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Sent: Sun 16 May 2010, 19h 36min 48s
Subject: new thought about Clapham Junction

Dear Cyril and Kate,

I've had an unusual idea for Clapham Junction station which I thought I might run past you to see what you think. It may not be original!

Obviously it is disappointing that Network Rail appears so uninterested and so unwilling to commit big money to give the station the kind of proper upgrade it needs, with major engineering works (eg new deck, bridge, or subway) providing much better access to/from the platforms. The abandoned Twin Towers project was never going to deliver this anyway. In a period of great financial austerity it seems to me unlikely that a change of government will make much difference to such an attitude. There is no indication that the train operating companies have any wish to contribute anything. Wandsworth lacks initiative. In such circumstances perhaps it is best to think modest. I believe a relatively small scale, and perfectly do-able, piece of development could offer a major improvement to the passenger experience.

At the moment, particularly in the rush hour, the crowded subway, the crowded booking hall-cum-Stop-and-Shop arcade, and the crowded pavements and relentless motor traffic of St John's Hill make navigating an entrance or exit to the station a thoroughly grim experience for most passengers. The reopening of the Parcels Office entrance on St John's Hill will obviously improve matters a bit and take some of the strain off the subway. Network Rail estimates that, once open, it will account for 30% of passenger entrance/exits at St John's Hill. But the overbridge is up to three times the width of the subway, with up to three times the capacity. Why not target at least an equal 50-50% split of passengers between the two? What a difference that would make to the subway experience (nearly 30% fewer punters) and to the street outside, without overloading the bridge at all. It could be done.

I think most residents would agree that the Fitness First plus Stop and Shop complex (west of the arcade) is undistinguished, offering third rate architecture and poor use of space. So, step one, knock it down and rebuild it, necessarily at greater height to maximise financial returns. It could provide at least two storeys of shopping space, perhaps employing some kind of gallery/atrium design which includes a booking hall, and several more storeys of flats or offices above, but hopefully no more than about eight storeys (and stepped back).

Then, step two (the wacky bit), construct a footbridge over St John's Hill from Severus Road (next to the Grand Theatre) into the first floor of this new complex, and construct a linked walkway (at the same level) from the back of the complex, running behind the Windsor Castle pub, to connect directly with the new Parcels Office booking hall and the overbridge. There is plenty of available space to do this. The creation of such a structure would allow a passenger leaving the station to avoid the crush of the subway, the arcade, and the pavement outside, and to have no need to fight his/her way across the busy main road at all. He/she would quickly alight on the quiet Severus Road which leads directly towards the St John's Road shopping street and all points south. The new

Parcels Office entrance will only attract passengers who live to the west of Clapham Junction. This proposed footbridge would provide a highly attractive station access proposition not only to all passengers who live adjacent to St John's Road but to all who live in the entire "between the commons" space beyond, a huge area. I have no doubt it would redirect large numbers of passengers away from the subway and onto the overbridge, surely a very positive result.

Now, assuming that the necessary rebuilding could be organised, planned, approved, financed etc etc, the obvious question raised is : Who wants a footbridge over St John's Hill? Many might regard such a thing as entirely unwelcome, a visual abomination even, no matter what the potential benefits. Some dreary utilitarian slab of metal clearly wouldn't do at all. But if a really creatively-designed structure was built, which had genuine aesthetic quality and actively complemented the frontage of the Grand Theatre (perhaps echoing the arches and waves of its decorative features), people might come round to it. They might even start to like it. It might even become a kind of Clapham Junction landmark (isn't the leader of Wandsworth Council supposed to be keen on landmarks?). How about a competition? One could reel off a whole string of famous "signature" bridges round the world which people know and like. The idea of a footbridge at Clapham Junction is obviously unexpected, but if it is of high quality, why not explore the possibility?

This project will not add access capacity at the station (which we would all ideally like) but it will make much better use of existing capacity. It is not a project of any great technical difficulty. It demands no engineering works to the track or the platforms, or to the spaces above or below, which will please Network Rail. It is essentially a property project with a couple of bolt-ons. It will need to involve Network Rail, Wandsworth, the Highways Agency, and maybe the Mayor, but with the right will it could be done, and, I think, at no staggering expense.

A bridge and walkway could in fact be built without knocking down the existing buildings, but the bridge would have to go diagonally across the road in front of the Grand. It would look really ugly and, in my view, quite unacceptable. Better to do a proper job, albeit a more complicated one. By bringing the bridge into the first floor of a new shopping complex, the constant stream of passing passengers would add great value to potential shop leases at that level. The complex would also be well integrated with the town centre. You're probably familiar with Waterloo station. Think of the access benefits provided by the footbridge across York Road to the Shell Centre and the riverbank beyond. There are of course all sorts of other individual discussion points about this proposal which I won't bother going into here.

You may think I've been smoking something exotic and this idea is barmy. But it would be a whole lot better than doing nothing, and, once the new Parcels Office entrance is up and running, nothing is what currently appears to be in prospect. Let me know what you think. I shall await a visit from the men in white coats with complete equanimity.

Best wishes,

David

