

The Finsbury Park Town Centre Proposal

A
town
centre

or development ?

open space or more impinging on common land?





Finsbury Park Mosque

Finsbury Park Bus Station

The Rowan's site

Finsbury Park Railway Station

The A503 (Seven Sisters Road)

Finsbury Park Tennis Courts in winter

**Looking
west**

Falling short!

Comment on Rowan's proposed development, in the guise of a 'Town Centre' for Finsbury Park sponsored by Islington council

THE principle of tri-Borough co-operation for planning over one of London's most neglected corners is as excellent as it is overdue.

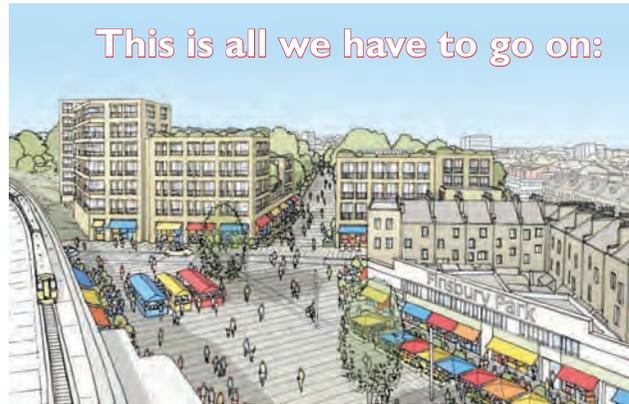
It's an important area: a big transport hub and within its ambit, the principal entrance to one of London's major public parks, by the A503 – a busy arterial road. It needs careful thought and treatment as a whole.

The aim of a *Finsbury Park Town Square* is good, noble and appropriate.

However, the biggest element in the current scheme is a big block of flats wanted by one land owner—something that the planners have gone to some lengths to disguise.

In their 63-page Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) the most we learn about this is an *artist impression* on page 36. Unlike

the rest of the document—full of planning policy context—the bottom half of page 36 is blank. So is page 37. Together they give the impression of redaction, of items not yet fit for public consumption. At the 'Consultation' at *FinFuture* on 15/08/2013, there was a model on view on a table, with Rowan's at its heart.



"Figure 3.18 artist impression of potential future development of Station east area"
Page 36 of the Supplementary Planning Document Draft for Consultation (July 2013)

The flats are obviously the most significant element of the *Town Square* proposal that does little more than promote one property-owner's desire to develop their land.

However, at least we know the owner is open to change and amenable to a radical of re-use of their existing property. Despite the drawbacks of the planner-developer's current proposal, we may yet see significant public benefit come from the situation.

■ **The Rowan's site**

THE SOUTHERN end of Finsbury Park, (adjacent to the main entrance) has been curiously labelled in the SPD.

It is described, not simply or neutrally as a strip of land between the road and the park, currently in private ownership, nor even as a development site. Instead, we are told it is a Key Development site. The only thing 'key' about it, is that it is a key to unlock a treasure chest of profits for the developer. Any reasons of public policy to further develop this particular site, need to be balanced with reasons to open up the whole corner.

The proposed apartment block would, on one side, have splendid views over our park and on the other side, a walk of less than one minute to public transport. Relatively few locations of the same distance from central London would be more valuable. The apartments would likely be the most expensive in the area.

■ **The current buildings**

IN MY opinion, the current buildings are not attractive but do have some historical value. In 1963 the Beatles played their first London gig there. Such a history is worth sacrificing only for *significant* public benefit (below).

UNREALISTIC viewpoint

the distant and elevated perspective makes apartment blocks seem smaller

Access alley drawn as avenue des Champs-Élysées
moving the goal posts: the (retail) corridor—so much vaunted—shown as a wide avenue populated by tiny people making it appear yet wider—planners declined to confirm width

Park made visible!

from this height above ground level—and through the ‘permeable’ cut-through—the tops of the tallest trees are visible. N.B. At the peak of summer, trees in full leaf can just be seen. In practice, the ‘park view’ would be far more restricted (see text).

Seven story blocs

overlooking park — have extra stories been added in order to concede later?

Bicycle park: gone !

Stroud Green Road: now a lane !

this heavily-used road and bus route, becomes a fantastical lane, narrower than the pavement, with one and a half cars visible

Giant canopy: gone !

the artist ‘impression’ manages to disappear the big steel porch outside the railway station entrance, built in recent years at great expense

Bus station: gone !

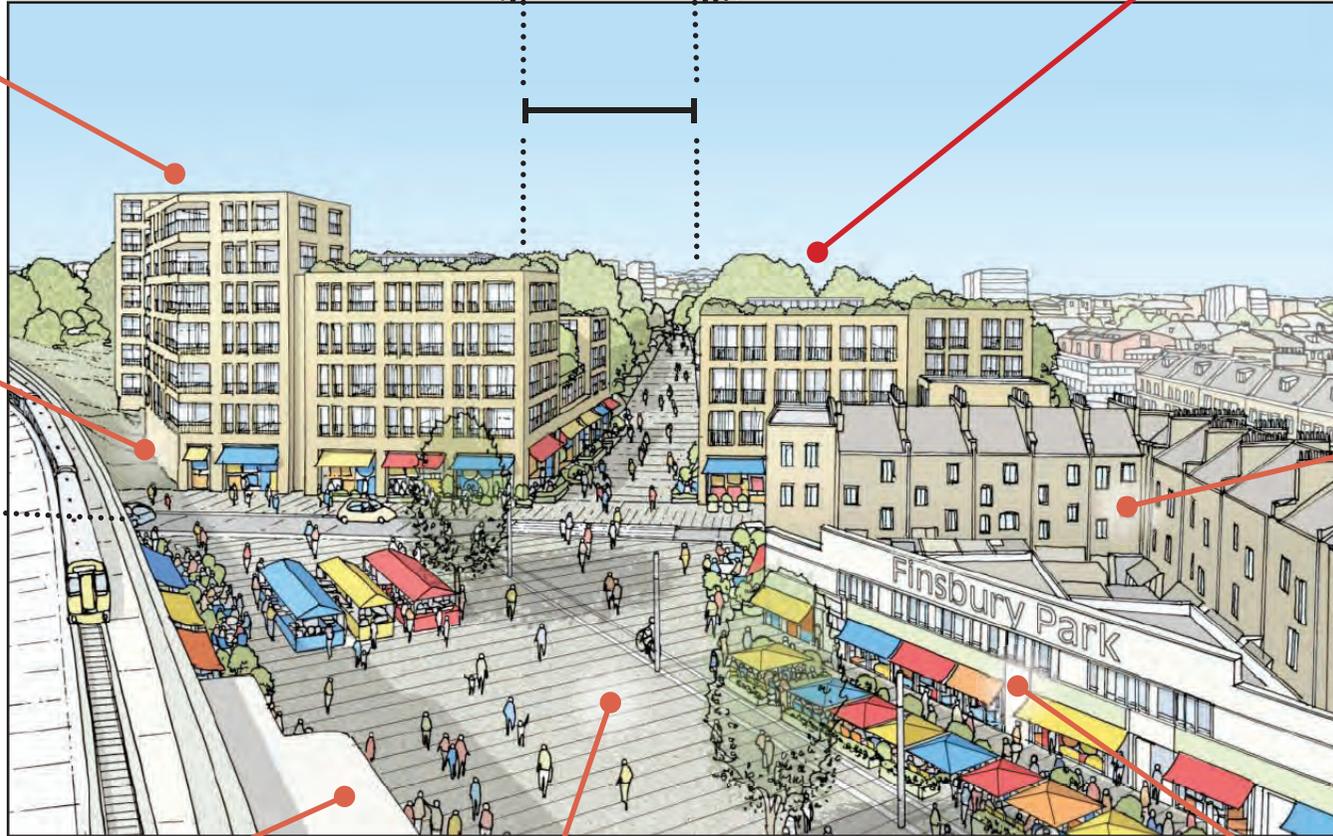
perhaps even more surprising than the absent porch by the bus station, is the disappearance of the entire bus station. Is this an artist’s hallucination ?!

Retained:

the triangle of ugly buildings that separates the big transport hub from the main road and continues to frustrate the aim of a real town square

Silver bullet public house

in this extraordinary rendition, the spit-and-sawdust Silver Bullet pub is hard to distinguish from central Paris



■ The artist's hallucination

BEGINNING with its elevated viewpoint, the artist's sketch accompanying the prospectus (opposite) is unrepresentative.

The perspective is a birds-eye view above the station, about five storey's high, just high enough to permit a view of the tree tops of Finsbury Park.

The unrealistically high viewpoint also serves the developer's wish to disguise the dominating height of the blocks from the more typical ground level viewpoint of pedestrians, who would stand much closer to the buildings.

The depiction of Stroud Green road is unrealistic and is perhaps the most deceptive aspect of the sketch.

The normally busy and often jammed-up Stroud Green road is shown as **(a)** the width of a track **(b)** narrower than the footpath

alongside **(c)** with one and a half cars and **(d)** no buses (!) Indeed, the entire bus station has mysteriously vanished. The giant steel awning (below) along the length of the



railway station has disappeared. Do planners really want to remove this item, installed at no little cost? I say: stop the piecemeal fiddling and come up with an overall solution that looks, swims and quacks like a Town Square!

The part that the planners are pleased to call 'permeable' is shown as a boulevard that continues into the park. The impression given is that this is generously wide; however the

artist 'impression' appears significantly wider than the gap shown on the model and that size was not quantified.

The boulevard is shown running into an avenue that goes straight into the park. The bicycle store has disappeared.

The (fantastic) scene is shown in *sunlight* which is fair. Only slightly less representative, the scene is shown at the height of summer with all trees in leaf. It is

significantly less representative, that the scene is near the middle of the day, where the fall of long shadows is least. The *impression* left is of an artist straining to make the development look the least ugly and intrusive as possible.



Broad-brush artist's sketches, – as substitutes for serious consultations – have been used before, once at the infamous 2006 Alexandra Palace 'consultation'. That ended up in the High Court.

■ Narrow-minded

THE MAIN selling point of the planners and promoters, has been the break between the buildings allowing view and access. **The principle, of having a view and access to the park from the station is excellent**, but the presentation has been misleading. The average position at the bus station is some distance away from the corridor entrance. Therefore, the view of the park down the corridor is along a narrow angle and in any event, viewable from only a small proportion of the area of the bus station. This is deceptive.

From most of the bus station area, that view would be **(a)** oblique and **(b)** of retail frontages. It is in the developer's interests to retain as much building area as possible and to cede as little width as possible for the

corridor purpose, at the same time, flagging it as a major concession in keeping with public objectives.

The private objective is to provide two, valuable retail frontages along the alley way, increasing further the land value.

■ Finsbury Park Town Centre?

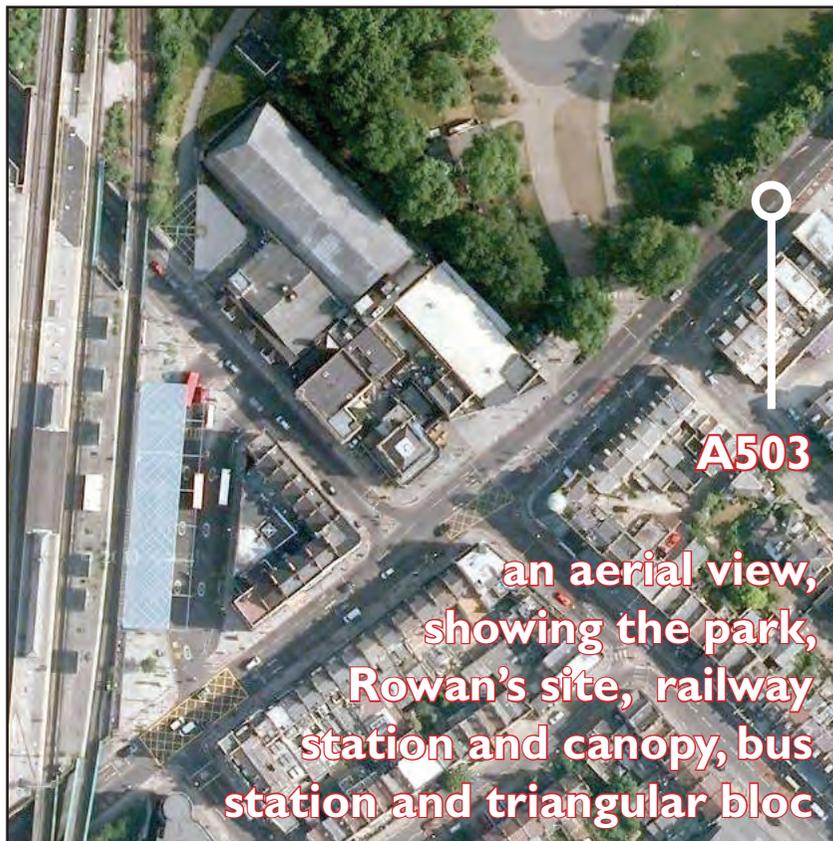
PLANNERS seem happy to dress the private developer's plans with the real need to improve the area and appear to go to lengths to link the private interests to public goals.

■ Consultation

ALARM bells are triggered by the timing of the consultation. It is held during the summer when many residents are away on holiday.

This period (and Christmas) is notorious as the time when councils hold consultations for their least attractive proposals, because the least number of people will be available. A campaigner once said that as a rule, consultations held in this period are real stinkers. Tabulations will be performed on the basis of uninformed and unavailable comment. It appears that no named people are responsible. The SPD is long on jargon and planning regs; and short on content. It

The ugly triangle of buildings is kept, but the façade facing the station is now tarted up in the artist's hallucination, with colourful accoutrements. One would hardly guess that, remaining in the council's sketch, and lying behind the Parisian awnings and colourful umbrellas, is one of the area's toughest, meanest pubs, the *Silver Bullet*, that has more in common with spit-and-sawdust than the artist's cheerful dressing we are shown.



an aerial view, showing the park, Rowan's site, railway station and canopy, bus station and triangular bloc

■ Partiality?

ASPECTS of the documents appear tendentious, if not biased. The July SPD describes the Rowan's complex [as] a key destination for visitors in the area (which is at odds with its demolition).

Again, Rowan's is described as key in the same way their planning consultant might. Rowan's happen to own land that separates our park from the road. The planner's identification with the developer goes further:

3.6.4. However, the major opportunity site in this area is the Rowan's complex on Stroud Green Road in Haringey.

This begs the question, opportunity for who? The so-called *major opportunity site* is certainly a site of opportunity for major capital gain for Rowan's, but planners paid by public funds ought to be promoting primarily *public* and community interest, not private.

When planners identify so closely with the development goal of single developer it could give the appearance of impropriety.

■ Security?

THIS is more so when the declared goal is a town centre and area-wide regeneration. On page 50 of the SPD, we are told of *the range of activities that should take place.*

At 5.13, under table heading

Accord Strategic Objective, we have *Development*; under

Activity, we have: *Secure redevelopment of the Rowan's Complex*; and under

Actions: *To work with the site owners to co-ordinate plans for the site's redevelopment, including securing the new links to park.*

By the use of the term 'secure', there is already an assumption that further development of the Rowan's site is some kind of valuable prize of benefit to the public. However, as with much modern development, the proposed construction is an attractive building ... in the wrong place. Far more significant is that this development would preclude a superior solution to most of the declared objects of a Town Centre.

■ Nibbling away at public parks

SADLY, preservation and enhancement of public parks seems to have slipped down the agenda for Planners. Councils that once

is a pity the planners feel the need to use jargon here and one suspects they take refuge in it in order to hide meaning. The informal 'consultation' has been light on specifics. There is vagueness about details. We are given artist's sketches from angles that present Rowan's development in the least bad light. It is clear that the planners favour this particular development and that this 'consultation' on the draft just goes through the motions.



General view of canopy and busy bus station, Rowans (in middle distance) and the triangular bloc. Bus on right waiting to cross to station

At least 4 (four) bus routes use this terminus. Buses exiting the station on this side of the railway station, all turn right into Stroud Green road



General view — opposite of above — from the bicycle park entrance with Stroud Green Road in foreground. General view of canopy and busy bus station; the triangular bloc is now on left

All non-aerial photos in this document taken on Saturday afternoon (2013–08–17)

created them, now seem to see them as a cost and are indifferent to their fate. Maintenance is cut and in small but steady ways, the park is reduced. There is a ratchet effect that militates against them and few speak up for parks, least of all local councils representing developer interests.

There is confusion over where the boundary of **Metropolitan Open Land** lies. It is marked with care and attention to detail all along Stroud Green Road. It is clearly marked in the SPD as bowing into the park, but the Planner/promoters now said this was incorrect. This is also worrying.

Whether or not the proposed building impinges on MOL, it would represent a further nibbling away at the spirit of public parks. The proposed luxury apartments would overlook the park and that would of course, be one of their selling points. The higher they were, the more they would quite literally, over-shadow our park.

■ Height and mass

THE HEIGHT depicted for the western-most bloc at 7 (seven) stories is cynical. Either, one or two extra stories have been added in order to take them off later as concession (in typical developer fashion) or if seven stories



were actually built, they would be used as a precedent to build yet higher buildings in the area that would cast even longer shadows.

The four and five story blocks appear to have penthouse floors on top (of lower than full-floor height), inset within what appears to be roof-gardens. These are just visible in the artist 'impression'. Clearly none of this is intended to be 'key' worker accommodation.

■ Curtilage

MORE housing is needed in London, but surely not just anywhere at any cost to other public policy goals. The apartment blocks along the long eastern side of our park (in Hackney Borough) are not only attractive buildings and have a view over the park but, in contrast to the Rowan's proposal, are at a reasonable distance by virtue of being *beyond the wide margin* of Seven Sisters Road (the A503).

Part of the spirit of parks is that their borders need to be treated sensitively. Around *most* of our Finsbury Park is a good margin comprising either road or railway line. The jumble of buildings on the southern-most side are an exception to this – an anomaly that the developer seeks to exploit.

■ Planning: out of control ?

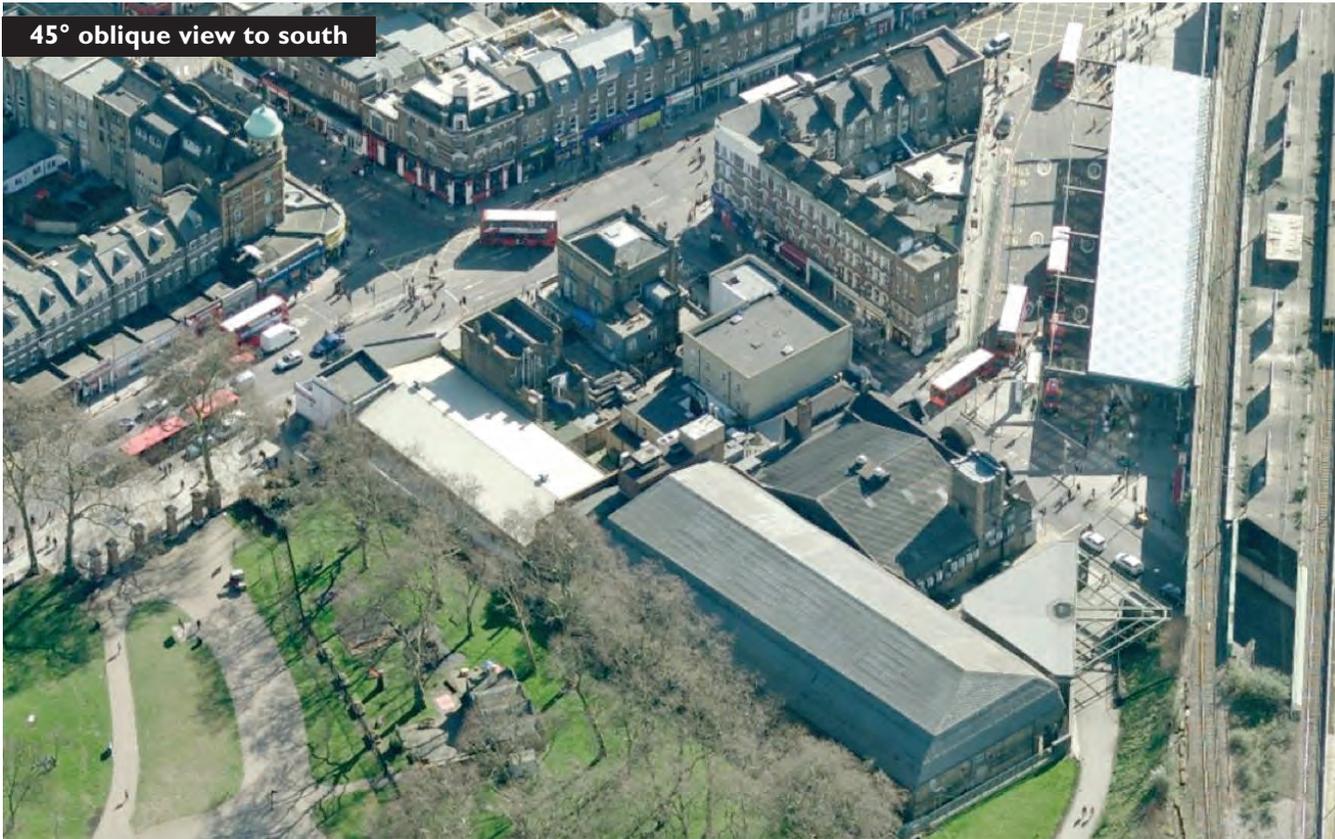
THIS appears to be another example of poorly thought-through regeneration around a north London Tube station. We have seen this at Wards Corner, with the ill-judged proposal above the Seven Sisters Tube station.

There, one company (Grainger) has become practically a client of a planning department where the council unwisely signed up to a contract that embodies 1990s 're-generation' concepts. If council planning officials stopped making big mistakes, real progress could be made.

This proposal too, meets developer needs rather than broader local community needs.

However, there is a great opportunity here to make amends for some previous planning failures by adopting a wholly community focused approach and that will genuinely meet the goal of a town centre.

45° oblique view to south



■ A lack of ambition so far

THIS is little more than one developer's interests contrived to fit to public goals. It lacks ambition and doesn't come close to meeting the real needs of the area. What is offered by the developer would preclude a more ambitious scheme that would truly fulfil the worthy goals of a Finsbury Park Town Centre – and the public interest.

■ A real town square

THE GOAL for a developer quick-win is at odds with the long-term community interests. Except for cost, it would be desirable from many view-points if there were many fewer buildings on the southern-most corner of our park. The building **on the corner**, housing *The Twelve Pins* pub, is not unattractive and may be worth keeping. A clean-out and squaring

up would have a solution that was genuinely 'permeable' and that was unobstructed. The cost of the land could be shared between three boroughs, perhaps from other sources too, and it need not happen in the short term.

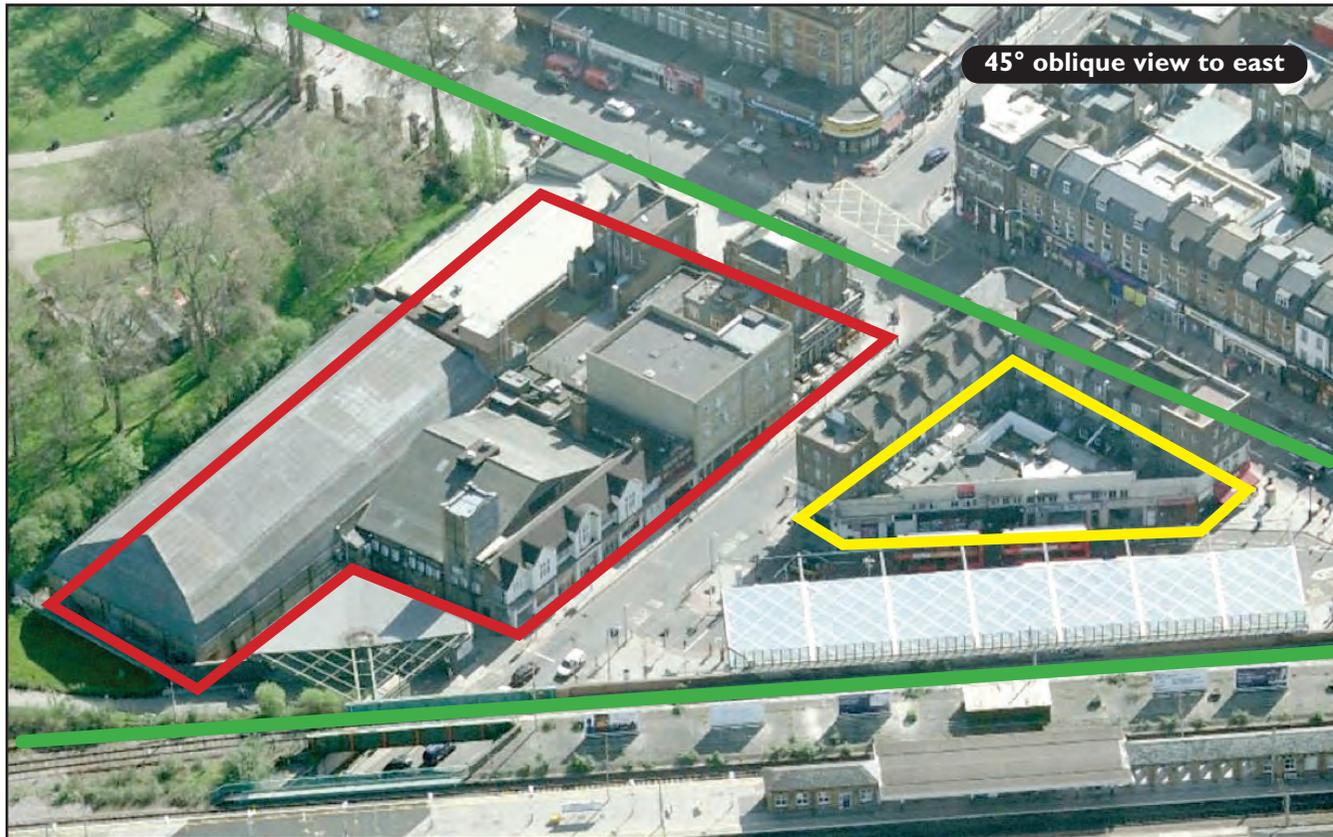
A similar, long-term strategy could be adopted towards the unattractive triangular patch of land opposite the bus station (see: *Triangulation*). If there was a real will of the three Boroughs to co-operate to come up with a scheme in the public interest, then the area could be transformed and radically improved.

■ Conclusion

WE HAVE seen a previous scheme in the area that favoured a single development, in this unco-ordinated fashion. Consent for the skyscraper twin towers is now regarded as a mistake and the current narrow proposals threaten to make a further mistake.

Unless and until the councils can come up with a long term approach that puts the public first, I suggest that there be no further token piecemeal efforts.

What is needed is an overall plan that, in the long-term, links the main elements in an integrated fashion, rather than a bitty approach that happens to fit in with a single private property owner's current plans.



Triangulation If the creation of a town square were truly the object, then the biggest single thing that could be done to promote it, would be to acquire the triangular bloc marked above in yellow. If converted to open space, it could form the basis of a plaza or piazza. It would better link this major transport hub with Seven Sisters road and the shops behind and open up many possibilities. With a pedestrian and cycle flyover, it could link with our park.

Right	top	bus station; triangular bloc on right
	middle	the triangular bloc
	bottom	bloc frontage on A503 (Seven Sisters Road)



A harder option but better in the long term?

What is proposed is a half-baked measure that is just not up to the challenge. The heavy use of jargon clothes a scheme that puts developer interests ahead of public interest.

At 4.2.16, *Haringey Council's emerging Site Allocations Document* will set out the appropriate uses for the Rowan Site. The Council's aspirations for the site include the

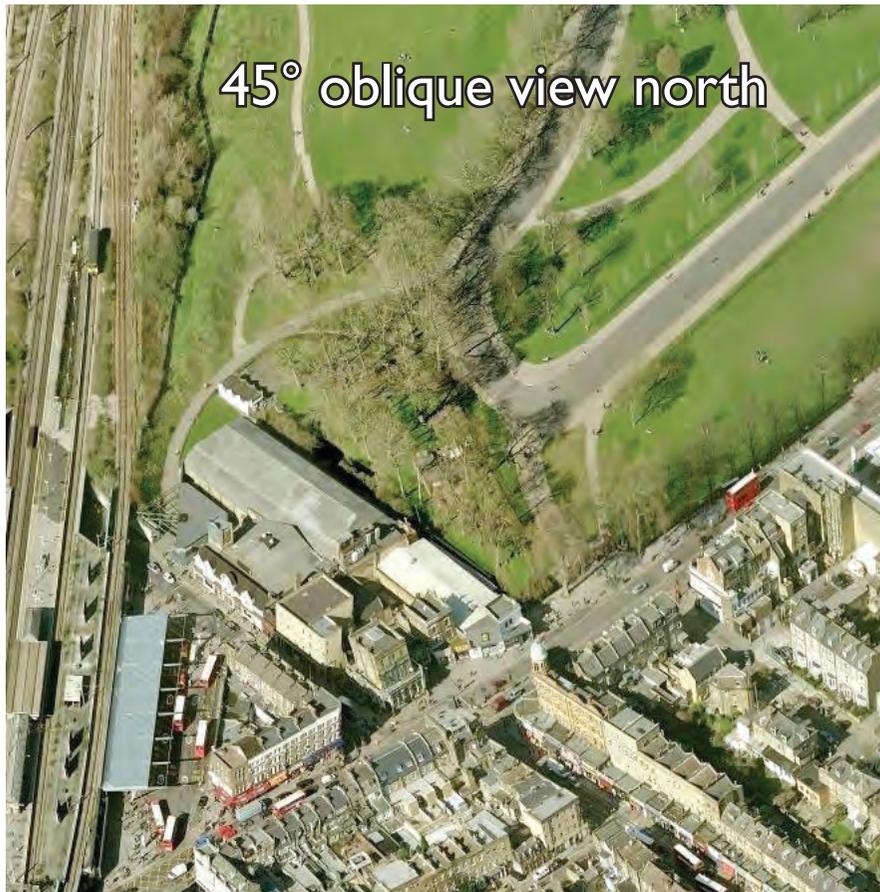
provision of a gateway into the Park, replacing the existing entrance from Stroud Green Road beside the railway embankment and improved visibility and access between Finsbury Park and the station.

At 5.1.3, the SPD seeks to improve entrances to the Park and for *Islington Haringey and Rowan's to work together to*

agree on an appropriate gateway to the park from Stroud Green Road.

These are modest goals given the ambitions for a **town centre**. The cut through is no more than an excuse for a big property development and the planners go along with it.

For Haringey Council, the site is perhaps



45° oblique view north

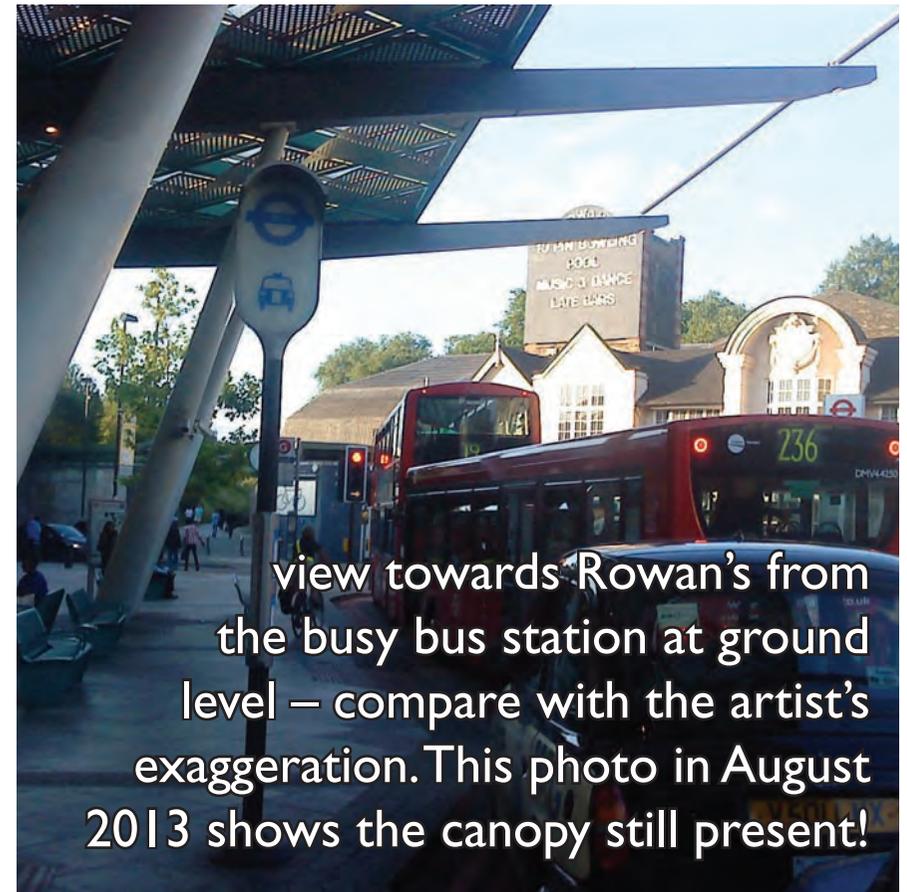
important to the other two boroughs.

This one-developer proposal falls short. With enough will and a commitment to the real goals, the potential however is enormous. The wrong decisions will last for decades; the right one could transform the area.

more important that the other two. The big transport hub of Finsbury Park station debouches at the southernmost tip of entire Borough, the part nearest to central London, which is Finsbury Park itself.

It is the **Gateway to Haringey** but, lying at the far end of one of London's bigger parks, the area as a town centre is perhaps more

A wide structure for walking or cycling, flying over Stroud Green Road could link a new town square with our Park and link to the improvements already made at the station, including the giant steel canopy.



view towards Rowan's from the busy bus station at ground level – compare with the artist's exaggeration. This photo in August 2013 shows the canopy still present!

View from top of bank near railway line, looking south, of Rowan's hall. Cycle park at top right; Finsbury Park railway station beyond

