

Donald Insall Associates

Senate House North Block

Historic Building Report Addendum
for Mace

November 2015

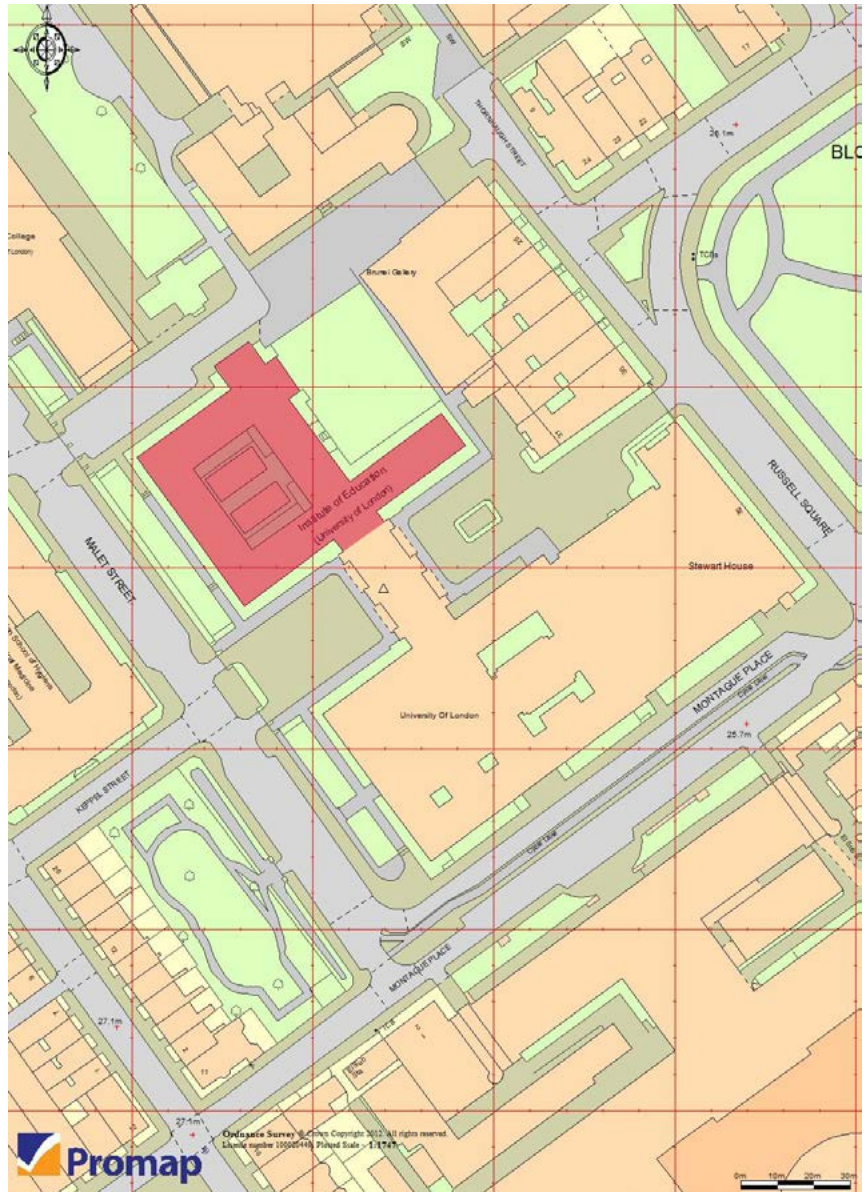


Chartered Architects and Historic Building Consultants

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Ordnance Survey map with the site marked in red.
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1.0 Introduction

Donald Insall Associates was commissioned by Mace in September 2012 to advise on proposals for the north block of Senate House in Bloomsbury, London. This note is an addendum to the report of July 2013 on the Senate House North Block, a Grade II*-listed building in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

The historic building report of July 2013 sets out the architectural and historic significance of the building and was submitted as part of the wider scheme of works approved in 2014.

The proposals subject of this application are minor in nature and do not affect the approach to the listed building or its significance which primarily lies in the elegant form and monumental presence of the tower and, to a lesser extent the architecture of the flanking courtyard blocks, the interiors of the southern block and the Senate House Library and the foyer of the northern block. Therefore they meet the tests within the National Planning Policy Framework for sustainable development, insofar as these relate to the historic environment.

2.0 Summary of the Proposals

The proposed works are described in detail in the design and access statement and drawings by Mace which this addendum accompanies.

As part of the scheme approved and now on site, provision was made for a dry riser to be installed within staircase 9 to help fight fires in the new courtyard space. It was outlined in the submitted design and access statement that the dry riser inlet would be located on the lightwell wall in the Tower forecourt and that the pipe would enter the building under the new escape platform. A riser for the dry riser would be provided in staircase 9 at ground floor and in the data hubs adjacent to staircase 9 on the first to third floors. The outlet would be from inside the staircase 9 enclosure accessed via panels located above the handrail.

The proposals for the insertion of the dry riser remain as outlined above however the detailed design has now been developed to outline the physical alterations and interventions required which are now subject of this application.

3.0 The Building and its Current Legislative Status

The north block of Senate House of 1932-38 is listed at Grade II* and is located in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area in the London Borough of Camden.

The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 is the legislative basis for decision making on applications that relate to the historic environment. Sections 66 and 72 of the Act impose a statutory duty upon local planning authorities to consider the impact of proposals upon listed buildings and conservation areas and state that new development should preserve or enhance the special architectural or historic interest of listed buildings or their setting and the character and appearance of conservation areas.

In order for a local authority to consider granting such consent, the proposed development must also be justified according to the policies on the historic environment set out in the *National Planning Policy Framework*.

The key message of the *National Planning Policy Framework* is the concept of 'sustainable development'. The *National Planning Policy Framework* requires that heritage assets (a term that, with regard to UK planning legislation, includes listed buildings, conservation areas, and unlisted buildings of local importance) should be conserved in a manner 'appropriate to their significance.' It also notes the desirability of 'sustaining and enhancing the significance' of heritage assets and of putting assets to viable uses 'consistent with their conservation.' The *National Planning Policy Framework* recognises the 'positive contribution of that the conservation of heritage assets can make towards economic vitality'. However, it also recognises that, in some cases, proposals can lead to a heritage asset losing significance. The *National Planning Policy Framework* thus requires that the 'public benefits' of a proposal – which include securing the optimum viable use of a designated heritage asset – should outweigh any 'less than substantial' harm caused to the significance of a designated heritage asset.

4.0 Significance of the Building

The north block of the Senate House was designed by Charles Holden in 1932 and built, along with the main Senate House and Library, from 1933. The Senate House was the headquarters of the University of London and the north block was the home of the Institute of Education and the School of Slavonic Studies, two of its constituent colleges. The north block was substantially complete by April 1938, but it wasn't until after the War that the interior was fully fitted out.

The Senate House as a whole is a manifestly significant building, but (as Charles Holden would be the first to concede) it is not flawless. Holden's full vision for the site was never realised, indeed even his scaled-down scheme was left incomplete at the outbreak of the Second World War. Holden's design, conceived in 1932, was out of fashion by the time the building opened in 1937 and important elements of his idea, such as sculpture on the tower, were never executed. The building's sheer scale makes it something of an imposition in the otherwise largely Georgian, domestic streets of Bloomsbury, and it has acquired (entirely unfairly, and thanks to George Orwell) an unhappy association with the architecture of totalitarianism.

Yet these things notwithstanding, Senate House is an undeniably important building. It is remarkable for the grace of its overall composition, the refined massing of the tower, the fine detailing and craftsmanship, the quality of materials, and its associations with the great Charles Holden and with the University of London in its interwar heyday. Senate House is a piece of 1930s New York in central London (the tower looming over Russell Square has the feeling of a miniature Central Park); like Manhattan it has strong cinematic qualities, and it is consequently a popular location for film shoots. Listing at Grade II*, which places Senate House in the top ten percent of buildings nationally, is fully warranted for this London landmark.

This special interest is not evenly distributed across the entire building, however. The architectural strength of the Senate House is very much concentrated in the tower, with its elegant form and monumental presence. For many, the tower is the enduring image of Senate House and the University of London. The courtyard blocks flanking the tower are less sophisticated in their massing, but are nonetheless very important for their carefully composed elevations and high quality materials and detailing. The interiors to the southern block and to the Senate House Library are also very special: these are rare and complete ensembles of interwar interior design. The foyer of the north block forms part of this sequence of interior spaces too. All these aspects of the building are of the utmost significance.

The north block is of lesser interest, but is still important. Its significance may be summarised thus:

Of high significance are:

- **The external elevations including those in the courtyard**, for the part they play in the composition of the 'balanced' scheme

which Holden devised when his plan to build a much larger structure came to nought; and for their carefully-proportioned design and high quality materials and detailing, including dated lead hoppers.

- **The ground floor foyer**, for its travertine-clad walls and original fittings, which are broadly as Holden designed.

Of **moderate** significance are:

- **The interior fittings, apart from the ground floor foyer.** The fixtures and fittings in the north block are good quality 1940s work, and have some interest as surviving features of this period, but they are not of the same order of significance as those in the south block. Lavish interiors were never intended for this block, which did not form part of the ceremonial or intellectual heart of the University, as the south block and tower did. Only the bare skeleton of Holden's interior was built and the building was fitted out after the Second World War. Some of the fittings (parquet floors, lighting, fragments of signage) are similar to those in the south block and library, but on the whole the interiors are nothing out of the ordinary.
- **Plan form**, which has some interest as it survives largely as built, but was designed to be flexible and has no intrinsic value.

Various factors **detract** from the building's significance and prevent enjoyment of the north block's principal elevations and interiors. These are:

- **The unfinished sections of the L-shaped elevation to the east**, where a further courtyard was proposed.
- **The host of temporary structures in the internal courtyard**, which have proved all too permanent.
- The breeze blocks and modern partitions in the ground floor foyer
- Suspended ceilings and runs of modern cables obscure the building's original form and details.

If the north block were a standalone building (as for the purposes of this application it essentially is), it would likely be listed at Grade II rather than Grade II*, albeit with a strong emphasis on its group value with the south block and tower.

Staircase 9 is an open string staircase with an original composite stone floor and skirtings and original metal balustrades with bronze handrails. On each tread is a brown and orange tiles mosaic to mark the edge of the tread. Prior to the implementation of the approved scheme there were modern security grilles, modern pipework and endless boxed in wiring which particularly detracted. This staircase matches others in the building and is of moderate significance.

5.0 Assessment and Justification of Proposals

The pipework for the dry riser would enter the basement lightwell through an inlet box inserted in an opening formed in the south-east lightwell perimeter wall. It would then run along the inside face of the lightwell wall which runs parallel to Malet Street, set on steel fixings. The pipework would cross the lightwell to enter the building underneath the new lightwell escape stair platform and enter via an existing window at lower ground floor level. The window would be altered to replace the top right corner pane with a solid panel, finished white, to allow the pipework to penetrate into the building. Aside from the panel in the south-east lightwell perimeter wall, owing to the set-back and depth of the lightwell the pipework would be concealed from view. The proposed window to be altered is similarly obscured by the depth of the lightwell and the new escape stair platform.

Internally a new riser would be installed to run up the outside face of the staircase enclosure wall – this area forms a secondary space of low significance within the building comprising a link corridor at ground floor and server rooms at the floor levels above. To access the riser a new opening would be formed through the wall to staircase 9 at each floor level and a landing box inserted above the retained original handrail. The surrounding fabric would be made good to match. At ground floor level the large existing detracting opening would be infilled. Aside from the insertion of the landing boxes, there would be no alteration to the staircase enclosure or the original fabric and features which remain and as such the impact of these works on the moderate significance of the staircase is minimal.

The proposed location of the riser both internally and externally has sought to minimise its impact on the significance of the listed building. Otherwise entirely concealed from view or located in secondary spaces of low significance, the external inlet box and internal landing boxes which are required to be visible are accepted features within buildings of this nature and would not detract from the character or significance of the listed building overall.

The proposed insertion of the dry riser would preserve the special interest of the listed building and its contribution character and appearance of the conservation area. Therefore the presumption against the granting of planning permission imposed by Sections 66 and 72 of The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 Act is not engaged.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has crystallised previous policy approaches to the historic environment and has given strong emphasis to the need to 'weigh up' the pros and cons of a proposal to alter the historic environment. As outlined above, and in accordance with paragraph 131 of the NPPF, the proposals would not cause harm to the significance of the heritage assets and consequently the tests outlined in paragraphs 133 and 134 of the NPPF which relate to the extent of 'public benefits' required to balance any potential 'harm' caused are not engaged.

