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FAO: Elaine Quigley and Catherine Bond

Dear Officers,

Application for Listed Building Consent | Repairs to external Staircase 03, West Residence, The British Museum, London WC1B

Introduction

On behalf of the Trustees of The British Museum, we enclose an application for Listed Building Consent to support the proposed repair works to external Staircase 03 of the West Residence. The proposed description of development is: *Repair, conservation and maintenance works to Staircase 03 at the West Residence of The British Museum.*

Application content

This application has been submitted via the Planning Portal (ref: PP-12483149). This letter and the following make up the application and supporting documents:

- Application forms and Certificate
- Existing and proposed drawings
- Schedule of repairs
- Design and Access Statement inc. Heritage Statement
- Structural drawing

There is no fee associated with this application for Listed Building Consent.

The site

The British Museum Estate

The British Museum was founded in 1753, the first national public museum in the world, and has been open to the public since 1759. With approximately eight million objects in the collection, it is arguably the world's greatest display of human history, culture and art. Both permanent collections and special exhibitions are presented within displays for the public. The Museum's Bloomsbury estate is situated on the north side of Great Russell Street within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. It is bounded by Montague Place, Montague Street, Bloomsbury Street and Great Russell Street. The estate houses several important listed buildings, including the Grade I listed Quadrangle Building, the KEB to the north of the site, and other listed elements such as the railings and a number of lampposts around the periphery. The original, now replaced, elements of the Museum date back to 1755- 1822 when Montagu House was purchased to house the new British Museum collection. There was a need to expand the Museum as the collection grew bigger. Robert Smirke was the designer of a masterplan which dates from 1823-47. His plans consisted of four wings with an impressive iconic colonnade along the building's south elevation. This building consists of two principal storeys, adhering to the Greek Revival style, which also includes the columns and pediment at the South entrance.

Surrounding uses and designations

The surrounding uses include a range of commercial office, hotel, residential and education uses. The Museum is located in the Midtown BID district (Holborn, Bloomsbury, St Giles), an Archaeological Priority Area, the Background Strategic View (Blackheath), and the Central Activity Zone (CAZ). It is located within an area of excellent transport accessibility with a PTAL rating of 6b. It is close to Russell Square, Holborn, Tottenham Court Road and Goodge Street tube stations, and several bus routes operate along Southampton Row and Bloomsbury Street. There are cycle networks in close proximity with secure bike stands. There is a Santander bike hire stand towards the junction between Great Russell Street and Montague Street. The south forecourt is designated as an open space.

Heritage context and significance

Conservation Management Plan | The Museum's Conservation Management Plan (CMP) was originally adopted in 1999 and later revised by Purcell Architects in 2007/8. Updates to the CMP are currently being progressed. The current CMP contains a detailed appraisal of the significance of the Museum as a whole and highlights that it represents the high point of neo-classical Museum style in the UK. As noted above, much of the Museum's estate is Grade I listed, being of international significance and sitting in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. The Site was constructed in numerous phases from Smirke's 19th century Quadrangle masterplan to the 21st century WCEC. There is innate value in the historical built fabric overall, especially where it survives from the earliest building phases. The use of pioneering construction techniques and innovative design across the phases is also important as is The British Museum's association with a succession of architectural figureheads. Its special architectural and historic character can in part be attributed to the significance of its collection and the considerable social value attributed to its use as a museum containing some of the world's most valuable and coveted collection of ancient artefacts. The Museum was founded on the principle that its collection was for the nation and would, therefore, be accessible to everyone. This is a key theme which continues today and is a driving force behind much of the Museum's decision making and future planning.

Heritage significance of the East and West Residences | The two southern wings of the Museum, the East and West Residences, were designed by Sir Robert Smirke as residences to house the principal staff of the Museum. Each wing comprised four residences. A review of the heritage significance of the residences is set out in the 2007 CMP. The East Residence was completed in 1846-47, with the northern house of the East Residence constructed as the grandest, being the residence for the Principal Librarian. The Residences are an integral element in the design of the Museum's south front composition and as such are highly significant, both historically and architecturally. In common with Smirke's construction of the Museum the Residences are built to a very high standard of design, incorporating the latest constructional techniques such as cast-iron beams and fireproof floors. The exterior elevations are a restrained, almost severe, essay in Greek classical temple form with a giant order of shallow pilasters supporting a cornice and a low pediment facing Great Russell Street. These elevations provide an appropriately restrained counterpoint to the deeply modelled form of the main south front.

The West Residence was built concurrently with the south end of the West Wing between 1843 and 1846 and the East Residence which was designed in 1844 and was built 1846-47. Like the East Residence and as noted above, the West Residence forms an integral part of the Museum's front composition and as such is highly significant. The five external approach stairs (Stairs 02, 04, 06, 08, 09) leading up to the principal entrances of the Residences are therefore significant in terms of the overall composition and in the fact that they are the 'front doors' of the individual houses within each Residence. The four secondary stairs (Stairs 01, 03, 05 and 07) are also carefully and symmetrically disposed elements within the overall composition of the principal elevations, lending architectural weight and importance to the central approach stairs which they flank on either side.

The Bloomsbury Conservation Area | The Bloomsbury Conservation Area as a whole derives its special interest from its surviving early street pattern, which is laid out in a rectilinear pattern with straight streets leading to open squares, which are often landscaped. The dominant architectural form is the townhouse, with some earlier 17th and 18th century examples surviving alongside later 19th century properties, though a large proportion have been adapted during the 20th century for office or other uses. The Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal states that "The British Museum is a cultural institution of international importance, occupying a major ensemble of outstanding Grade I listed buildings which make a significant contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area as a whole". It recognises that the principal entrance is located south of the site aligning Great Russell Street, with a secondary frontage along Montague Place.

Relevant planning history

There is an extensive planning history relating to The British Museum, spanning many years. In relation to the West and East Residences Staircases, an exchange of letters was prepared and submitted to LB Camden on the 26th March 2021 to agree a set of early investigative works to the East Residence Stairs (Staircase 6). These investigative works and reports helped inform the proposed repairs which were the subject of a subsequent exchange of letters in January 2023 - this confirmed that the proposed works would not require planning permission and could be covered under a Listed Building Consent application. This application was submitted and approved in April 2023 (ref. 2023/0680/L). Due to

the need for further investigative work on Stair 03 to inform the required repair works, Stair 03 was omitted from that application and it was agreed this would be the subject of a further Listed Building Consent application in due course.

This application seeks Listed Building Consent for repair works to Staircase 03.

The proposals

Summary of proposals

The British Museum is proposing to carry out urgent repair, conservation and maintenance works to an external staircase, Staircase 03, at the West Residence. This staircase is in view of the public from within the entrance court to the Museum. (NB. Eight further staircases - Stairs 02, 04, 06, 08, 09, leading to principal West and East Residence building entrances at Level 2, and Stairs 01, 05, 07, which are secondary stairs giving access down into basement level lightwells – have been granted Listed Building Consent via an earlier application (ref 2023/0680/L)).

Need for repair works

Stair 3 is suffering from ongoing and, in places, severe damage to both masonry and ironwork caused by weather exposure and this is causing safety issues with steps. The proposals for Staircase 03 have been drawn up after a full and detailed visual inspection both externally from above and internally from below (see the submitted *Schedule of Repair Works* for further detail).

Staircase 03 is a secondary stair giving access down into basement level lightwells either side of the principal entrance stairs to the West Residence. It is the only secondary stair remaining with its original stone construction. The stone steps and landing have been topped in recent decades with a cementitious mortar/render material which is now failing and uneven. A cementitious render has also been applied to the soffit of the stair landing. This is welded to the stone and shows no sign of failure.

The wrought iron handrail is becoming detached from the stone landing and treads and the feet of several of the railings are proud of the surface and severely corroded, leaving it unsafe. There are also concerns about the safety of the cantilevered stone landing which has degraded, cracked and is in poor condition. Conservation repair work is being planned for this stair in order to conserve and retain as much of the original stone material as possible. Exploration works have been carried out to understand the full extent of existing stone that it will be possible to retain.

Schedule of works

The proposed works are as follows:

- Retention of the existing York stone treads and landings;
- New York stone veneers tiled to the top and bedded on a lime mortar base (to regularise the different heights). The stone tile thicknesses will vary between 30mm and 40mm. The treads will be completed in a single unit while the landing, due to its size, will be tiled in 4 rows;
- Removal of the wrought iron handrail and caulking;
- Removal of the balustrade as a single unit, and cleaning and repair of the same (treatment with rust inhibitor and decoration);
- Swan neck bases to the balustrade to be repaired or replaced with new sections to the same profile;
- Extension of the end of each balustrade with new rods between 10mm and 15mm (to ensure its bedding into the original stones will be the same as the original and allow for the losses of stone surface).
- Original pockets in the stone landing and treads to be deepened to accommodate the balustrade;
- Replacement of the repaired balustrade;
- Stone indent repairs to the base tread and removal of the cementitious mortar;
- Installation of additional support to the landing stone by three precast concrete lintels supported on brick piers built up under the landing slab either side of the existing doorway.

Planning framework and assessment

The policies within The National Planning Policy Framework 2021 (NPPF) including the Planning Practice Guidance 2021 (PPG) form a material consideration in the determination of this application. The Development Plan is formed of the GLA's London Plan 2021, and the Camden Local Plan is comprised of: The Camden Local Plan July 2017; the Site Allocations Plan September 2013; and the Policies Map (updated version)

August 2021. These documents are supported by Camden’s Planning Guidance Note on Design and the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal 2011. Historic England Temporary Structures in Historic Places 2010 also provides a useful reference.

Key planning issues

The Museum is not proposing new structures, and no new floorspace is proposed. The proposal is considered a minor development which will not trigger the need for environmental provisions. There are also no amenity considerations associated with the proposals. Therefore, in this case, the primary planning issue relates to the impact of the repair works on the significance of the heritage asset. This is considered further against the planning policy context below.

Design and heritage considerations

Policy summary | Section 16 of the NPPF requires heritage assets to be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance. Paragraph 197 confirms that local planning authorities should take account of the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation. Paragraph 199 states that, when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). Paragraph 202 confirms that, where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.

London Plan Policy HC1 (Heritage Conservation and Growth) requires development proposals affecting heritage assets, and their settings, to conserve their significance by being sympathetic to the assets’ significance and appreciation within their surroundings.

The LBC planning policies most relevant to the consideration of the works presented as part of this application include D1 (Design) and D2 (Heritage). LBC Policy D1 seeks to secure high quality design in development, including that which preserves or enhances the historic environment and heritage assets in accordance with Policy D2. Policy D2 reflects the aims of the NPPF. Developments that propose less than substantial harm are required to be convincingly outweighed by the public benefits of the proposed works. Development should also preserve or enhance the historic environment and heritage assets. LBC will resist development that would cause harm to significance of a listed building through an effect on its setting.

Historic England’s Conservation Principles provide guidance on the repair of older buildings. The document notes that repair necessary to sustain the heritage values of a significant place is normally desirable if there is sufficient information comprehensively to understand the impacts of the proposals on the significance of the place and the proposals are designed to avoid or minimise harm, if actions necessary to sustain particular heritage values tend to conflict. Paragraph 118 notes that while sufficient work should be undertaken to achieve a lasting repair, the extent of the repair should normally be limited to what is reasonably necessary to make failing elements sound and capable of continuing to fulfil their intended functions.

Assessment | The Museum’s Bloomsbury estate includes two Grade I listed buildings of international significance and other Grade II* and Grade II structures (including the gates and railings and lampposts). It is also set within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. Other listed buildings are in the vicinity, on Great Russell Street and Montague Place. The East and West Residences form part of the key approach to The British Museum and are acknowledged to be important to the wider setting and collection of heritage assets. However, the Museum’s overall special historic interest can also be attributed to the significance of its collection and the considerable social value attributed to its use as a museum containing of some of the world’s most valuable and coveted collection of ancient artefacts.

The CMP identifies the front composition of the Residences as highly significant – this will include the stairs that form part of the frontages. Where possible, the CMP recommends surviving features should be retained and conserved. It is understood that Staircase 03 is the only front stair with its original stone construction and will therefore hold some significance. Therefore, the approach to these works has been to ensure as much surviving original construction is retained and conserved as possible. Original ironwork railings and gates are retained, repaired and redecorated.

The three new concrete lintels at Staircase 03 have been proposed for structural stability and safety. The lintels will generally not be visible from the Forecourt of the Museum or the street frontage, as it is located underneath the stair landing and facing onto the back of the Level 1 lightwell. The concrete is being offered up from below to support the existing stone landing and this installation is substantially reversible without significant damage to adjacent construction. In order to maintain the integrity of the original brickwork, the new brick piers supporting the lintels are tied to the original structure through resin ties in the brick joint positions. The installation is also fully reversible.

The works will affect high significance areas of the British Museum, but it is not considered that the works will cause harm to the significance of these areas as the works are conservation repair works which will retain original fabric and ensure the continuity of existing appearance together with the longevity and safety of the stairs. There will be no change to the external appearance or arrangement of these elements and nor will it affect the significance of the listed building or Conservation Area. This assessment is confirmed in the submitted Heritage Statement prepared by Dannatt Johnson Architects. As the proposals will not cause harm to the significance of the building, it is considered that the restoration and conservation of the stairs fully accords with Policy D2 of the LBC Local Plan

Summary

The proposals have been drawn up after a full and detailed visual inspection of all of the stairs both externally from above and internally from below. The findings are captured in the Schedule of Repair Works submitted in support of this application. The submitted Heritage Statement concludes that although the works will affect high significance areas of the British Museum, they will not cause harm to that significance.

The proposals are, therefore, considered to meet the requirements of the relevant London Plan and LBC Policies, alongside other material considerations within the NPPF. The proposal will support the care and display of the collection and improve the overall function of the Museum, which in turn will help it meet its objectives and maintain its international reputation, meet the objectives of Policies D1 and D2, and thus continue to enhance its status and significance.

If you have any questions, please contact Vicky Cartwright or Henry Brown on 020 7257 2363 or email henry@theplanninglab.com.

Yours sincerely,

The Planning Lab