

## HERITAGE STATEMENT

Philips Building  
SOAS University of London



August 2024

## INTRODUCTION

This Heritage Statement has been prepared by Neville Bruton Design on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), to support an application for listed building consent for the replacement of interior office/teaching room doors within the Grade II\* Philips Building, SOAS University of London, Thornhaugh Street, London, WC1H 0XG..

It should be read in conjunction with other application documentation.

Points of reference:

- English Heritage 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance' 2008
- Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990
- National Planning Policy Framework 2021
- Camden Core Strategy 2010-2025 'Policy CS14 – Promoting high quality places and conserving our heritage
- Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy – Adopted 18 April 2011

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSED WORKS

The proposals relate to the interior refurbishment of main circulation corridor areas on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floors of the Philips Building, comprising:

- The replacement of interior office/teaching room doors and associated ironmongery within the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> floor corridor areas

It is generally accepted that the best way of securing the upkeep of historic and listed buildings is to keep them in active and economically viable use. SOAS are committed to the preservation of its listed assets. The challenge is to design and specify a scheme which respects the integrity and maintains the preservation of the building.

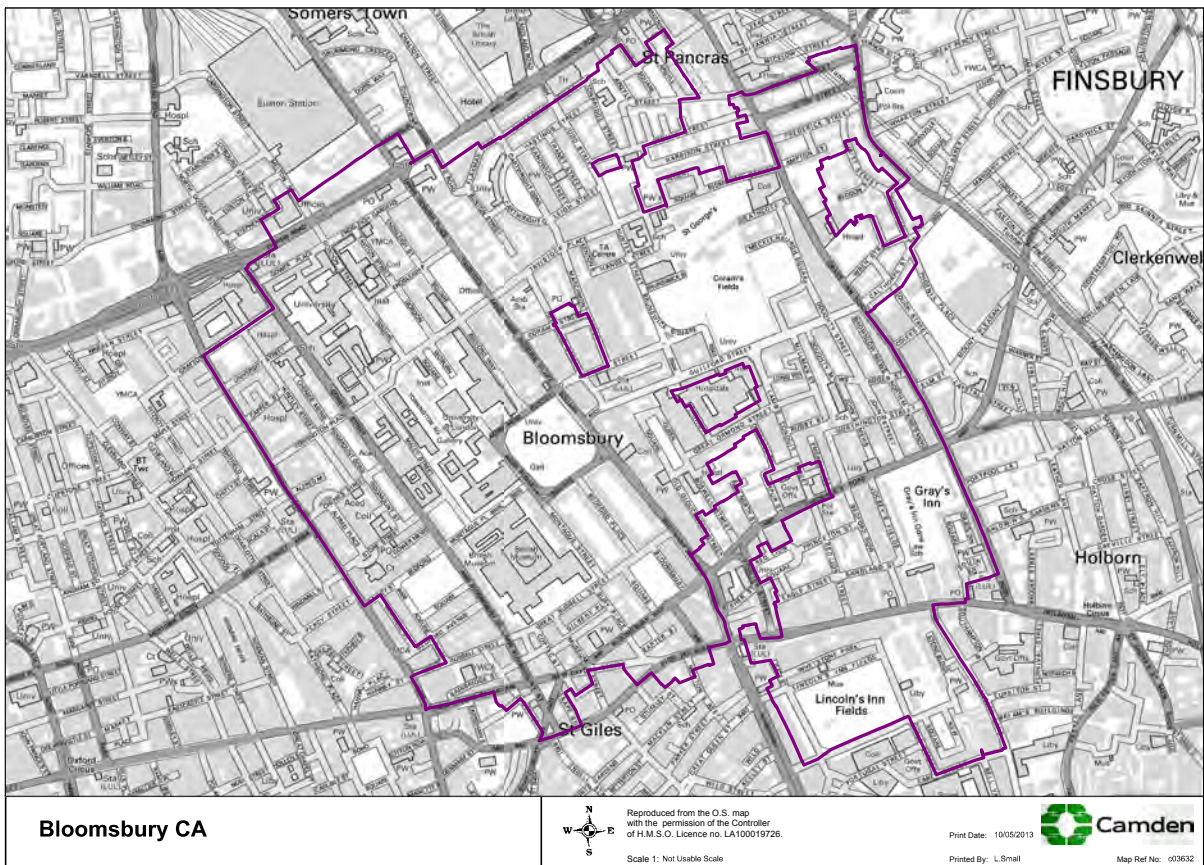
The proposals do not seek to increase the building's area or introduce significant changes in design or material finish.

The proposed works are described in detail within the accompanying Design and Access Statement.

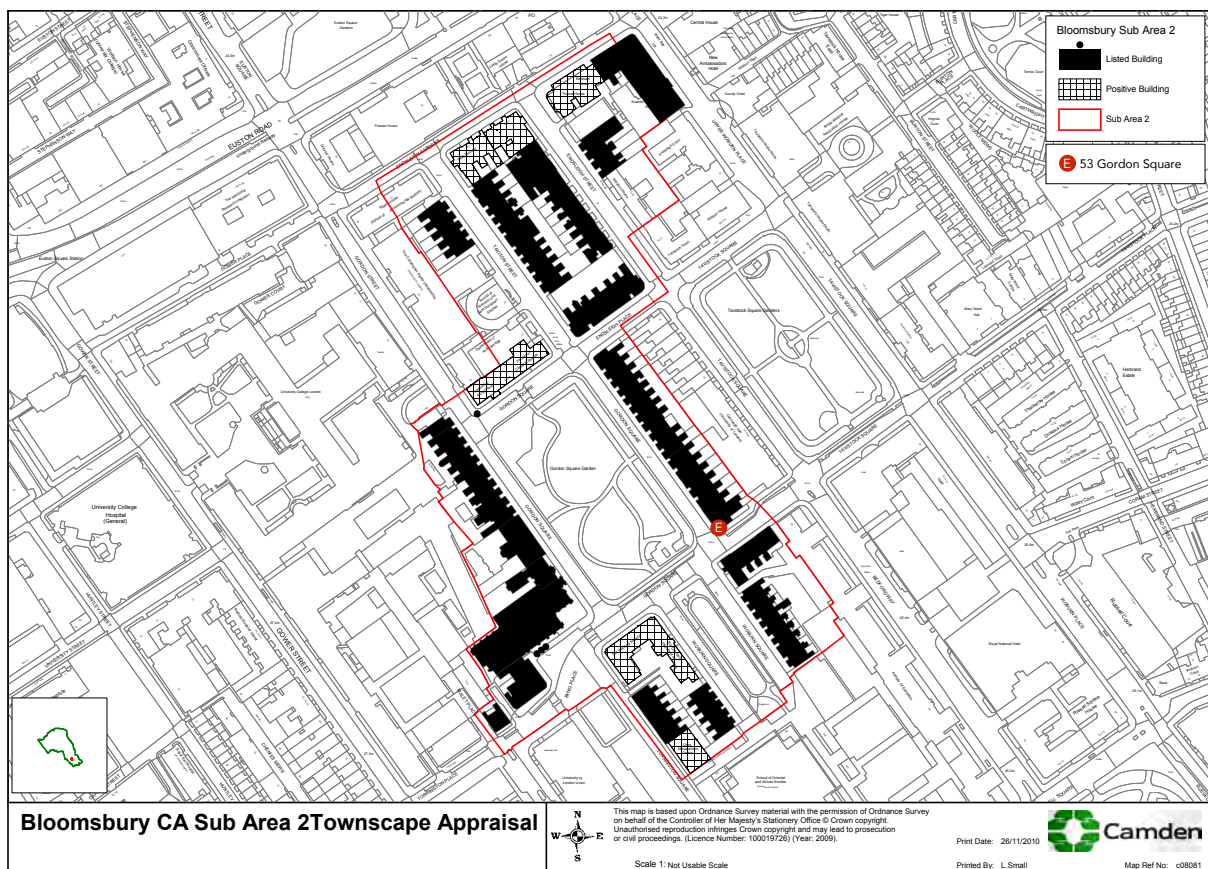
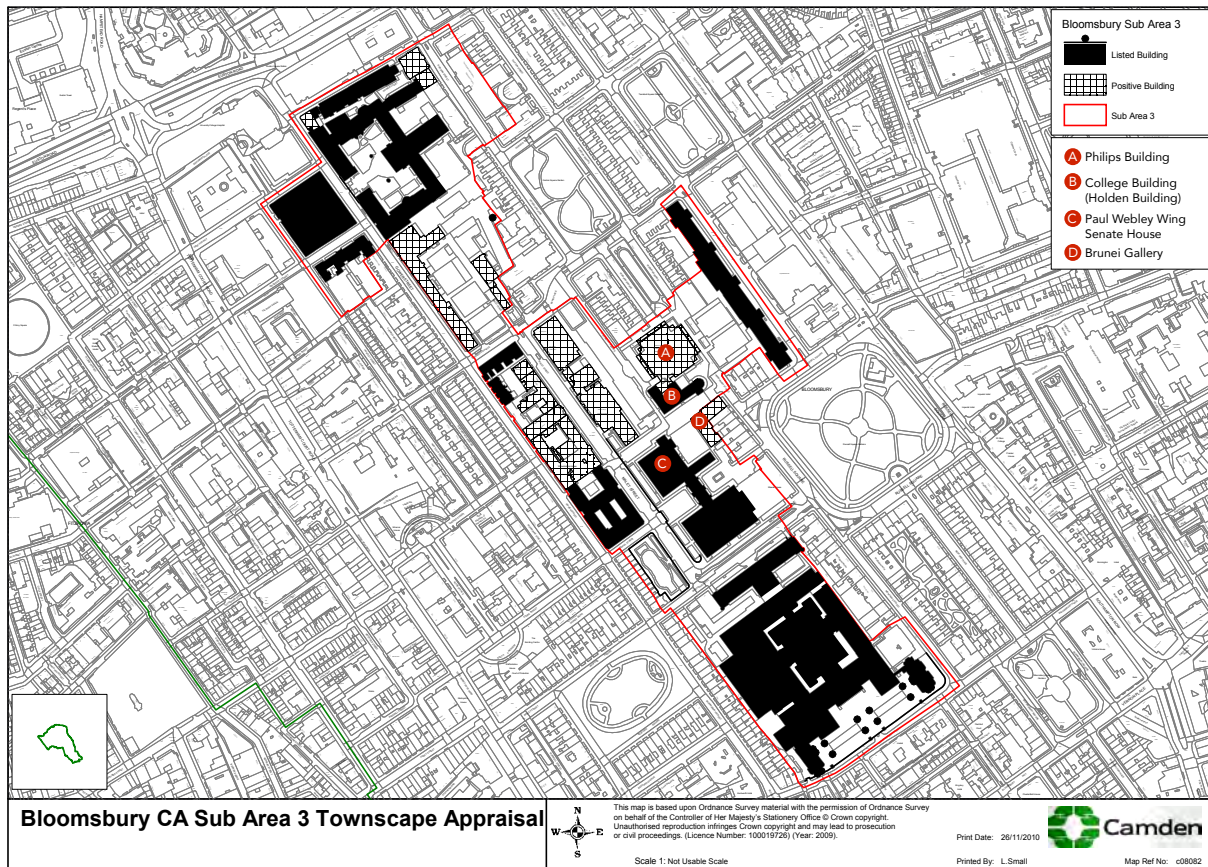
## BACKGROUND

The Grade II\* Philips Building forms part of the SOAS central London campus, associated to the University of London and includes, the (Holden Building) College Building (Grade II), the Brunei Gallery, the Paul Webley Wing of Senate House (Grade II\*), which sit within Sub Area 3 of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and 53 Gordon Square (Grade II), which sits within Sub Area 2 of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.









Sub Area 3 is dominated by large-scale institutional buildings. To the north of the area is the University of London precinct and its associated colleges and faculties. To the south is the British Museum which occupies almost the entire street block north of Great Russell Street and south of Montague Place. As well as some exemplary 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, there are several examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture of international repute. The original street pattern is retained in most part, but 20<sup>th</sup> century development has involved the loss of some earlier, small-scale domestic terraces. In most cases, later buildings maintain and define street frontages, despite their larger scale and increased bulk and mass. There are a series of pedestrianised spaces and courtyards of varying scales between the buildings giving a quieter but nonetheless active campus atmosphere contrasting with the busy streets.

The School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) building addresses Torrington Square and the wide east-west, tree lined thoroughfare which links Malet Street to Thornhaugh Street. The original Building was designed in the late 1930s by Charles Holden as a continuation of his work for the university; however World War II interrupted construction so it was not completed until the 1950s. The SOAS building is grade II listed and forms the northern frontage to the thoroughfare together with the southern end of the Birkbeck College. They share a palette of materials (pale red brick with stone banding), together with building heights and the rhythm of vertically proportioned windows. The curved semi-circular east end of the block, which signals the entrance to the university precinct from Thornhaugh Street, is a distinct streamlined feature reminiscent of the architecture of Holden's famous London Underground stations. A lightweight infill extension was successfully inserted in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to the immediate north of this wing, designed by John McAslan and Partners. The northern side of Senate House forms the southern edge of this route and is of similar scale and height. To the east of Senate House, there is a grassed area that presents an opportunity to complete the frontage to this route, as a contextual response to the surrounding listed buildings. The Brunei Gallery, by Nicholas Hare Architects, which turns the corner into Thornhaugh Street, is a high quality 1990s building which encloses the eastern end of the pedestrian link and successfully continues the terraced frontage to Russell Square.

The rear library extension to SOAS known as the Philips Building, and the Institute of Education (grade II listed) are seen as a group in views from Torrington Square, Woburn Square and Thornhaugh Street. Both by Denys Lasdun, they share a common vocabulary derived from postwar British Brutalist architecture: stark concrete, strongly modelled structures with horizontal glazing, and distinct sculptural forms including vertical circulation towers. While radical interventions in the Bloomsbury townscape, the Lasdun buildings are now part of the established character of the Conservation area. The open spaces to the rear of the building provide a green link between Woburn Square and Thornhaugh Street.

Source: Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy – Adopted 18 April 2011



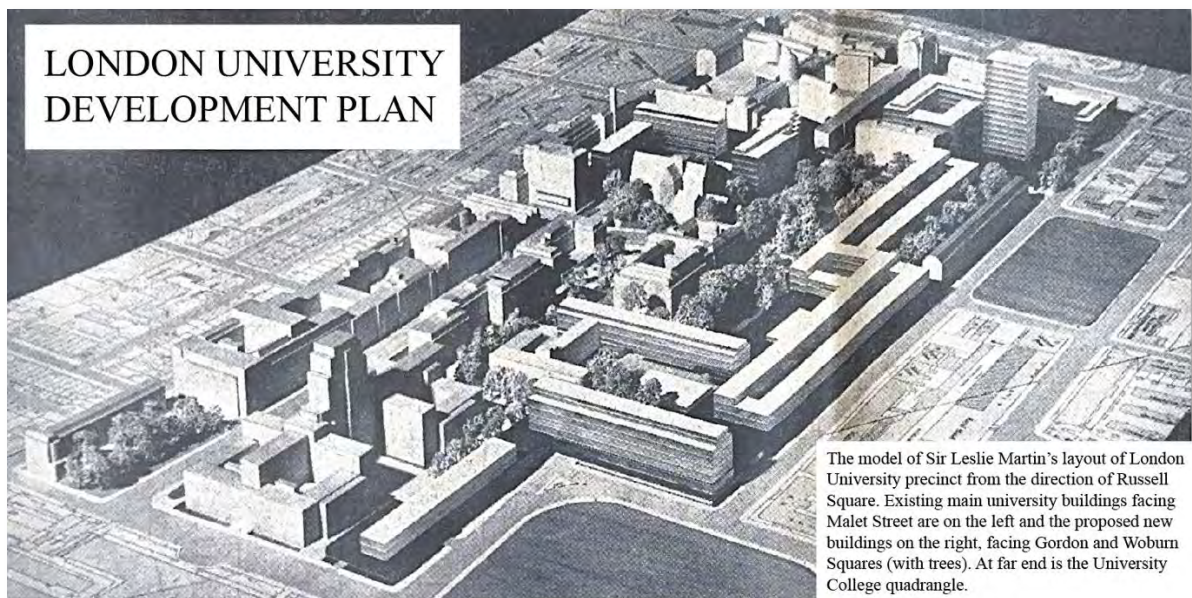
## SUMMARY OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The following provides a summary of the historical development of the site

Source: Heritage England

The Denys Lasdun Philips Building was commissioned in 1960, full planning was granted in 1968, with the construction contract beginning in 1970, The building was completed in May 1973.

The Philips Building at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) has its origins in the London University spinal development plan of 1959, devised by the renowned LCC architects Sir Leslie Martin and Trevor Dannatt. It was Martin who recommended Denys Lasdun (1914-2002) as the architect for the new buildings at SOAS which were to form part of the development of the central area of the University's Bloomsbury site. The University had moved its principal headquarters (at Charles Holden's iconic Senate House, now designated Grade II\*) and some of the smaller institutes, such as SOAS, to Bloomsbury in the 1930s although the war prevented implementation of the ambitious (and forbidding) masterplan that would have marched a linear spine of buildings north through Bloomsbury.



The Times February 26, 1959

SOAS was established in Finsbury Circus in order to train people working in Asia and Africa, and it received its London University Charter in 1913. Its original building was housed in the building of 1940, purpose-built also by Holden to hold what was by then a well-established school. This building was designated at Grade II just 29 years after it was built.

Lasdun accepted the commission for the SOAS library in 1960 and full planning approval was granted in 1968. The chosen site, to the north of the Holden building (College Building), infringed on the small but well-formed Woburn Square. This prompted a conservation fight of the type emerging in London at this time. It was long enough after the war for Londoners to have views on what should be preserved in the face of new building, and students, faculty and local residents protested the demolition of the increasingly appreciated Georgian town houses. A London University Special Committee narrowly rejected the calls to preserve the

square and demolition began in July 1969. The building contract officially began in January 1970 and was completed in May 1973.

Lasdun's design changed the concept that Martin and Dannatt had promoted in their master plan for the site. This resulted from his brief to create more pedestrian areas, as well as being a response to the truncated nature of the scheme when financial and conservation issues emerged. He implemented the envisioned dominant 'spine' in his impressive Institute of Education (to the east along Bedford Way, and designated Grade II\*) and instead turned the library into a distinct 'pavilion' that formed part of a new pedestrianised square. The library was designed at about the same time as the library in his major scheme for the University of East Anglia (UEA).



Woburn Square pre demolition 1969

Denys Lasdun is one of the most distinctive and creative of post-war architects. He is one of the few to have begun practicing before WWII, when he worked for Wells Coates, and after a distinguished military service he joined Lubetkin and Tecton, and Fry and Drew, before establishing his own practice in 1960 when his own style emerged. This was a synthesis of 1930's modernism with a strong horizontality derived from Frank Lloyd Wright (whose planning he came to admire in the 1950s) and an interest in expressing services that makes for comparison with another American architect, Louis Kahn. Perhaps of all British architects, Lasdun's work best demonstrates the cool, four-square and intellectually rigorous qualities of Kahn's work. Most of Lasdun's surviving buildings in England are now designated, many at high grades, such as the Royal College of Physicians at Grade I, and the nearby London University Institute of Education, the UEA Ziggurats, Keeling House and the National Theatre at Grade II\*.





Construction 1972



The Library Building (Philips Building) April 1974



## BUILDING DETAILS

### Materials

A reinforced concrete frame of in situ concrete and interlocking structural pre-cast concrete panels with a white cement and Ballidon limestone aggregate mix, with a grit-blasted finish. The windows are mostly horizontal sliding sashes with aluminium and bronze anodised finish, set back from the precast panels.

### Exterior

The Philips Building closes the southern end of Woburn Square, and the leafy trees and late-Georgian terraces were intended to be glimpsed from the building. It is essentially a library, built to house its collection of then half a million books (now grown to over a million), also with teaching rooms and offices. The eight-storey building does not have its own external ceremonial entrance, which was always through the listed Holden block. The roofs are flat, with a series of diagonally-arranged north-facing roof lights, hidden from the outside. The central library dominates and projects on three floors with a set-back range of academic offices and classrooms (totalling 220 separate rooms) above. Each of the facades of this square, pavilion-plan building has nine bays and there are set-back corners on the four lower storeys. The ground floor formerly had projecting balconies, or terraces, but these were glazed in on the north and east elevations around 2007 (also by John McAslan and Partners, and apparently with the blessing of Lasdun, before he died). A service moat around the building provides light to the basement levels and a delivery entrance on the west side.

### Interior

The set piece is the central, top-lit library. This features three levels of concrete-fronted balconies and natural light comes in through a diagonally-set grid of slender concrete ceiling beams. On the lower floors, rooms lead off to provide study and tutorial space within the library, and computer areas to which the centre of the lower level is now dedicated. Reading areas extend into the former terraces, which are now part of the library's interior, and include a mezzanine level divided by concrete fins. There are other concrete partitions within the stacks that frame openings while supporting the floors. Two original concrete book counters survive: the book issue counter on the lower level of the library, and the book return counter, now isolated in a room on the ground floor. The original model for the building is housed in a case in the basement. The main, full-height library stair has a concrete parapet with metal tubular hand rail. The concrete here, and in the main stair outside the library, which is nestled into a concrete service core, has a fair-faced horizontal close boarded finish. A further stair from the ground floor down was added near the lifts by John McAslan and Partners around 2000. The upper corridors, which wrap around the central library, largely retain the simple grooved timber doors and architraves and some original cork floors. The original arrangement with a window at the end of each corridor largely remains, although some temporary rooms have been added to these spaces, blocking off the light and the view. The toilets were refurbished in 2009. There is a lecture hall with slatted wooden wall covering on the lower ground floor.

SOURCES: The Architects' Journal, (14 June 1967) 'New Buildings for London University, Bloomsbury', The Architectural Review, (March 1980) Cherry, B, Pevsner, N, Buildings of England, London 4, North (1999), 274-8.