

233 Shaftesbury Avenue

Conservation Assessment

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1.0 Scope

- 1.1 This assessment has been prepared to support planning application and listed building consent principally for works to the interior of the building.
- 1.2 The assessment has been carried out by Anthony Walker who has extensive experience of building conservation, particularly in the London Borough of Camden. He has a postgraduate qualification in building conservation, is on the register of Architects Accredited in Building Conservation, and lectures and has published papers on Building Conservation in the UK and America.
- 1.3 The assessment is based on an inspection of the building carried out in August 2010, and a desktop study of relevant documents including the draft Bloomsbury Conservation Area Statement, the listing description, Pevsner's 'Buildings of England' and relevant statutory documents such as Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5), archive material held at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the records of the Camden Planning office.
- 1.4 The proposed works have been reviewed and an assessment made of their impact on the conservation interest and significance of the building.

2.0 Location and setting

- 2.1 The building, which is listed grade II, is located on the edge of the Bloomsbury Conservation area, near the intersection of Shaftesbury Avenue and St Giles High Street, facing on to a small triangular space known as Prince's Circus. It is on the western side of this space and south of the Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.
- 2.2 It lies within Sub Area 8 of the Conservation Area draft which is named New Oxford Street/High Holborn/Southampton Row. The character of the area is described in 6.117 as '*principally comprised of areas of large scale, late 19th and early 20th century blocks fronting busy thoroughfares. Development followed the construction or widening of these roads and cut through earlier 17th and 18th century street pattern.*'
- 2.3 The location of the site is clearly described in paragraph 6.121 in which the most notable building in the area is said to be the adjoining church. The north side of the space is formed by a four/five storey block of varied character while the south-eastern side also consists of four and five storeys in ornate brick with stone dressings. To the south of 233 is a lower, four-storey brick building with pitched roofs and stone dressings. Inspection of the area confirms the varied appearance of the buildings and indeed Pevsner refers to the conjunction of 233 and the church as having the appearance of an Osbert Lancaster drawing. This does not detract from the significance of the buildings but underlines the diversity and variety which exists in the area and the fact that therein lies much of the interest.
- 2.4 The back of the building faces Dyott Street and a major new development which towers over it to the west.
- 2.5 The building is screened to a large degree from the north by the church and from the east by the trees in Prince's Circus. It can be seen over the buildings to the south and is clearly seen from Dyott Street to the west but is screened from longer distance views in that direction by the new development.

3.0 The building

- 3.1 The listing description refers to the building as being of a 'Neo Egyptian style, six storeys high and on the main frontage six bays wide of which one is a solid masonry face with triple slit windows at each floor, lighting the main staircase and lift'. There is a giant order of columns with decorative carving both surrounding features at ground level and to the cornice. Windows between the columns are in metal with metal spandrel panels below. The listing attributes the building to Leo Sylvester Sullivan while Pevsner states that it was known as Britannia House and is by Hobden and Porri. Both date it as 1929.
- 3.2 The result is a strong building which makes a positive contribution to the conservation area and contributes to the diversity of buildings there .
- 3.3 The back of the building is of a far more utilitarian design but not without some decorative details. The elevation is mainly a plain brick façade with independent window openings.
- 3.4 The plan form is a simple U shape with a light well on the northern boundary. This is very small at the lower levels and increases in size with the southern face sloping back at the upper levels. There is a main staircase at the front of the building and a service stair at the back, both of which appear to be original. The remainder of the space is simply framed and was clearly intended to be capable of subdivision to suit the occupants' requirements.
- 3.5 The interior of the building is specifically noted in the listing description as not having been inspected. While in some cases this is stated to make it clear that there has been no consideration of the interior in this instance, with the absence of any special interior detail as set out below ,it is clear that the virtues for which it is listed lie within the main façade.
- 3.6 Inspection of the interior shows that there have been extensive alterations over the years including quite substantial changes prior to listing. As a result there is nothing of special value other than the general layout of the cores.
- 3.7 The main staircase has a terrazzo finish under the carpet tiles but, from a limited lifting of the tiles, it is apparent that there is no special interest or decorative scheme visible. The main floor areas are covered with carpet tiles, with some exposed areas of woodblock flooring. The woodblock is laid on a screed and where floor boxes have been inserted it appears that they must be serviced from below. The wood block floor may well be original but it could also be a later intervention since, apart from the damage probably caused by stiletto heels, it does not appear to be very worn other than where damaged by the insertion of the floor boxes and the application of a levelling screed which may indicate greater areas of wear which cannot be seen. It is understood that it is intended to retain this flooring in most areas, albeit covered with carpet.
- 3.8 There are suspended tile ceilings and bulkheads throughout and views through to the void show the original plain, plastered soffits with downstand beams. There is a maze of services and quite a lot of surface damage to the original finish which in itself appears to be of no particular interest.
- 3.9 Wall surfaces. There is a lot of boxing out and new partitions, none of which are of any interest. There appear to be no decorative features of interest.
- 3.10 The lavatories and kitchen areas are all later interventions and are of no interest or significance.
- 3.11 Joinery. There are several glazed doors to both staircases which may be original and, even if they are not, they have a coherent theme which would be worth protecting. The handrails to the staircases appear to be in reasonable condition – one is painted – and are worth retaining. There is a complete mix of skirting details, many providing surface-mounted service trunking, some in

modern, plain sections and some fragmented areas of moulded skirting, none of which is of any particular significance.

4.0 Significance

- 4.1 The Neo -Egyptian component of the Art Deco movement produced a number of very interesting buildings in London, some by leading architects and designers during the 20's and 30's. The Egyptian influence is particularly apparent from 1922 onwards, following the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter. Because this was also an important interior design movement, stimulated by the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels, there were some excellent interiors but they are more often seen in public buildings such as cinemas and hotels and were either given less scope or have been lost in commercial office buildings. One example of an excellent decorative exterior with little or no interior significance is the grade II listed Artillery House in Artillery Row, Victoria which, like number 233, has a grand column façade in this case with staircase towers at either end. It is noted in the listing that, like 233, the exterior is largely unchanged. Internally however, also like 233, it had been so much altered before the listing that the office spaces retain nothing of significance.
- 4.2 It has been noted that the building is attributed to two different architects, Leo Sylvester Sullivan and Arthur George Porri. It is beyond the scope of this assessment to determine which is the correct attribution but, since the designer and his oeuvre may be a significant consideration in listing a building, a short examination of both architects is considered to be of relevance here.
- 4.2.1 Leo Sylvester Sullivan was born in 1878 and started his architectural training in his home town of Hastings before joining Alfred Waterhouse as a junior assistant in 1896 and starting training at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. In 1907 he set up his own practice and was elected an Associate of the RIBA the following year. In 1909 he took on the role of Consulting Architect to the City of London Real Property Company and the City of London was to be his principle field of opportunity throughout his professional career. He died in 1964 and the obituaries referred to the artistry of his designs and '*the vertical emphasis which did much to counteract the limitations of narrow sites*'. Examination of the limited number of drawings in the V&A show that he was accustomed to working with existing buildings and indeed in his address to the RIBA on 30th May 1932 he referred to the difficulties clients had in assembling large sites in the City.
- 4.2.2 That address, entitled *City Office Building*, provides a useful insight into his understanding of the inherent requirements in this form of building. He clearly had a good understanding of the economics of development and also the role that the London Building Act had to play in the efficient design of buildings ranging from ways of getting round the ventilation of WC's to the restrictions imposed on the heights of buildings. He took the view that there were three types of office building ranging from the luxury of big business – which undoubtedly represented much of his City work – to the more mundane where the functional considerations of good light and sanitary accommodation were paramount. He recognised the need for flexibility in the interior where the tenant might have his own architect and could divide the space to suit his own needs. As for the exterior design he said '*.. I would have you disregard fashion and go your own way provided that your way is lit by knowledge, study and good manners.*'
- 4.2.3 Dr Susan Beattie of English Heritage wrote a paper in March 1987 in which she noted several of Sullivan's city buildings as demonstrating his oeuvre stating that '*Their facades are dominated by a grid pattern of peculiar simplicity and severity, formed, above ground storey, by a giant order of stone piers or shafts and the horizontals set up in the rows of deep metal aprons to the recessed windows.*' Dr Beattie noted the carving and modelling and that Sullivan had a great interest in the design of the interior including furniture and fittings. This no doubt paid dividends with his

'luxury' buildings designed for banks and institutions which, as he recognised in his paper, were often able to escape some of the restrictions of the London Building Acts.

- 4.2.4 Sullivan was clearly an important figure in his time and as an active member of the RIBA was well known to his contemporaries. He was very aware of the current trends, using contemporary buildings like Artillery House Victoria to illustrate his paper.
- 4.2.5 Arthur George Porri's life covered a very similar period: he was born in 1877 and died in 1962. He joined the office of R W Hobden, undergoing his training through correspondence courses and night school until he was finally invited to join Hobden in a partnership which lasted until about 1926. They specialised in industrial and commercial buildings including the Carreras cigarette factory in Camden Town, built 1928. Originally designed by Porri this was embellished by Marcus and Owen Collins who were responsible for the detailing.
- 4.2.6 Porri, in common with Sullivan, was very interested in achieving the maximum amount of window space and he often had to fight battles with District Surveyors to win his point of view. He was a great advocate of the use of reinforced concrete and had a great admiration for the Georgian period which influenced his work on interior decoration.
- 4.2.7 From examination of their other contemporary design work, the exterior of 233 appears to have more in common with that of Porri than of Sullivan. As far as the interior is concerned the lack of any existing comprehensive decorative scheme fits well with both architects' backgrounds. For Porri who was used to designing industrial interiors, the emphasis would be on the exterior as indeed it was with the contemporary building for Carreras, while for Sullivan this ties in with his views of functional interiors where flexibility was of the greatest importance.
- 4.3 It is apparent that this building has a good main façade which is important not only in its own right but as a component of the conservation area. Although there is some good external modelling there is not a comprehensive decorative scheme of a standard equal to that in some of the leading buildings of this period such as the BBC, the original Daily Telegraph building in Fleet Street or Artillery House and the Carreras building which have already been mentioned.
- 4.4 Internally there have been extensive alterations, including cutting away areas of the ground floor slab, the formation of a loading bay at one stage and regular changes to the partitioning of the space. Examination of the online planning records show that comprehensive renewal of finishes, including the provision of suspended ceilings and new sanitary accommodation was carried out during the last century with comprehensive changes to the subdivision of the space. From a visual inspection there is nothing which is significant and it is anticipated that a careful programme of opening-up will verify this.
- 4.3 There are many surface-run services internally which detract from the appearance, particularly of the service staircase and where these can be removed it would be a significant gain.
- 4.3 Externally there is a roof top trellis balustrade which is a later addition inappropriate in design and should be replaced. There are some cast iron gutters and downpipes for rainwater which should be retained or replaced like-for-like, but there is a miscellany of other exposed services which are of no value to the building and which could be removed or replaced in a more sympathetic way .
- 4.4 In summary, the significant elements of the building are the external facades with that to Shaftesbury Avenue being of far the greatest significance and that to Dyot Street of less significance. The Shaftesbury Avenue façade is strongly modelled with some good decorative work and reflects the interests of several designers of the period.

4.5 Internally there is little of interest. The layout plan of the staircases does reflect the planning currently being advocated for buildings of this type and is therefore of some interest but not of significance. There is no significant decorative scheme and the detailing of the handrail, the ironmongery and other elements is utilitarian.

5.0 The proposals

5.1 The proposals are described in detail in section 1.1 of the Design and Access Statement and are summarised here purely in relation to the conservation interest.

5.2 Externally the main facades are retained as existing with only repair and maintenance of the finishes proposed with the exception of the inclined façade on the south side of the internal lightwell which is a latter intervention, is not visible externally and is to be replaced following broadly the existing format. At roof level a new balustrade will replace the inappropriate trellis and a new key clamp handrail is proposed behind the main elevation, set back so that it will not be visible from below. It is understood that there may be some minor adjustments in the plant enclosure but that this will remain substantially in the current locations.

5.3 Internally the two main elements, the two staircases, will be retained together generally with the lavatory accommodation and woodblock flooring. The ceilings will be stripped back and replaced as will most of the non-loadbearing internal partitions, services and carpet finishes.

6.0 Assessment of the proposals

6.1 The proposals respect the elements of greatest significance in the building both externally and to the limited degree that this applies internally.

6.2 The repair and maintenance of the existing fabric is to be welcomed, as is the removal of the inappropriate trellis at the upper level.

6.3 The potential tidying up of the service runs, is to be welcomed.

6.4 The revisions to the layout of the interior of the building are consistent with the criteria for office buildings and their use as set out by Sullivan and as such respect the original objectives of the designers.

6.5 None of the proposals involve removal of any elements of significance in the building.

6.6 I consider therefore that the proposals reflect the objectives of PPS5, of the current UDP and Draft Conservation Area Statement and that they will enhance the listed building and ensure the retention of a positive feature in the Conservation Area.

Anthony Walker

6th September 2010