

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

The proposal described in this document and shown on the attached drawings is intended to allow a season of temporary exhibitions to be mounted in the Round Reading Room. The British Museum's Conservation Plan identified the Round Reading Room as being a space of the highest significance in historic, architectural and cultural terms. The Room remains largely unaltered and the readers' desks, the catalogue tables, the librarians' desks and the book presses are all considered of high significance. The furniture was designed by Sydney Smirke for the space.

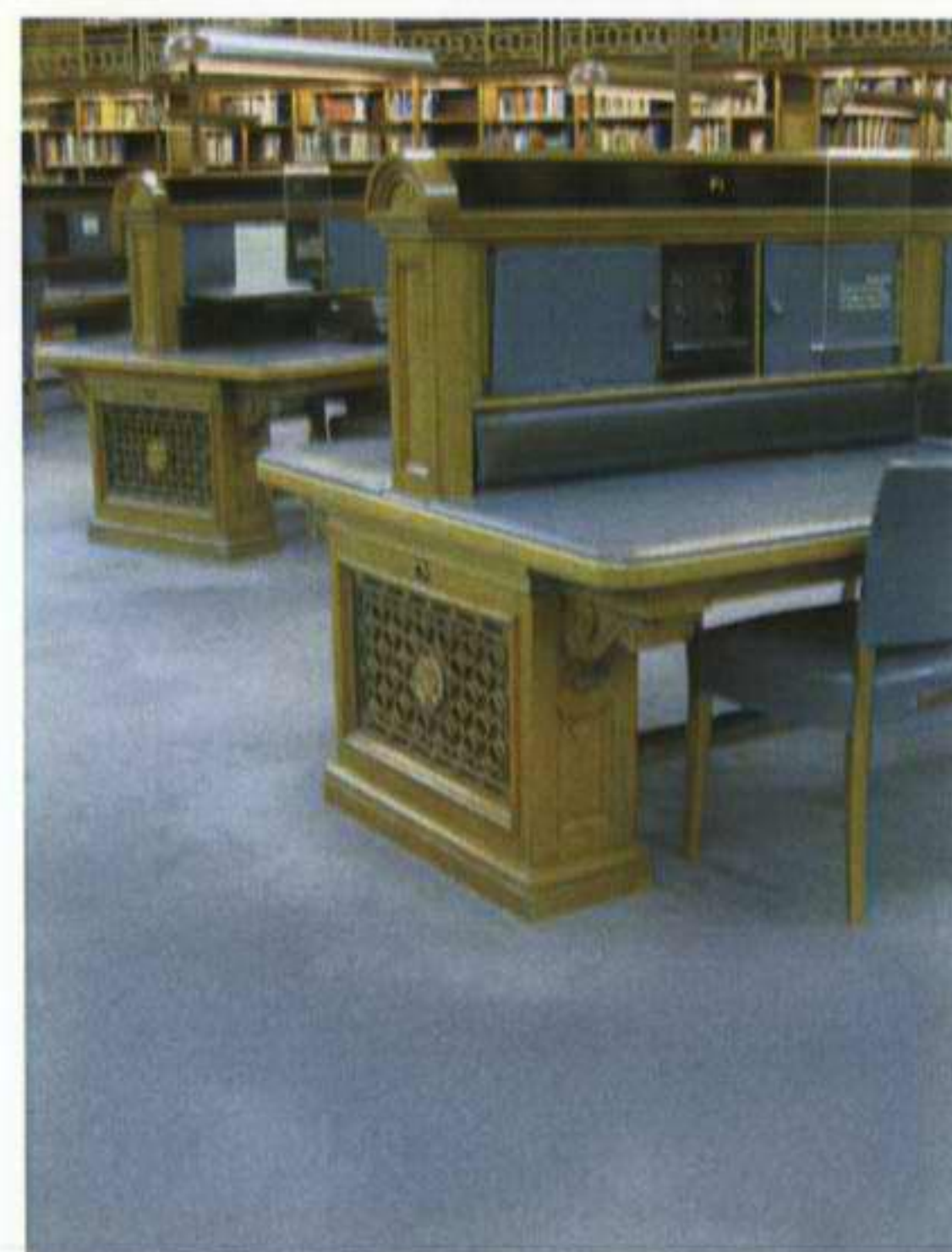
The challenge for the design team has been to find a way of mounting an exhibition in this space without any risk of damage to the furniture and finishes of the Room. The work must all be fully reversible with no attachments to the existing structure. There is no intention to make this a permanent temporary exhibition gallery.

The British Museum is currently preparing a Master Plan for the whole site and both the future of the Round Reading Room and the need for a permanent Temporary Exhibition Gallery are considered in the Master Plan. Nothing in these temporary proposals conflicts with the aspirations of the long term Master Plan.

The proposal, for which we are seeking listed building consent, provides a flat deck across the whole interior of the Round Reading Room. This will be entered by visitors through the existing east doors and will mean that the Children's Shop will be closed and the space will be used for managing the queue into the exhibition.

Access to the exhibition will be by new stairs on the south side of the room with an exit stair to the north. The existing north doors are currently blocked by shop units in the main Great Court shop. These doors will be unblocked and will be used as the final exit from the exhibition with the existing shop remaining in use, but being devoted specifically to the exhibition merchandise.

Secondary stairs will be put in to the east and west as fire escapes. There are, of course, already emergency exit doors in these positions. Access for visitors in wheelchairs or with poor mobility will be provided by four platform lifts, two by the south entrance stair and two at the north exit.



Typical reader's desk. End pedestal housed in cast iron duct

The proposed new floor will be entirely independent of the existing floor the soleplates simply resting on plywood protection with no physical connection. The suggested flank walls around the exhibition area which conceal the bookcases will be cantilevered off the floor construction and will have no fixings of any kind to the existing fabric. There is no ceiling over the exhibition area and the whole of the upper part of the Room of the dome remains on view to all visitors to the exhibition.

Constraints

There are a number of specific constraints on the way that the room can be used. These are considered in more detail below:

Furniture

The furniture in the Round Reading Room is part of Sydney Smirke's original design. The readers' desks are constructed around a cast iron framework. This both provides the structure of the desks and contains hot-air ducts from the air distribution system in the "spider" built into the basement.

The best method of safeguarding the Reader's desks has been considered at some length. The construction of the readers' desks has been looked at in detail by Tankerdale Joinery, specialists in the conservation of historic furniture. They concluded that removing the readers' desks from the Room would be extremely difficult with a potential for damage. The cast iron elements would have to be disassembled which could lead to breakage. The only sections of the desks that can be readily removed are the modern bronzed fluorescent light fittings. These were installed in the 1960's.

The decision was made that the least risk to the furniture is to protect it insitu and to put a new flat floor deck over the top of the furniture. By moving the modern light fittings (and storing them carefully inside the protective boxings) a platform can be put in at a finished height of approximately 1800mm above the present floor level.

All the fixed furniture will be left insitu with the exception of two modern bookcases at the north end of the 'librarians keyhole'. These will need to be removed to allow space for the exit stair. The furniture will be protected by covering all surfaces with a protective layer of ethafoam and then a cladding of 18mm thick plywood. The air ducts through the desks will continue to function so the desks will remain at ambient temperature.

DESIGN STATEMENT



Desk showing modern light to be removed.