

## **Inside Out Wac Arts**

12 August 2019

### **Access Report of Current Proposals**

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#### **A/ Introduction**

Wac Arts' development project, named Inside Out, is for a new external terrace and café at level 2 (ground floor) at the Old Town Hall, Haverstock Hill.

This access report is based on the proposed plans by Ash Sakula Architects issued in August 2019. It focuses on circulation and physical access, as well as sensory and cognitive disability. More detailed reports, issued at later stages during the design process, will address other aspects of accessible design.

#### **Background to project and description**

The project is based in the Old Town Hall, Haverstock Hill, North London. The building is owned by Camden Borough Council and leased to Wac Arts, a community youth, education and arts organisation. Other charities and businesses lease parts of the building from Wac Arts. Hiring out the Main Hall, Small Hall and Council Chamber to outside companies, such as West End theatre productions, is a significant revenue earner for the organisation.

The building houses the following organisations and activities:

- Wac Arts runs full-time and part-time courses for young people, specialising in dance, theatre and music
- Inclusion programmes for disabled people
- Outreach projects for local schools
- Community and cultural projects
- Charity and non-profit resident groups
- Wac Arts College
- KIDS, which provides services to disabled children and young people
- University of the Third Age (U3A) offices and classes
- Other arts organisations and advice services
- Atrium Café

- Local community organisations hire rooms for local events
- Office space for hire
- Recording studios

## **Location**

The building faces onto Haverstock Hill, an arterial road and bus route leading from central London to Hampstead. It is about 150 metres from Belsize Park Underground Station.

The building is Grade II listed and was developed in three phases.

- The Victorian front section opened in 1878 as a Vestry Hall, which was used for weddings and was designed in the Italianate style with a campanile tower. At ground floor level the central Imperial Staircase is surrounded by a series of ante-rooms, including the Council Chamber and the existing reception hall. The Imperial Staircase rises up to an intermediate landing, from where one can enter the Small Hall and WCs. From this level two flights of stairs on each side of the Imperial Stair Hall rise to the upper landing, where there are doors into the Main Hall, a large assembly room stretching across the front elevation. Ancillary spaces are located in the basement and the 2000 renovation also added new stairs (suitable for means of escape) and lifts on the south and north sides of the Imperial Stair Hall.
- A two storey Edwardian extension dating from 1910, was constructed when the building was turned into Hampstead Town Hall. This wing runs along Belsize Avenue, which slopes down, so that its ground floor rooms are at the level of the basement of the front part, built in 1878.
- In the mid 20th century, the town hall functions were relocated elsewhere and the building became dilapidated. A local campaign raised funds for its renovation and the construction of the third major element, a new wing and enclosed atrium located to the south of the Edwardian block. This block, which opened in 2000, contains new dance and teaching studios, reached from ramps and steps within the new atrium. It has its own lift and entrance on the south side.

## **Report summary**

The Inside Out proposals for Wac Arts focus on the building approaches to the Old Town Hall and the northeast parts of Level 2 (ground floor level). The proposals will enhance entry into the building from Haverstock Hill. By relocating parking places to the rear of the building, there will be a gentler approach across a new cafe terrace to newly formed entrance doors on the north side of the building. These doors will open directly into a large reception/ café hall.

People arriving from the south up Haverstock Hill and from new designated disabled spaces in the rear car park, will be able to climb the existing front entrance steps, or alternatively make use of a new external platform lift up to front entrance level.

The new reception/ café will provide a welcoming space for members of the public, building users and visitors at an accessible serving counter. Cafe refreshments will be available for all, compared to the current arrangement, where the cafe is only open for the building users, due to its location in the centre of the building. The existing WCs serving the public areas will be upgraded, so they will meet modern standards. The cubicles will be unisex, including an upgraded wheelchair accessible cubicle.

Even though the Inside Out proposals focus on the building approaches and only parts of level 2, during the next design stages a more detailed review will explore the division between the public areas and the private spaces used by young people's organisations, businesses and charities based in the building. The key issue will be to ensure that access to the lifts and to escape stairs will be maintained and the means of escape strategy will be brought in line with current practices.

## **B/ Access within the current building**

### **Approach**

1. Many people arrive at the Old Town Hall by foot, on bicycle or by using public transport. It is not easy to find parking in the area, because most streets have resident's parking zones and there are no large car parks nearby. The Old Town Hall itself has two small car parks, one at the rear of the building and one on the corner of Haverstock Hill and Belsize Avenue. Currently these are only used by disabled people with Blue Badges, for deliveries or for parking the organisation's minibuses.

2. Disabled people can be dropped off immediately outside the front entrance on Haverstock Hill or in the rear car park.

### **Main entrance**

3. Entry is up a flight of eleven steps to a narrow level landing at the front of the building. There is a ramped route from the front car park, but sections of this route are very steep.
4. All visitors are directed to a reception hall in the north east corner. From this point onwards, visitors are only allowed to enter with a visitor pass. Members of Wac Arts and other organisations within the building are issued with a security pass, which allows access to specific areas of the building used by each organisation.
5. The route from the reception hall to the rest of the building is through a narrow vestibule with a wide automatic door to the Imperial Stair Hall, which is central to the building's circulation.

### **Side entrance**

6. This entrance on the south side of the building is generally used by Wac Arts students. It enters directly into the new atrium, from where the rooms in the 2000 extension are reached.

### **Circulating round the building**

7. The Council Chamber is entered directly from the entrance lobby off the Reception Hall.
8. The Atrium Café is located near the Imperial Stair Hall. Due to its location beyond the security line, members of the public are not able to enter this part of the building, and so this cafe is only for building users.
9. New lifts and fire protected staircases, connecting all levels, are located on the north and south sides of the Imperial Stair Hall. These lifts and staircases were constructed as part of the 2000 works. They are not easy to find because they are reached through a series of lobbies and security-controlled doors.

10. Wayfinding around the building, particularly for people using the lifts and fire protected staircases, is confusing due to the various floor levels and the different lobby configurations on each floor. There is little distinction with regards to the décor within these secondary circulation spaces, which tend not to have windows to help with orientation.
11. The Imperial Staircase leads up to an intermediate level where there are doors into the Small Hall, which seats approximately 100 people.
12. The Imperial Staircase continues up to the Main Hall, at the front of the building. This large room is often used for rehearsals of West End theatre productions. It has retractable bleacher seating for an audience of about 200 people.

## **C/ Access review of proposals**

### **Overview**

13. The Inside Out proposals will move the café from its central location to the corner where the reception is currently located. The front car park will be converted into a café terrace, which will benefit from afternoon and evening sunshine. There will be a level entry from the raised pavement on Belsize Avenue, across the new terrace and through three new doorways into the enlarged reception and café area.

### **Arrival**

14. The front car park will be converted to a café terrace, which will form a much improved accessible entry into the building from Belsize Avenue. To accommodate the Blue Badge holders, who currently park in this car park, five or six new designated accessible parking bays will be marked out in the rear car park, which has a level route around the building to the main entrance.
15. The main accessible entrance into the building will now be from the raised pavement on Belsize Avenue. This new entry route will be at a gentler gradient, but for people who have difficulty walking far, it will be a slightly longer route than via the existing ramp to the Haverstock Hill main entrance, particularly when approaching from the rear car park. Therefore the proposals include an

external platform lift on the southeast corner, rising up to a new walkway to the left-hand side of the entrance steps.

- *Design details to consider: Detailed design of the platform lift will be required to ensure that there is space on the upper landing for two wheelchairs to pass one another. It will need to be easy to locate for first time visitors to the building, including a comprehensive wayfinding strategy. However its design should minimise its impact on the front elevation of the listed building.*

16.A consultation process is underway with relevant groups, such as U3A, because removing the front car park may present difficulties for some people. Building users will be able to enter using other entrances and will make their way internally, thus reducing travel distances.

## **Entering the building**

17.**Main entrance:** This entrance with wide double doors will continue to be used, particularly by those people arriving from the south, climbing the existing flight of external steps from Haverstock Hill, or using the proposed platform lift.

18.**Café terrace entrance:** Three new entrance doors will be formed on the northwest elevation. At least one of these sets of doors will be automated, because the width of the existing window openings will only permit narrow double doors to be inserted. This will be an important accessible entry point into the building, particularly for people approaching from the north or along Belsize Avenue.

- *Design details to consider: A clear route is required through the external and internal café tables to at least one automated entry door and then onto the reception and café serving area.*

19.**South Lift entrance:** The South Lift, which has external doors at basement level, will sometimes be used as a more private entrance for VIPs. A new awning or canopy will be installed at the entrance to provide weather protection for those using the lift. This proposal assumes that the lift and stair lobbies in this part of the building could provide segregated access, linking this entrance and service spaces in the basement up to the Council Chamber at ground floor level and the Small and Main Halls on the first floor.

- *Design details to consider: More detail is required with regards to security at the South Lift entrance. This proposal also may impact on other disabled users circulating around the building using the South Lift and means of escape routes, so the security strategy needs to consider this issue.*

## **Reception and cafe**

20. The reception/ café will be a large open space formed by demolishing intermediate walls. It will be open to members of the public, as well as the building users. The mezzanine level above this space will be removed, so all café seating will be on one level.
21. The plans show the North Stairs and Lift entering from the café. A security pass will be required to use this lift and stairs and the security system will be alarm-linked, so that the stairs can be accessed as a means of escape route.
22. The reception/ café will have a long counter. The current design shows a continuous lower height counter to allow serving for wheelchair users.

## **Circulating around the Public and User/Staff Areas**

23. The proposals will open up the Imperial Stair Hall to members of the public and the security line will be moved further back into the building. Hopefully this will reduce and rationalise the number of security doors throughout the building. Note that at the moment the lifts can only be reached using security passes.
  - *Design details to consider: The issue of access to lifts, stairs and security passes should be explored further, to ensure that there are logical circulation routes for all the building users, for instance wheelchair users accessing the upper floors and basement.*
24. The Level 1 (basement) rooms, studios and toilets will remain as existing. However, a flight of stairs from the existing Atrium Café down to this level will be removed. The whole basement will be behind the security line.

## Other facilities and WCs

25. Extra spaces will be created for serving the Council Chamber as a rehearsal space, including a dressing room and an adjoining multi-purpose space in the former Atrium Café. There will also be a new wheelchair accessible shower/WC cubicle in this area designed to AD M2 Diagram 24 and associated guidance.
26. The toilets on Level 2 (ground floor) will be reconfigured and refurbished, but will remain in the same location. The general WCs cubicles will be unisex, with some adapted to be ambulant disabled WCs. The existing unisex wheelchair accessible WC will be relocated and upgraded with new internal fittings and a separate baby-changing facility will be provided.
27. The brief for the redevelopment proposals does not include a Changing Places facility, for changing adults and older children.
  - *Design details to consider: WC cubicles which meet the needs of ambulant disabled users as per Diagram 21 of Approved Document M will need to be included within the new WCs, with outward opening doors, as well as wider ambulant disabled cubicles (as recommended in Provision 5.7d of AD M).*

## Visual and audio environment

28. The interior details are yet to be developed.
  - *Design details to consider: The visual contrast of the interior spaces for people with visual impairments and dementia will be considered; for instance, contrast between doors and walls, floor and walls, plus contrast between sanitary fittings, ironmongery and switches and their backgrounds.*
  - *Detailed design decisions will also need to be taken with regards to hearing enhancement systems and the audio environment.*

## Means of escape

1. Under the Equality Act and BS9999 service providers and employers have a duty to ensure that people with disabilities can leave the premises safely in the event of a fire, so any emergency plan must take account of people with disabilities. Key to this process is the development of Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs), which will be available for visitors and students, and drafted specifically for members of staff and volunteers with disabilities.



2. The current plans are not at a sufficient level of detail to address changes to means of escape for disabled people, particularly as this issue has become more of a priority in multi-storey buildings, since the 2000 works were carried out. It is assumed that the current escape strategy relies on a management strategy whereby wheelchair users are assisted.
  - *Design details to consider: There needs to be rationalisation of means of escape routes and the location of wheelchair refuges. In some locations means of escape routes are up the stairs from the basement, so evacuation chair stair climbers may be required.*