

3.0 DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRIEF AND ITS CHALLENGES



'Sancai' ceramic tomb figures (1936.1012.224-231)

3.1 A Rich and Diverse Collection

The gallery will host the Museum’s vast collection of Chinese, Indian subcontinent and Southeastern Asian objects. These objects vary from sculptures and architectural reliefs, to paintings and scrolls. They also vary greatly in scale and have a variety of conservation needs..

The challenge for the design team is to create new displays that cater for all these varied requirements, while producing an aesthetically cohesive design.

In displaying the material cultures of these large areas of Asia, the major objective of the gallery is to illuminate their histories and cultures, to express their major achievement in art and technology, and to compare and contrast them with other parts of the world seen in other galleries.

The challenge of the brief was that upon entering the gallery, two immediate impressions were considered essential:

- the scale and beauty of the gallery must be immediately apparent, expressing thereby the richness of the Museum’s collections and its interest in and commitment to Asia.
- and the areas and time periods included in the space must be recognised easily, so that the visitor knows what to expect and where to go.

Therefore, the central area of the gallery needed special attention to allow the visitor to appreciate the long vistas with their rich content and to understand the ways in which the exhibits are arranged.

The two halves of the gallery are dedicated to very different regions and cultures - to the east, China, and to the West, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

3.2 The Curatorial Approach

Most visitors to the permanent galleries exhibit browsing behaviour. Typically the average dwell time in an individual permanent gallery is relatively low because visitors want to see as much of the British Museum as they can during their visit. Most visitors tend to stop at a small number of objects or exhibits in any one gallery. However, a smaller proportion do engage more systematically and comprehensively. Nevertheless, the evaluation by the Museum demonstrates that only a very small percentage of visitors read traditional wall panels.

The gateway object concept offers an effective strategy for helping visitors engage with the bigger stories and themes we wish to communicate to them. Gateway objects are key pieces that are used to attract visitor’s initial attention and interest.

They provide a clear starting point, and are potentially a way into a bigger subject display. They work on the principle that at the British Museum visitors are drawn to objects first, not text or interpretation. Key to the success of this approach is ensuring the interpretation of the gateway object is in direct proximity to the object and that it tells a compelling story that works from the object out to introduce a bigger theme or idea. By placing traditional panel-type text in direct relationship with a gateway object that exemplifies key themes, the likelihood of visitors reading the text is significantly increased. Gateway objects can be used to introduce a gallery as a whole as well as at individual subject display level.

This approach has been used in most new gallery projects from 2006 onward. Evaluation indicates that this approach does encourage increased engagement with text and key messages.

An ideal gateway object exhibits four qualities and should be:

- Intrinsically attractive.
- An intellectual gateway into a key theme or story.
- An important object in the collection.
- Iconic to visitors.

Typically a new gallery might be built around 15-20 ‘gateway objects’, key pieces that can be used to direct visitors browsing behaviour. A larger gallery like Room 33 is, of course, likely to require more. Gateway objects are likely to be a key part of the interpretive strategy deployed here.

A key finding of almost all our evaluations is that visitors value, and increasingly expect, a range of interpretation. Visitors of all ages respond positively to digital media and but they also enjoy the opportunity to touch original artefacts on the Museum’s Hands On Desks. There should be a variety of interpretation to reflect the diversity of our audiences, their different learning styles, motivations and preferred way of engaging with museum displays. Digital content that visitors can access on their own device is likely to play an important role in engaging visitors with the objects in the displays.

3.3 An Integrated Design Approach

The challenge of the providing new coherent and engaging displays will need to be integrated within an overall holistic design approach that also balances energy conservation and historic building fabric conservation.

With the planning permission for the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre (WCEC) development, a commitment was made by the Museum to reduce the on-site carbon emissions by 30% from a 2009 baseline by the year 2034. Submission of the plan outlining the steps to achieve this goal is required before April 2017 (on the basis of first occupation being 01 April 2014). As a design team we have been tasked with addressing these energy conservation requirements through a combination of natural and passive means, and the introduction of new energy efficient systems, such as new lighting, ventilation and heating strategies.

3.4 Congestion at Peak Times

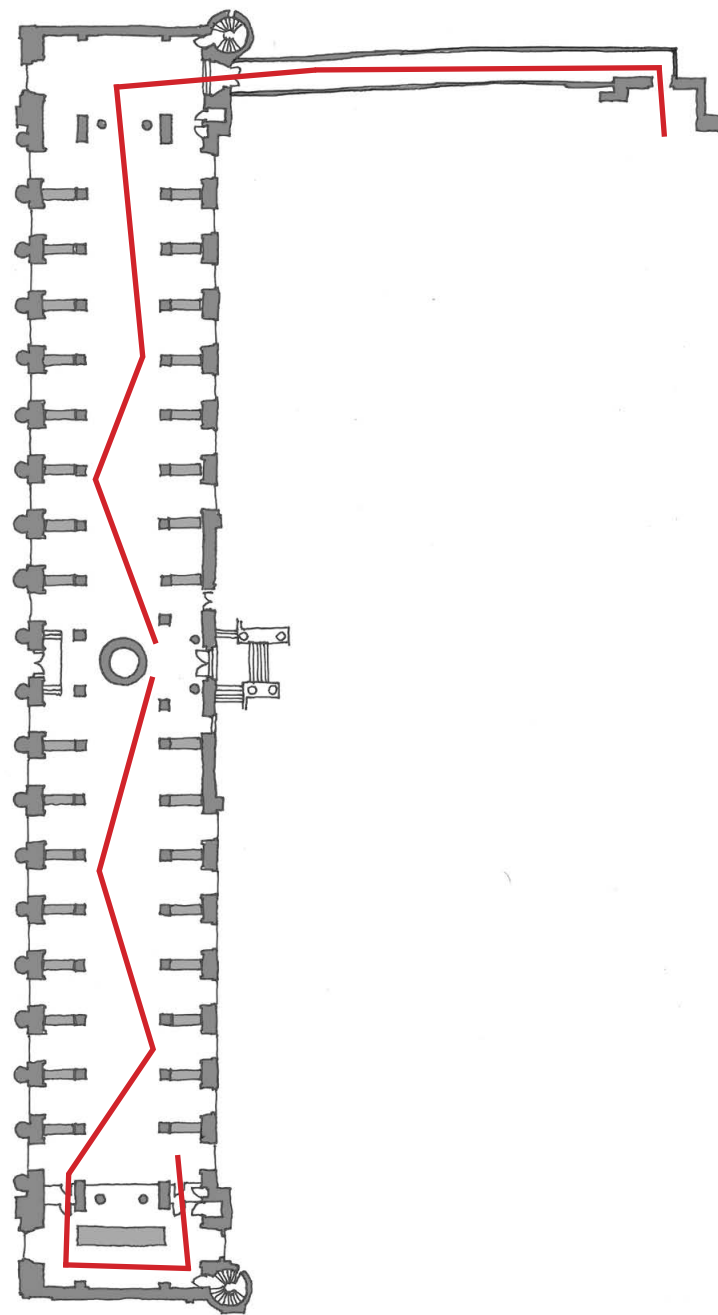
As one of the museum’s highlights, the gallery becomes highly congested at peak times. The central entrance with oculus, is highly successful in attracting visitors into the space, but more thought was required for this first part of the visitor’s journey, to provide an appropriate entrance, and to allow the visitor to orientate themselves within the gallery.



3.5 Orientation and Navigation

With such a large number of visitors to the space, the gallery needs to cater for a variety of visitors; from the quick walk through, to the hour-long self-learning educational wander.

The use of ‘gateway objects’ strategically placed together with new signage and interpretation will help to produce displays that attract a variety of audiences.



3.6 A Lack of Context

The current gallery displays suffer from a lack of visual clues as to the landscapes and cultures from which the collection is derived. The brief provides the opportunity to enrich the collection with more meaningful interpretation and graphical backgrounds.



3.7 Celebration of the Existing Architecture

The layering of years of re-interpretation of the galleries has led to a loss of the original architectural intentions of the gallery space.

The beautiful ornamentation of the columns, the high ceiling, and tactility of the materials speak for themselves, and with a little help, could once again be celebrated.



3.8 Connection with Adjacent Gallery Spaces

A combination of poor signage and hindered vistas, means that the connections between the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery (Room 33) with the adjacent Asahi Shimbun Gallery (Room 33a) of the Sculptures and Carvings of Amaravati and Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery (Room 33b) of Chinese Jade are not obvious and therefore not particularly accessible to all visitors.

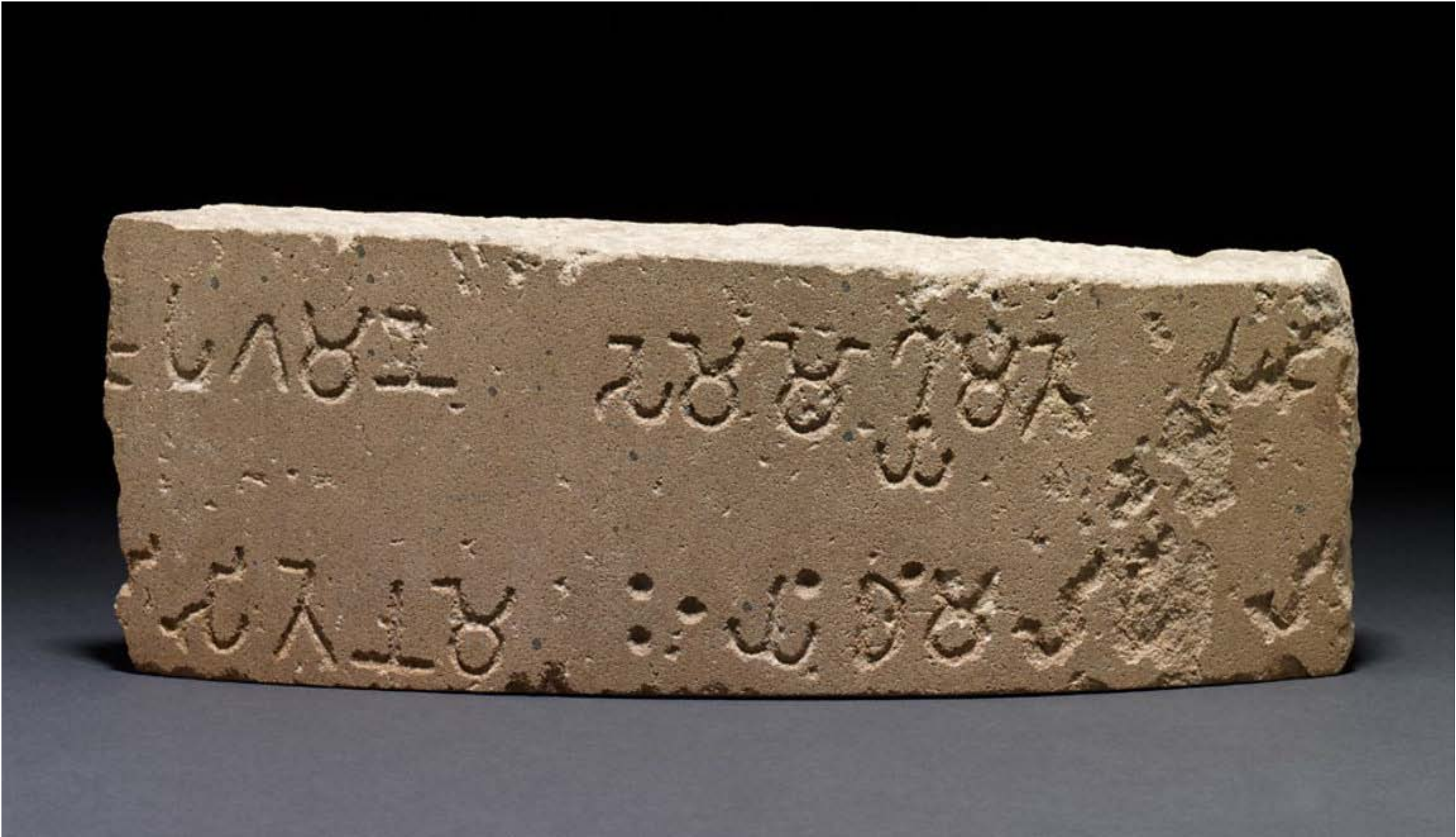


3.9 Natural and Artificial Lighting

While the large windows provide a light and airy feel to the space, this does present challenges in terms of excessive daylight levels for light sensitive objects, and the large south facing windows present issues with regard to solar gain and overheating. The existing exhibition lighting systems, both within and outside the showcases are outdated and require immediate upgrading for a more efficient system.

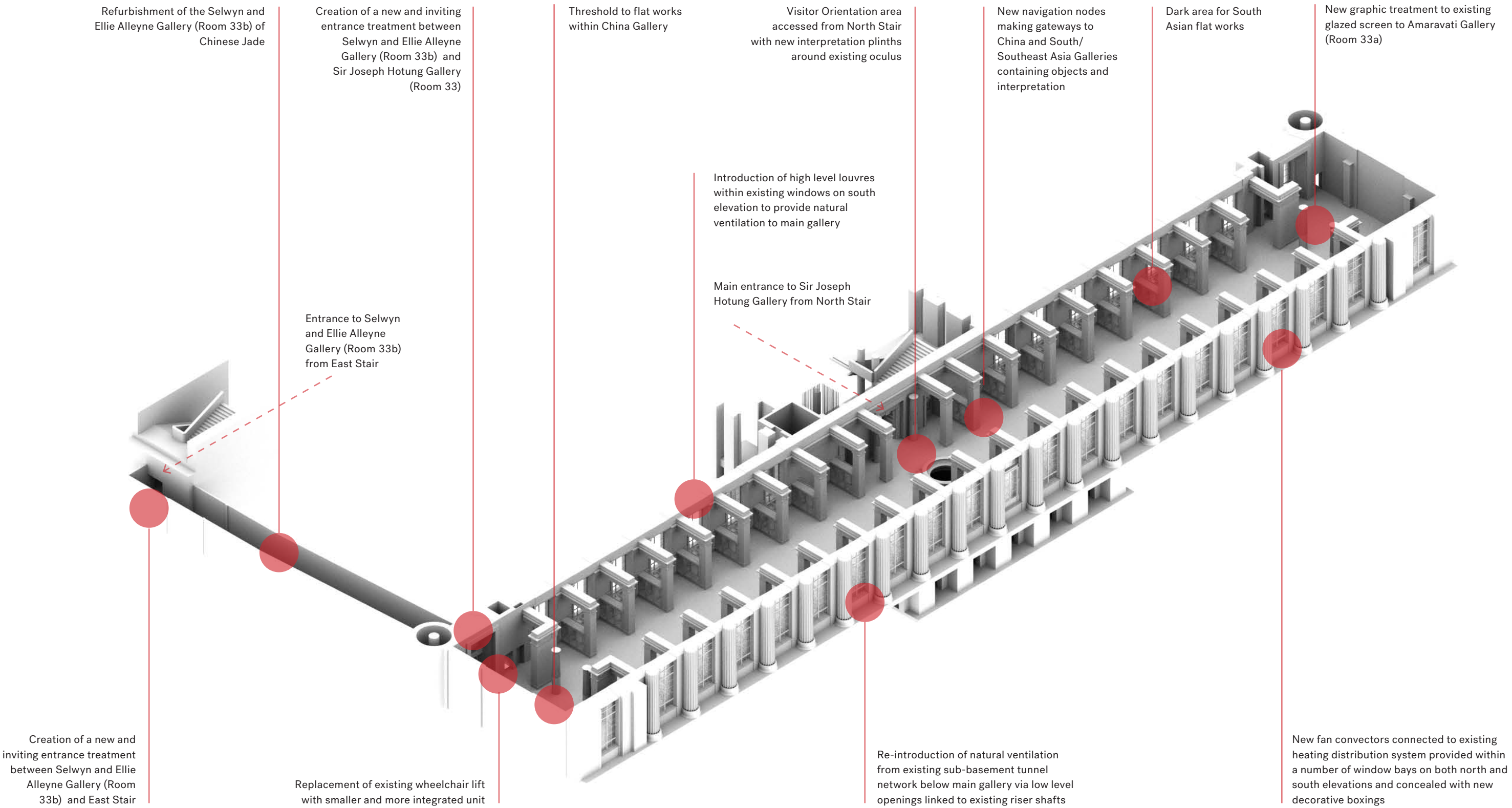


4.0 DESIGN APPROACH



Asoka pillar fragment (1880.21)

4.1 Overview of the Proposed Works



4.2 Entrance and Orientation

The galleries receive large numbers of visitors, often in large groups, and therefore we propose to clear the central space of furniture and reduce the object displays so that visitors can gather and orientate themselves.

Within this space, the group of twenty glazed tiles arranged as friezes, Dragon Tiles (Shanxi Province, Ming Dynasty, 15th-16th century) will be relocated from the North Stair and displayed within the central bay, flanked by the stoneware figure Budai Hesheng (Henan Province) and the elephant headed stone figure, Orissa Ganesha (Orissa, India, 13th century).

The existing central oculus will have a new ring of interpretation panels mounted on polished white marble frames. A new bespoke centrepiece light that sits centrally and comprises a pair of U-shaped forms that represent both sides of the Gallery and are fabricated from bronzed metal and alabaster resin acting as diffusers to the LED light sources.



(above) Illustrative view of the proposed orientation space.

4.3 Oculus

The existing oculus is an original circular opening within the floor with solid guarding of polished white marble. The upper part of the internal lining is painted plaster with raised lettering on the northern face providing details of the opening of the refurbishment in 1982. We propose to replicate this lettering providing details of the current refurbishment proposals that will sit opposite on the southern face.

New interpretation panels will be captured on segmented frames fabricated from polished white marble and bronzed metal. These frames will be positioned outside the existing marble floor inlay and sit independently of the oculus, with concealed fixings within the floor build-up.



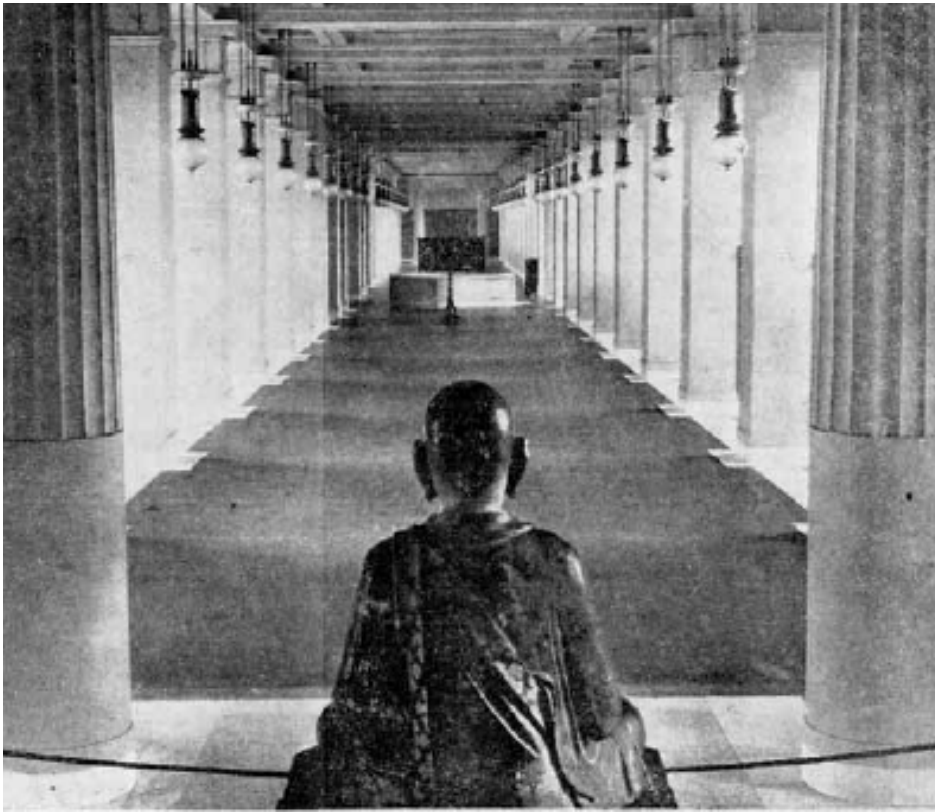
(above) Alternative interpretation text detail



(above) New segmented polished white marble frame holding orientation and interpretation text.

4.4 Reintroduction of the Vista

A photograph that was published prior to the inauguration of the King Edward VII Building in 1914 creates a temple-like atmosphere with clear vista's the full length of the gallery. As the layout of the gallery has changed and adapted over the years this vista and the rhythm of the architecture has been lost. A variety of new showcases, plinths and other furniture has been added and we propose to reintroduce this vista by clearing the central aisle and reinstate the original architectural rigour.



(above) Photograph taken following completion of the gallery in c.1914

(clockwise from top left) Photographs showing the variety of showcase displays since the completion of the gallery in 1914

4.5 Embracing the Architectural Rhythm

The existing layout, with modern free-standing showcases, between and in front of the columns, appear to deter the visitor's eyes away from the repetition of the columns and architecture. A new datum line is set by the heavy top and bottoms of these showcases.

The current free-standing showcases within the centre of the space (when higher than eye level), also mean that views through to the ends of the space are not visible from the central oculus.

All of this, added to the lack of high-level lighting to the ceiling mean that many of the building's original features and rhythms are not being celebrated.

We have sought to retain the rhythm of column and bay, with new interpretation elements sitting within the architecture and have an impact on the visual rhythm of the space. Similarly, the rhythm of windows with the graduated black-out bays will also have an impact due to the lighting effects created. The use of freestanding 'gateway' objects within the aisles are key to 'bounce' across the architecture, drawing in the eye of the visitor and enticing them into the bays.

Another original feature that has disappeared are the pendant light fittings within each bay entrance and these were used to line the length of the gallery, and we propose to reinstate these in order to mark the entry point to each bay.

With a focus on providing more clarity to the collection, and catering for the ever-increasing number of visitors, the new gallery layout seeks to: expose more of the original architectural features; clearing the clutter; and opening up views through to the oculus and end 'rooms'.



(above) Existing photograph showing the key vista and perspective alignments

4.5 Embracing the Architectural Rhythm



Proposed illustrative view looking east towards the China Gallery

4.5 Embracing the Architectural Rhythm



Proposed illustrative view looking west towards the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia Gallery with Amaravati Gallery (Room 33a) now clearly visible at the far end

4.6 Navigational Nodes

These navigational nodes are proposed at the entrance to each of the sub-galleries adjacent the central orientation space. These moments will hold introductory objects together with key navigation and interpretative material.

Conceived as polished white marble (or light stone) plinths and bases, with slim perimeter guarding in bronzed metal that also hold the interpretation and information panels.



(above) Navigation node to Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia Gallery



(above) Navigation node to China Gallery

4.7 Peninsular Showcases

The existing peninsular showcases are an original feature of the gallery and we propose to refurbish and make necessary conservation, access and security improvements so that they meet the expected current standards. The existing showcase comprises a fixed glass panels either side of an existing opening glass panel, and this arrangement is repeated on both sides. A central lock mechanism is provided centrally to the opening panel within a widened section of the frame.

The refurbishment works propose the following works: The replacement of the existing glazing to all panels and adjustment of the frames to receive 11.5mm laminated security glass and new bronzed steel angles within a rebate to the rear face; adaptation of existing fixed glass panels to provide fully accessible glazed panels throughout; provision of new full height piano hinges with bronzed finish to all opening panels; provision of new security locks positioned within top and bottom rails to each opening panel; removal of existing lighting egg crate to the internal soffits and associated light fittings above, and replacement with new LED fittings and metal soffit panels; new electrical distribution within both soffit and base of the showcase; and, new electrical boards within side panels (where needed).

Permission was previously granted to undertake investigative and precision shop fitting works to an existing showcase, and these were undertaken offsite by A Edmonds & Company. The fixed panels have now been seamlessly converted to opening panels and reinstated within the gallery, with minimal affect on the historic fabric.



(above) Mocked-up case interior on site



(above) Existing showcase with single central access door and central lock



(above) Photograph taken during the prototype works within workshop of A Edmonds & Co.



(above) Proposed details for new security locks (top and bottom rails) and bronzed in security frame



(above) Reinstated but fully openable glazed panels with French polish finish

4.8 Window Showcases

The existing window cases are not an original feature of the gallery and appear to have been installed as part of the 1992 refurbishment works and were probably relocated from another part of the museum.

The cases have shallow horizontal displays with angled glass tops that are hinged to allow access. The proximity of the large windows causes issues with excessive reflection, and potential overheating on the southern side. The cases also have poor opening security and the opening mechanism are prone to failure. A number of the cases have been emptied of objects over the years due to the numerous concerns raised by the Museum's conservation department. The horizontal case layouts also given rise to accessibility issues, with solid fronts wheelchair users are unable to manoeuvre themselves into a position to view the case as well as younger audiences unable to view objects at all. In addition, the existing thin glass has been known to crack under the weight of visitors kneeling onto it to view objects.

Below the cases, a range of four panels are provided that allow access to the original radiator positions, albeit a number of these radiators have been omitted to prevent overheating.

We had previously discussed with the London Borough of Camden and Historic England that perhaps the retention of a few window cases could be explored, however given the amount of refurbishment work that would be needed to meet current security, conservation and accessibility standards, we now feel that it would be better to carefully remove all window cases and store them elsewhere within the museum so that they can be potentially reused in the future. This would then allow all window bays to have a standardised treatment of new timber panels and polished white marble cills throughout the gallery.



(above) existing window showcase showing radiator access panelling below



(above) showcase opening mechanism and timber sills with brass ventilation grilles



(above) objects removed from existing cases due to conservation, security and safety concerns

4.9 Asahi Shimbun Gallery (Room 33a) Amaravati

The refurbishment works with the Asahi Shimbun Gallery (Room 33a) will be minimal as given the logistical implications, the heavy sculptures and carvings of Amaravati will mainly be kept insitu. There will be an upgrading of existing electrical and mechanical services within this conditioned space, and the existing secondary glazing will be cleaned as part of the window refurbishment works. The proposed replacement of the vinyl floor and redecoration of the ceiling and wall finishes will be undertaken to match those proposed within the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery (Room 33).

It is also proposed to install a new (removable film) graphic treatment across the existing glazed screen in order to reduce the 'green' tinge of the existing glass whilst drawing visitors to towards the gallery. This graphic will represent the architectural context and scale from which the sculptures originated and thus provide a better understanding of their importance.



(above) Illustrative view of the existing Amaravati Gallery (Room 33a) with new graphic treatment to existing glazed wall

4.10 Chinese Flat Works

The Chinese flat works are proposed to be relocated at the far eastern end of the gallery and rather than take a similar approach to the Asahi Shimbun Gallery where a glass screen has been installed to provide a highly conditioned environment, the intention is to provide the required conservation standards to each object individually.

This part of the new gallery will house large paintings and scrolls, either hung vertically within existing and proposed wall cases, or set within new table cases supported on polished white marble tables. However the lighting levels will require careful consideration and will need a controlled level of daylight and artificial light in this section.



(above) Illustrative view of the proposed Chinese flat works positioned at the far eastern end of the gallery

4.11 Entrance between Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery (Room 33) and Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery (Room 33b)

At the eastern end of Room 33 is the entrance to the Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery (Room 33b) for Chinese Jade. Currently the entrance is particularly uninviting and is partially obscured by a utilitarian platform lift that overcomes the change in level between Room 33 and the original 'temporary bridge'. We propose to celebrate the threshold between the the galleries with a new 'portal' that sits independently within the existing splayed recess, and thus is fully reversible.

This patinated brass-clad surround would enable a suitable fixing for the rails for a new discrete accessible wheelchair lift, whilst also holding further orientation and interpretation material. The wheelchair lift will also be supported by floor mounted but freestanding steel stanchions and thus keep the lift mechanism away from the existing gold leaf wall finishes.



(above) Existing entrance is dominated by current platform lift.



(above) Illustrative view of the proposed new 'portal' between Room 33 and Room 33b, with new discrete wheelchair accessible lift mounted on the right side

4.12 Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery (Room 33b) Chinese Jade

The proposals for the Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery (Room 33b) for Chinese Jade are relatively straightforward and include: the relocation of an existing wall mounted showcase from the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery (Room 33); the relining and redecoration of the existing plasterboard walls; new plasterboard ceilings with integrated mechanical and electrical services; new LED lighting throughout (inside and outside showcases); new flooring (to match proposals for Room 33); new showcase displays, including new interpretation panels, and object labels; and new decorative radiator panels.

We also propose to echo the new entrance portal (between Room 33 and Room 33b) at the entrance to the gallery from the east stair, with a new patinated brass lining, which can also hold orientation and interpretation material.

For the lighting, the aim is to create a more intimate visitor experience, as a contrast to Room 33, and focus the attention on the beautiful object displays, as opposed to the architecture. A 100% LED scheme utilising museum quality fittings with high colour rendering properties will be introduced for the ambient, display and emergency lighting. The aim will be to create a low glare, low reflectance scheme so that the objects take the main focus in the space. In the new ceiling, new recessed LED fittings will maximise the height in this low ceiling gallery. There will be a good modulation of light along the space to provide a good sense of comfort and lead the eye to the key interpretation panels.

Both entrance and exits will be further defined with additional lighting to decorative panels which will also aid orientation. The ambient light levels will be approximately 100 -150 lux, graphics and object lighting approximately 200 -250 lux. Emergency lighting will achieve 10 lux at the entrance/exits with 5 lux throughout the gallery with 0.5 uniformity to more than meet best practice museum criteria.

The display lighting will be dimmed locally with museum access to equipment hatches at the top of the cases. The emergency lighting will feed back to the central battery system. Gallery lighting can be controlled locally in the access panel to the right of the entrance to Jade and this will also be fed back to the Building Management System for timed operations.

As part of the overall ventilation strategies of the galleries, it is proposed that 3 new extract fan units are installed within the void above the new ceiling of Room 33b. This new strategy will require the installation of 3 new roof cowls into the existing corrugated sheet roofing, to provide extraction via ducting.



(above) Illustrative view of the proposed refurbished gallery with new graphic panel (left) and new floor, wall and ceiling finishes



(above) Illustrative view of the proposed refurbished gallery with radiator panel (left) and patinated brass lining to the entrance from the east stair (far end)