% of residents are in work or looking for work, and for female residents the figure is less than 60%. A quarter of borough residents - twice the London average - have no qualifications and over 40% of these are not in work [Tower Hamlets Employment Strategy 2011]. The Yard actively combats these troubling issues through its creative programme and outreach projects.

11. The Yard has 12 full and part time members of staff to complete the objectives detailed above. It is recent proof that such an ambition can help rejuvenate a financially and culturally struggling community.

The Albany, Deptford

12. The Albany is an arts centre in Deptford, Lewisham, and has been at its current home on Douglas Way for 30 years. The Albany provides:

- An artistic and community resource where diversity and creativity flourish.
- A space where new talent is nurtured and exposed to ideas from across the world.
- High quality creative experiences relating to the communities we serve.
- A creative centre for learning within the community, contributing to the cultural, social and economic benefit of South East London.

13. The Albany has emerged as a new type of arts venue, very much driven by the cultural diversity and creative mix of South East London. Involving people through participation and partnerships is central to the Albany's work and is essential to the delivery of its vision, directly responsible for influencing its success. The Albany has received 250,000 visitors over the past twelve months, and it has 15 resident organisations whose offices are based at the Albany.

14. The Albany has taken the better part of a decade to establish itself as the nationally recognised arts centre it is today, and is now a key venue for Lewisham and its cultural life. However, for every £1 of funding from the local borough and Arts Council, The Albany creates £2.50 of additional commerce for business in the local area. Located off the main Deptford high street, the Albany has had an irreplaceable impact on the rejuvenation of Deptford high street, even though it is not immediately visible from bus stops, train or DLR stations, or the high street itself. Its activities still generate footfall in the thousands over the course of a year, even though it is not directly on the high street.

Financial Viability

15. We are confident in the deliverability and long term financial viability of converting the fire station into an arts centre.

Grants and Foundations

16. Theatre6's staff have over a decade of successful fundraising experience. With an extensive database of over 300 grant giving bodies, trusts and foundations, Theatre6 has a business plan that would generate 40% of the art centre's income on a rolling basis, using individual trusts deadlines and guidelines to ensure funding for the first 5 years, even if the database isn't increased. This includes The Arts Council

England, Heritage and Big Lottery funding, Sita Trust and Biffa Trust funding, Foyle Foundation, Paul Hamlyn, City Bridge and many more.

Profit

17. The arts centre would work off a model similar to the Albany's, whereby 60% of its income is earned income generated through bar/café sales, ticket sales, creative space hire and office/desk space hire. By keeping a minimum of 60% income as earned income, the building would therefore never be dependent on donations, trusts, statutory funding or grants as so many charities and arts centres are in recent years. By having the fire station converted into an arts centre, this plan would be given the square footage to work effectively, by offering enough space for a bar and daytime café, rehearsal space for hire and office space for short term and long term hires.

Timescale

18. The actual build of the auditorium and getting the building physically ready for opening to the public would take only weeks (likely 2-3). The planning element could take up to two months. Fundraising for the building and commissioning of projects would be a rolling, yearlong activity. This timescale is ambitious but reasonable (the Yard was conceived and built in 6 weeks, from finding the space to opening the doors of the theatre).

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Cricket Green Charter

This charter should be used to inform policies and decisions about the future of Cricket Green

The rich story of Cricket Green told through its buildings, open spaces and people sets the standard and makes development in the area a privilege. All development should be required to show it matches up to the quality of the area and contributes positively to its future.

Character and context

1. All new development should be considered in the context of the whole area and its contribution to the Cricket Green Charter
2. All new development should add to and not detract from the local character, and be respectful of setting, context, massing and height
3. Cricket Green's history and story should be revealed more effectively and the area given greater coherence
4. The diversity of building characters and styles across different periods is a vital asset, and any new development should add positively to this story

Open space

5. There should be no loss of open space, and the established common land and town greens should have absolute protection
6. The variety of open space should be positively managed for quiet enjoyment, recreation, sport and nature
7. Cricket should continue to be played on the green in perpetuity
8. Retaining and enhancing the character of Cricket Green road running alongside the east of the cricket ground should be a starting point for any future development in Birches Close or at Brook House

Walking

9. Pedestrian movement around the area should be made easier, including by action to improve road crossings, manage traffic and remove lorries from Church Road
10. Pedestrian routes should be enhanced throughout the area, including between Church Road and London Road Playing Fields and through the Wilson Hospital site

Quality

11. Any new development facing the cricket ground and other open space at the heart of Cricket Green should be of a standard that could warrant listing within 30 years
12. High-quality modern development has its place in the future of the area if it makes a distinctive contribution that positively enhances the local area
13. New development should strengthen Cricket Green's reputation and support its aspirations – including the type of new housing and attracting high quality facilities

Lighting

14. The sensitive lighting and attractive nightscape should be respected

Affordability

15. Cricket Green should remain an affordable location to live

Activities

16. There should be more reasons for people to linger and things to see and do, including in the evening
17. There should be a community arts centre providing a focus for the area and opportunities to meet

Canons House and Park Place

18. Canons House, Park Place and their grounds should be restored, given greater unity and become a thriving centre of cultural and leisure activity which appeals beyond the local area

The island site

19. The island site – including the fire station and Cricketers – should be a focus of local community activity, and be developed and managed as a coherent whole

The development process

20. The potential of land swaps, planning gain and the community infrastructure levy to secure the best location and outcomes from development for the area should be fully exploited
21. There should be opportunities for greater community ownership and control over management of key sites and development decisions, including the potential of a Community Land Trust and local community trust



The Cricket Green Charter presents the conclusions of Tune In Cricket Green – a workshop for all those involved in the area organised by Mitcham Cricket Green Community and Heritage working in partnership with the future Merton team at London Borough of Merton and local ward councillors.

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