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To Whom It May Concern

31 Great Queen Street

Application for the partial Removal of Panelled Partitions on First Floor

I have been asked to write in support to the partial removal of partitions on the first floor of 31 Great Queen Street.

My Background

I am an architectural historian. I currently a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Architecture at the University of Cambridge and the Fellow and Director of Studies in Architecture and History of Art Queens' College. I am a member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. I served for many years on the Georgian Group Technical Panel and I am on the London DAC's architectural panel. I was until recently on the council of the Society of Architectural Historian of Great Britain and I am a qualified, registered and chartered architect. My PhD was in historic carpentry and my current research is in the history of building construction and I am chairman of the Construction History Society.

The Building

31 Great Queen Street was designed by E.R. Barrow and constructed in 1923-24 as offices for the Masonic Trust for Girls. It has an imposing classical façade which presumably accounts for its listed status and the interior was not inspected on listing. Internally it is wholly unremarkable. Indeed beyond the façade it is questionable whether this building should be listed at all. Barrow is not a particularly notable architect and the style of the building is not remarkable for the period. If anything it was rather conservative. Only the steel frame marks it out as a product of the 1920s. The steel frame allowed relatively open floor spaces, interrupted only by the staircase and lift shaft. Steel windows were installed on the flanking walls. Most of these have been replaced at various period since.

Apart from the entrance hall and the façade there is remarkably little of historical interest here and the spaces were mostly sub-divided and re-divided in a wholly utilitarian way to suit the variety of different office spaces required over the years.

The use of the building, as an office for the running of a charity, required nothing of typological interest in terms of building layout. Most of the work was clerical in nature, requiring a mixture of small offices, mostly on the upper floors, with larger floor areas accommodating more open plan arrangements on the first floor. As office technology changed so the rooms and partitions were changed in layout.

At the rear on the first floor more substantial offices were built for the chairman of the trust and for the board of trustees to meet. These are panelled rooms. There is no suggestion that these should be removed. The partitions which are subject of this application are on the first floor at the staircase end of the building.

The Partitions

I have had several hours to examine the partitions in considerable detail. The first floor was obviously sub-divided from the first with partitions. These were not full height, but rather low walls, extending just above head height. At a later date various glass and solid partitions were added above these to make enclosed spaces for meeting rooms and individual offices.

The entrance doors at the first floor level are fine pieces of joinery and in general match the panelling within. I do not think there is a question of changing these as they are a major part of the character of the interior of the building. Likewise the entrance doors should in my opinion be retained. Internally however the rest of the partitions are much less interesting.

The screen that faces the person entering has been substantially altered over the years and various patches have been added. It is doubtful any of the original glass remains. The partitions are wholly unremarkable in construction. The classical design is typical of Edwardian furnishing but it is not a particularly well-designed or well-built example of its type. Originally the whole floor was presumably sub-divided by this type of panelling but now only a small amount survives, sitting rather uncomfortably in the middle of the room. This element, a low level piece of partition is fixed to the ground but it is in essence furniture. The joinery is not particularly special and the colour comes from varnish and French polishing not from expensive woods. It could be relatively easily replicated by a competent cabinet maker or joiner today and was no doubt adjusted by several in the last few decades.

The Museum of London suggested it should be recorded and then could be demolished and I would support that judgement. It is clear that the partitions far from adding to the space now look positively odd, isolated within it and no longer serve any purpose. Their removal would be beneficial in opening up the room and allowing the viewer to enjoy its full proportions, while the existence of the door frames and panelling elsewhere preserves the character of the Edwardian interior. Furthermore as low level partitions it is questionable whether they are furniture and thus not covered by the listing rather than walls or fixtures. Of course it is true they are fixed to the floor, but they were never intended as wall, but rather as office dividers.

I would thus support the removal of the partitions in the centre of the room or if they are not removed then their substantial reconfiguration, so that they form a more useful and logical space than that at present.

I would stress again that if the purpose of architectural preservation is to preserve particular examples of fine workmanship or social spaces and usages then I can see no particular merit in retaining these features, as they are neither particularly fine examples of their type, nor are such things particularly rare (witness Edwardian banking screens), nor are there any lessons to be drawn from their position which could not be drawn from reference to the surviving plans, nor is there anything about their construction that could not be construed from record photographs. Moreover their removal is reversible because all the mouldings and elements were machine made and can easily be replicated (indeed they will have to be, to replace missing pieces if they are to be retained).

Thus the removal of the central free-standing partitions is reversible and does not materially affect the character of the space. I can see no benefit in storing them for future reassembly as I cannot conceive of any reason why anyone would ever consider re-erecting them nor of a reason why anyone would be interested in examining them for research purposes as historical artefacts.

Accepting however that the building is listed, I can see an argument for retaining the other partitions along the side walls, that form separate meeting rooms and offices, as their removal will not greatly enhance the character of the space while their presence does affect its character.

However there is, I agree nothing particularly important about them either so they might equally be removed. As an architectural historian, I would not have strong feelings either way.

I do think, without question, that if this building is listed, the entrance doorway and the panelling in the boardroom and the ceilings must be retained in situ, but there is no suggestion in the current proposal that they be removed.

In conclusion I am writing in support of the current application for the reasons noted above. I would be happy to discuss any of my comments at any time and I can be contacted via the Faculty at the above address or on my mobile (0781 33 22 639) at any time.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Campbell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Dr James W.P. Campbell MA DipArch PhD IHBC FSA
University Senior Lecturer in Architecture