

Address:	Round Reading Room British Museum Great Russell Street London WC1B 3DG	
Application Number:	2006/3731/L	Officer: Victoria Fowlis
Ward:	Bloomsbury	Case File:
Date Received: 09/08/2006 Proposal: Erection of a temporary stage within the Round Reading Room, and the opening of the Reading Room North door in order to provide a temporary exhibition space. Drawing Numbers: Site Location Plan 001; Drawing No. 230838 003; 006A Rev B; 006 Rev B; 007 Rev D; 002; Design Statement		
RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY: Grant listed building consent		
Applicant:	Agent: Purcell Miller Tritton The Clove Building Maguire Street London SE1 2NQ	

OFFICERS' REPORT

Reason for Referral to Committee:

Requested by Members at Memners' Briefing meeting to be decided at Committee

1. SITE

Grade I listed museum building situated on the north side of Great Russell Street within the Bloomsbury Conservation Area. The original portions of the building date from 1823-47 and were built to the designs of Robert Smirke. Constructed of Portland stone it was originally planned as a big quadrangle with an open central courtyard. The building consists of two principal storeys and adheres to the Greek Revival style in the most part. Various additions, most recent of which is the Norman Foster designed Great Court scheme which created a central glass covered space around the Sidney Smirke designed Reading Room dating 1852-57.

2. THE PROPOSAL

- 2.1 Listed building consent is sought for works of alteration to form a temporary exhibition gallery within the Round Reading Room.
- 2.2 The British Museum is planning a season of exhibitions exploring the nature of Empire in the East and West, and has secured an agreement with the Terracotta Army Museum in Xi'an in China to a significant loan of the famous "Terracotta Soldiers," made to protect the tomb of the first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang-Di. The season is intended to run from September 2007 – October 2008. The first exhibition will centre on the "First Emperor," the second on the Roman Emperor Hadrian.
- 2.3 The Museum's existing Temporary Exhibition Space, used most recently for the Michelangelo Drawings exhibition, is not considered to be of a sufficient size to support the number of exhibits or anticipated visitor numbers. As such it is proposed that the Imperial exhibition season be accommodated elsewhere in the Museum. Various options have been explored, including using some of the permanent exhibition galleries. This was not considered to be feasible as it would involve taking a significant portion of the permanent collection off public display. This has led the museum to consider the temporary use of the Sidney Smirke Round Reading Room, and listed building consent is now sought for alterations to this space to this end.
- 2.4 Comments have been raised regarding the precedent that the proposal would set. The proposal is a temporary measure; the Museum have stated that the Round Reading Room is not suitable as a long term exhibition space as it lacks the required ancillary spaces for unloading / unpacking of exhibits, storage, preparation and workshop areas for staff working on the exhibition, and that therefore management of the space on a more permanent basis would be very problematic. The Museum are working on plans for the long-term provision of a suitable temporary exhibition gallery, but these will not be in place by 2007.

3. RELEVANT HISTORY

- 3.1 Lengthy planning history, none relevant to this application.
- The Round Reading Room**
- 3.2 The Round Reading Room was designed by Sidney Smirke and constructed in 1854 – 57. It remained in use as the main reading room of the British Library until 1997. It was restored during the Great Court project, and opened to the general visitor, whereas previously access had been limited to those with readers' tickets. It now houses the Hamlyn Library (on the ground floor), a general collection of reference books which are available for public consultation, and the Anthropological Library, which is located on the upper gallery floors and is not publicly accessible, the collection being used by Museum staff only.
- 3.3 The Round Reading Room is significant for its advanced use of iron technology, and retains its original seating arrangement and original furniture, which was built to Smirke's design. The desks are arranged radially, and are connected to the heating distribution system within the basement. Warm air is introduced into the

room via cast iron grilles at the ends of the desks. The basement below the reading room is constructed of radiating brick arches with a concrete skin above. It is known as the 'Spider.'

4. CONSULTATIONS

<i>Number of responses Received</i>		06
<i>Number in Support</i>		01
<i>Number of Objections</i>		04

Statutory Consultees

4.1 **English Heritage – direct as to the granting of listed building consent**, with conditions. (Letter dated 11.09.06, subject to Government Office for London authorisation.)

4.2 **Victorian Society – No Objection**

- on the basis that the works in the area would be reversible.
- Would oppose any attempt to use the Round Reading Room as an exhibition space on a more permanent basis.

The works proposed are entirely reversible. The use of the space on a more permanent basis would require separate consideration under a new listed building consent application, and this is not the Museum's plan for the space.

Conservation Area Advisory Committee

4.3 **Bloomsbury CAAC – comment** (letter dated 27.09.06)

- The Reading Room is a national institution of the highest importance – concerned at the fact that an application proposing a change if its use has been made.
- Consider it imperative that, if consent is granted, that such use is temporary and it is fully reinstated as the Reading Room. Believe the Council must only grant any consent on the condition that reinstatement commences no later than October 2008.

A change of use is not proposed – the Reading Room forms a part of the wider Museum function and as such no application for a change of use is required. It is the Museum's intention that the exhibition space be removed and the Reading Room be re-established after the proposed exhibition season finishes in 2008. This can be conditioned.

Site notice displayed. 3 comments received, as follows:

4.4 Bibliographical Society – object

- the proposal represents a significant change of use of an historic space of world architectural importance;
- are concerned that approval of the proposal would set a precedent which would lead to the eventual despoliation of one of the BM's finest architectural features;
- support the China exhibition project but believe it should be accommodated elsewhere in the Museum or at an alternative location.

No change of use is applied for. Change to the function of a historic space is not necessarily a reason for refusing listed building consent – many listed buildings function successfully in a way other than they were originally intended. One must assess the impact of the proposals on the effect on the special interest of the space. Whilst the proposal undoubtedly will change the character of the space, it represents a short-term intervention for a unique project which is beneficial to the Museum's function as a whole.

It is understood that the proposal represents a short-term solution to the Museum's lack of a appropriately-sized temporary exhibition gallery. Proposals for a long-term solution are currently being developed. In terms of precedent, the use of this space for this particular exhibition does not mean that such a proposal would be considered appropriate in the future, for a different exhibition. Each case must be taken on its merits.

4.5 Historic Libraries Forum – Object

- Temporary removal of access other than to the exhibition gallery would cause disruption to the proper use of the space;
- Danger that it would set a precedent to allow other undesirable developments to take place either on the Reading Room or in other historic library areas;
- A listed building of wide interest should not be taken out of use for purposes which are at odds with its proper function;
- If despite objection the listed building consent application is accepted the HLF would press strongly for such consent to be strictly time limited, and for firm guarantees to be given on the restoration of the reading Room and fittings to its previous state, along the lines proposed in the Conservation Plan.

The Reading Room's function as a study space will cease temporarily and this function, and the Hamlyn Library collection, which is publicly accessible, will be temporarily relocated elsewhere in the museum. The Anthropological library function is only accessible to Museum staff and curators and will not be affected.

The issue of precedent has been addressed above.

The Reading Room is not listed in its own right but as part of the British Museum as a whole. The change of use of this reading Room from a library to exhibition space is not at odds with the wider function of the Museum.

Appropriate conditions can be imposed on any listed building consent, and indeed are recommended here, to ensure that the Reading Room is put back to its former use and condition within a set time.

4.6 Objection from individual - letter dated 20.09.06

- The BM has always had a library integral to it - the Round Reading Room is a celebration and acknowledgement of this; it is placed at the centre of the museum quite deliberately and it is as much a symbol as the dome of St. Paul's. This will be lost for some two years under the present application. Express scepticism over this time factor - suspect that the "temporary gallery" will be used for more than the initial exhibition. Also certain that if this application is approved it will be used as a precedent for future applications and that the Reading Room will never again be used for its correct function.

- Has the Museum accepted the exhibition on the assumption that consent will be granted automatically? Does the museum have a Plan B if the application is not approved?

The issue of this being a short-term measure and the precedent which might be set has been addressed above.

The application document details the alternative options which have been explored by the Museum. The Grenville Library, Manuscript Saloon, Middle Room, Map Room and Egerton Room have been identified as a possible second choice location, though this would involve clearing three of these rooms of their current displays, including the Manuscripts Saloon which has recently been restored.

5. POLICIES

Set out below are the UDP policies that the proposals have primarily been assessed against, together with officers' view as to whether or not each policy listed has been complied with. However it should be noted that recommendations are based on assessment of the proposals against the development plan taken as a whole together with other material considerations.

Camden Unitary Development Plan 2006

5.1 B6 Listed Buildings

6. ASSESSMENT

6.1 The proposal raises a number of issues, in terms of the effect on the listed building, and also the Museum's function. These are:

- a) Physical alterations;
- b) The effect upon the character of the Round Reading Room and wider Museum;
- c) The relocation of the Hamlyn Library function.

a) Physical alterations

- 6.2 The option of removing the desks was explored and considered not to be feasible due to the risk of damage to the cast iron elements. The proposal therefore seeks to introduce a raised deck within the space, placed above the furniture, and which leaves the original furniture in place, and protected during the works. Two modern bookcases will be removed, and the 1960s bronze light fittings above the desks will be removed temporarily. All furniture left in place will be protected with foam and 18mm plywood cladding.
- 6.3 The deck will be placed approximately 1800mm above the existing floor level within the Reading Room. It will be supported on a column and spreader system which seeks to use the radial structure of the basement 'Spider' beneath to support the loading. No point loading will take place, to avoid puncturing the brick arches beneath. The plywood deck will then be laid on this framework.
- 6.4 The walls of the exhibition space will be fixed to the new floor structure and not to historic fabric. This will form a "drum" within the reading room, which is open at the top to allow visitors to appreciate the domed ceiling of the Round Reading Room. The height of the temporary walls will be no more than the height of the existing walls.

Environmental Control (M&E / lighting)

- 6.5 Some environmental control is required in order to provide comfortable conditions for the exhibition, in terms of air change, temperature and lighting. Sensitive objects will be displayed in controlled display cases. All air conditioning equipment will be located below the new floor, between the desks, and will be free-standing.
- 6.6 It will be necessary to adjust the lighting into the space for the duration of the exhibition, and it is proposed to apply a light-reduction film to the windows within the dome, which will be reversible and will be removed after the exhibitions end. Lighting to the exhibits will be contained within and attached to the temporary exhibition structure, not to the Round Reading Room fabric itself. The existing lighting within the Round Reading Room will otherwise remain unaffected.

Access / emergency egress

- 6.7 All four doorways of the existing reading room will be utilised during the exhibition. Primary access to the exhibitions will be via the east doorway, where the current Children's Shop is located. The Shop will be relocated during the exhibition. Visitors will then walk around the perimeter of the space and into the space via the south. Exit will be via the North doors, which will be re-opened (these are currently blocked due to the shop function). Mobility impaired visitors will access the space using the same route; platform lifts are to be in operation. The east and west doors will function as emergency exits.

Summary of the impact of the physical works on the retained fabric

- 6.8 The proposal has been designed to avoid any alteration to the historic fabric of the Round Reading Room. All original features will remain in situ and protected during the course of the exhibitions. The application of film to the upper windows will involve a minor change but this is completely reversible. As such the building's special interest in this regard is considered to be safeguarded. A number of conditions will be required on any consent, which fully detail the methodology behind the protective works, in order to ensure that no damage will occur to the retained fabric.

b) The Character of the Round Reading Room

- 6.9 The installation of the fabric to accommodate the temporary exhibition combined with the use of the Round Reading Room as an exhibition space rather than a library will undoubtedly change the character of this historic space during the course of the exhibition programme. Objections have been received on this basis.
- 6.10 The change in the function is entirely in keeping with the wider use of the Museum. However it is the Museum's intention that the function reverts to its original use as a library after the exhibitions close. In the long term, the character of the Round Reading Room will remain unaltered. It is considered that the benefits to the Museum, visitors and wider community outweighs any harm to the special interest of this particular part of the building.

C) The relocation of the Hamlyn Library

- 6.11 The Hamlyn Library is publicly accessible, and shall remain so during the course of the exhibitions. It is intended to temporarily relocate it to the former Reading Room (known as the "Middle Room") within the south wing, adjacent to the recently refurbished Manuscripts Saloon. This will ensure that the Library remains easily accessible and in a suitable environment (the Middle Room retains its historic bookshelves). The Hamlyn Library will return to the Round Reading Room when the exhibitions close.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Whilst the works will alter the look and feel of the Round Reading Room, they will not cause harm to the building's physical fabric. In this regard the proposal is considered to preserve the building's special architectural and historic interest.

In terms of the effect upon the character of the space, the proposal will undoubtedly alter this, but the proposed function is in keeping with the function and wider aims of the Museum. The visual effect upon the character of the space is a temporary intervention and, when assessed against the other benefits outlined above, is not considered to harm the building's special interest in this regard.

It is recommended that listed building consent be granted subject to conditions.

8. LEGAL COMMENTS

- 8.1 Members are referred to the note from the Legal Division at the start of the Agenda.

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