

Register

Not another barracks for Pimlico

Marcus Binney

Architecture Correspondent

London had few more dismal modern buildings than the long, repetitive 1960s front of Chelsea Barracks. Thankfully, that has now gone, so why should it be replaced by a housing development that is almost as repetitive as what was there before?

In its place, along Chelsea Bridge Road, opposite leafy Ranelagh Gardens and the grounds of Chelsea Hospital, developers are proposing 21 identical blocks laid out in seven parallel ranges. Monotony is relieved only by some variations in colour between the blocks and a series of projecting stair towers.

Though intended as the ultimate in modernity and exclusiveness, the nine-storey apartment blocks look principally into each others' windows rather than taking advantage of the glorious views. They are also much too tall — the limit should be six storeys rising occasionally to seven. Almost equally close-packed and standardised are the four parallel blocks of affordable housing ranged along Ebury Bridge Road, rising to 13 storeys — almost as high as the two 15-storey barracks accommodation towers which Westminster Council rightly says should be demolished. Both should be reduced in height.

A site as large and potentially prestigious as this should give birth to a new residential quarter as elegant as Chelsea or Belgravia. The long frontage set back behind the retained railings of the original Victorian barracks cries out for a modern John Nash to create palace-style compositions like the terraces around Regents Park with distinctive treatment of the centre and ends.

Instead, what we are offered is a ghetto for rich and poor alike, both with too little natural light. It is all the more surprising when the leading residential developers Candy & Candy have the backing of Qatari oil millions and the architects are Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners (the practice of Lord Rogers of Riverside).

The railings and mature plane trees along Chelsea Bridge Road point to setting the new blocks behind gardens like Lancaster Gate north of Hyde Park, here with a glorious southwest-facing outlook. The frontage here could be varied by introducing a grand crescent in the centre or creating two three-sided squares, like Brunswick Square in Brighton, giving even more apartments good views.



The proposed scheme is "a ghetto for rich and poor alike, both with too little light"

Cogent criticism has come from the Grosvenor Estate which has complained to Westminster Council that the scheme looks like "an office development", lacks "intimacy and individuality", and "a central heart or core". Grosvenor's planning director, Nigel Hughes, has said to Westminster that "only a complete redesign of the proposals can resolve the issues".

CABE, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, though hesitant to criticise such prominent architects, calls for the strict regularity to be relaxed "to offer places of surprise and delight".

The crucial site on the corner of Chelsea Bridge Road and Pimlico Road is used for a hotel. Yet why put a hotel on a busy cross roads when further south it could enjoy seclusion and a leafy outlook. This corner would be better turned by extending the antique and interior shops which are the hallmark of the Pimlico Road.

The developers have responded to criticism by creating a small park at the back of the site. Much better would be to place this green space in the heart of the site where the maximum number of local residents in both affordable and private housing could enjoy views on to it.

No amount of sophisticated details or smart materials from the architects will make up for the flawed layout. If Westmin-

ster councillors will not throw it out the Mayor of London should use his muscle to have it called in for a public inquiry.

One potential spanner in the works comes from the survival of the Victorian Guards Chapel at the back of the site. This has been recommended for listing by English Heritage, and Westminster's planning brief calls for its retention. So why demand the demolition of the one building which speaks of the site's illustrious links with Coldstream, Scots, Welsh and Irish Guards? In many conversions of Victorian hospitals and schools, chapels such as this have been converted into crèches, sports centres, gymnasia and theatres, and add a dimension to the marketing strategy.

It is hard to see the standardisation and repetitiveness of the layout as anything other than sheer laziness or blinkered tidy-mindedness. What is proposed is as much a barracks as what stood there before — without the imposing open space of the parade ground. Its design shouts out the simple message "We have paid £959m to the Ministry of Defence for this 13.8 acre site and we want our money back — fast". It is unworthy of London, let alone Chelsea, Belgravia or the Royal Hospital.

Marcus Binney is president of SAVE Britain's Heritage