

ROUND READING ROOM - TEMPORARY EXHIBITION SPACE DESIGN STATEMENT FOR THE LISTED BUILDING APPLICATION

INTRODUCTION BY THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The British Museum is planning a season of two significant exhibitions exploring the nature of Imperial Power in the East and West, starting with Qin Shi Huang-Di who established the Chinese Empire and followed by an exhibition on the Roman Emperor Hadrian under whose reign the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent. Both exhibitions will draw extensively on extraordinary loan exhibits from abroad e.g. an unprecedented number of class 1 loan objects from the Terracotta Army Museum at Xi'an in China. The exhibition season will last from September 2007 to October 2008.

The Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, has signed an agreement with the Chinese authorities in the city of Xi'an to stage an exhibition on "The First Emperor of China" between September 2007 and April 2008. Qin Shi Huang-Di, the "First Emperor", unified China in 221BC effectively providing the framework for the modern state. He is perhaps best known for the army of terracotta warriors made to protect his tomb after his death. The British Museum has secured agreement that a significant number of the warriors and other Class 1 objects will be loaned to the Museum to form the central exhibits of the proposed "First Emperor" exhibition.

It is hoped that the exhibition will provide a "once in a lifetime" opportunity for many people in the United Kingdom to see these extraordinary life sized terracotta figures. The exhibition is part of an ongoing collaboration between the British Museum and the National Museum of China which has two British Museum touring exhibitions in China at present. The aim of the First Emperor exhibition is not only to show the terracotta army figures but to help the British public to understand the long history of China and to make more comprehensible its present condition and the possible directions it may take in the future.

As well as allowing many visitors to enjoy seeing these extraordinary objects, the museum will be organising a rich series of events and educational activities. In the case of the Qin Shi Huang-Di exhibition the events will be a springboard to encourage people to enrich their understanding of the emerging world power that China is today; visitors will be able to appreciate the rich history and culture of China, and consider them in the context of other cultures and of the world today; children in family or school groups will be able to learn something of a culture that is little taught today but of immense importance to the future. Adults will be able to reflect on notions of imperial political and economic power, and during the season as a whole look across eastern and western empires in a way that will serve to deepen an understanding of both the universality of imperial power on the one hand but also on the diversity of its expression in different places and different times. While it is hoped that the exhibition will be of interest to people all over the UK, there will be a particular opportunity for Londoners and indeed people in Camden; in the latter cases we hope to be able to build on some of the existing links with the Museum and use the season as a means of developing some of the links we hope to forge in the future.

Recent exhibitions at the Museum have been very popular. "Forgotten Empire: the world of ancient Persia" attracted 155,000 visitors and the most recent exhibition "Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master" attracted 161,000 – a record in recent years and the second most successful exhibition ever held at the Museum. Both these exhibitions have been held in the current Temporary Exhibition Gallery in the Museum's south west wing, a modest sized space that will permit a maximum of 190 visitors into an exhibition at any one time. The numbers of visitors able to appreciate the Michelangelo exhibition, which was a sell out, was limited by the space and the record numbers were achieved only by the use of strictly timed tickets and by extending opening hours throughout the run of the exhibition and in its last few days up to midnight. If the "First Emperor exhibition is held in this area the total visitor numbers are likely to be limited to something under 200,000 whatever measures are adopted to allow visitors in.

The British Museum has been working on a master plan for its future development which it hopes to publish by the end of the year. Very early discussions have already been held with Camden officials, English Heritage, and the Victorian Society, and the Museum's Director and Deputy Director have started briefing Camden councillors about some of the emerging ideas. The master plan has examined, amongst a host of other concerns, the possibilities for the long term provision of a world class temporary exhibition space. To take the biggest exhibitions this will need to be in excess of 1000 square metres (i.e. about three times the size of the current gallery in the south west wing). The possibilities considered for a long term solution to the problem posed by temporary exhibitions have ranged from a completely new gallery constructed on the Museum site to the adaption of an existing space within the Museum. The review of options is still being finalised.

The Museum's public programme places a high importance on the ability to be able to stage and host significant travelling exhibitions. It is part of the Museum's mission and essential to its ability to tell the story of world civilisation. Whilst a larger modern Special Exhibition space is an essential long term requirement it is clearly going to come far too late to stage the "First Emperor" exhibition next year.

After extensive consideration the Director and Trustees of the Museum have concluded that the only possible space that could be made currently available to them for staging this major exhibition in time is the Round Reading Room. The Trustees are, of course, acutely aware of the cultural, historic and architectural significance of the Round Reading Room and have only settled on its use as a result of a study that has shown that it will be possible to use the space temporarily in this manner with no damage (or permanent fixings) to any of the furniture, finishes or fittings. It is the clearly stated intention of the Trustees that the space should be used for a season of temporary exhibitions and then should be reinstated afterwards. The proposal is that the Room will be closed to the general public from March 2007 this will allow time for the proper protection, in situ, of all the built in furniture and fittings, the relocation of the Hamlyn Library and other functions, and for the erection of a temporary inserted lightweight floor over the reading desks and other furniture, the provision of screens and

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all necessary access. The Reading room will be fully reinstated after the second exhibition closes in October 2008 and will reopen as soon as possible thereafter (no later than February 2009). The proposal will create a clear floor space of just over 1100 square metres .

Significant pre-application consultation has been undertaken with statutory consultees and local amenity groups, these include; London Borough of Camden, English heritage, The Victorian Society, The Bloomsbury Association, Bloomsbury Improvement Group, and the Museum's Community Liaison Group, others have also been contacted. There is a broad understanding of the difficulties faced by the Museum in staging such exhibitions and support for the extraordinary opportunity that these exhibitions present to the visiting public.

By using the Round Reading Room in this way it is anticipated that it will be possible to allow up to 500,000 adults and children to see this extraordinary exhibition. This can be achieved without any significant disruption to the permanent exhibits and without inconveniencing the general Museum visitor. To achieve a similar amount of space elsewhere in the Museum it would be necessary as a first step to clear several of the major permanent galleries and to take a significant portion of the collection off public display, but even if this were done the requirements of the exhibition season would require similar interventions in other parts of the listed building; and even if that were possible, they would offer a less rewarding space for the visitor to experience and learn from the extraordinary objects that are coming.

The Round Reading Room is, of course, currently on display to all visitors to the British Museum. During the period of the exhibition the interior of the Room will only be visible to those visiting the exhibition.

The present use of the space is as a library with the upper shelving housing the Anthropological collection and the lower shelves housing the Hamlyn Library, a general collection of reference books which are available for consultation by all Museum users. During the exhibition the Hamlyn library will be re-housed in the original British Museum Reading Room which is currently an unused room in the south east wing where the library will continue to be accessible to the general public. The anthropological collection is not publicly accessible and will be left in position in its current shelving where it will remain accessible to the librarians and curators (via the existing cast iron galleries) throughout the whole period.

After what we hope will be a wonderful exhibition season the Museum will reinstate the Reading Room as it is now. The plans and procedures that are described later in this document provide a clear methodology and plan for ensuring that there will be no irreversible intervention into the Room and the current structure will be fully preserved.