

**Advice from REGENT'S PARK CONSERVATION AREA ADVISORY COMMITTEE
12A Manley Street, London NW1 8LT**

27 March 2020

The Diorama, 18 Park Square East London NW1 4LH 2020/0802/P + 2020/0846/L

1. Strong objection.

2. The Advisory Committee considered these applications at our meeting on 2 March 2020. The Committee had had a presentation by the applicants' agents of an earlier version of their scheme for 17, 18, and 19 Park Square East on 7 October 2019 and reviewed and agreed pre-application advice on that scheme at our meeting on 4 November 2019. Our pre-application advice was lodged with Camden.

3. The main issue for the Advisory Committee is whether the proposals would cause unacceptable harm to the architectural and historic interest of the Listed Building.

4. Noting the historical and architectural richness of the building, the Advisory Committee is profoundly concerned by the extent of proposed demolition of historic fabric in the building. This includes work from all major periods of construction in what is a Grade I Listed building, recognized as a unique survival in the world.

The Diorama, no. 18 Park Square East

5. No. 18 Park Square East is Listed at Grade I and is part of a group, 17-19 Park Square East similarly Grade I Listed, forming the central bay of a symmetrical terrace designed by John Nash and built 1823-25. The Park Square East terrace is part of the grand square, Park Square East and West, linked to Park Crescent, which together constitute the architectural link between Regent's Park and the northern connection to Regent's Street. This formal townscape is itself exceptional. But 17-19 Park Square East are correctly identified as unique in having been designed with a formal elevation to the Square, but an internal plan enabling the inclusion of the Diorama – the only Diorama building known to survive in the world. The Diorama was designed by Augustus Charles Pugin. One key to the special significance of no. 18 Park Square East is the interrelationships between the elements derived from the standard form of the front parts of the houses in the Park Square East terrace with the exceptional plan of the interior and rear.

The Diorama itself – 1823

6. The Diorama provided a viewing space for large painted semi-translucent scenes which appeared . animated under varying light passing through and across the scenes. There was provision for two main scenes, each hung at the rear of the building, the viewers seated in a moveable 'salon' which turned on a basement pivot and curved rails to enable each scene to be viewed in turn. The Planning Inspector who conducted the Appeals in 1987 (APP/X5210/A/86/054443 and 054442 with APP/X5210/E/86/801761 and 801762) concluded in his report (para 10.6) that the building contained, in addition to the front elevation and front spaces, surviving fragments of the 1823

building including the outer shell of the polygonal 'picture rooms' at the rear of the building, the remaining half of the rotunda which housed the moving auditorium 'salon', and fragments of the rooflight above the rotunda. He also noted that there may also be fragmentary survivals of the substructure on which the auditorium 'salon' turned. Extensive historical evidence survives in Pugin's notebooks, in contemporary accounts, and the 1823 patent drawings for this mechanism (see Donald Insall Associates report on the Diorama dated 2014, pp. 8-10, 18, and appendix III). This historical evidence gives the possibility of surviving fragments extra significance. With the exception of the fragments of rooflight above the rotunda, all this fabric still survives.

The Baptist Chapel – 1853

7. The Diorama closed down in 1848, and in 1853 18 Park Square East was converted into a Baptist Chapel. The Chapel conversion involved the removal of the first floor entrance vestibule at the front of the building, of the Diorama mechanism itself, and the insertion of an upper floor to provide a chapel space at first floor, and a school space at the lower floor. The new levels also required new entrance steps. Important elements of the 1853 Chapel remain in the first set of steps from the entrance level and include the columns flanking the entrance to the Chapel through the original auditorium drum. Vestiges of the 1853 Romanesque screen enabled this screen to be reinstated in the 1990s when the second set of steps, curved and within the original Diorama auditorium drum, were replaced in replica. Important details from the period of the Chapel survive in the ceiling of the front entrance space.

Middlesex Hospital rheumatism clinic

8. In 1922 the Middlesex Hospital established a rheumatism clinic in the building: the first clinic of this kind in Britain (Planning Inspector's report 1987, at 10.6). It involved the addition of floors within the original 'picture rooms' with an octagonal central light well and roof-top lantern, with a treatment pool at its lowest level. The Planning Inspector in 1987 referred to the survival of 'the octagonal central light well and lantern, have both architectural and historic interest – this being the first clinic of its kind in Britain.' (Inspector's report 10.6). We also note the Inspector's comment on the 'attractive octagonal light well' (Inspector's report 10.12). Both octagonal central light well and lantern survive.

Proposals

9. The applicant proposes to retain the office use of the Diorama building itself, 18 Park Square East. The office would be mainly open-plan office, although with separate meeting rooms. A single user for the office space was anticipated.

10. The proposals, we were told pre-app, sought to 'recover the Diorama levels', removing the 1850s access stairs to the raised level of the chapel floor. These access stairs consist of the first set of steps from the entrance level and the second set, the curved stairs within the original Diorama drum. The flanking columns would also be demolished. This would enable the whole volume of the Diorama auditorium drum to be revealed. This volume would be lined in stock-brick, with glazed screens to the rear, a stair following the circumference of the drum with landings at three levels, and a pair of lifts. It was stated in the pre-application presentation that the possibility of revealing the fulcrum or

pivot on which the original auditorium itself turned through a glass insert in the new floor had been considered, but had not been taken up.

11. The rear section of the building would retain the octagon – though not its rooflight or lantern open to the sky – and the 1920s floor levels. There would be an extra storey on the roof, set back from the external walls.

The Advisory Committee’s response to the proposals for the Diorama and the 1823 period fabric

12. The Advisory Committee was very gravely concerned by the substantial loss of fabric, original and post-1850 fabric which the application scheme proposes. The principle that later work of merit is part of a building’s history, and should not be destroyed, was discussed and strongly endorsed. It was noted that some important elements from the post-1920s building would be retained, but only in part.

13. The applicant’s agents argued pre-application that the removal of this later work was justified because it would allow the recovery and exposure of the original Diorama structure (though not its mechanisms).

14. The Advisory Committee questions this claim.

15. The applicants claimed that the proposed entrance floor level would ‘recover the Diorama levels’, and ‘[reinstate] the original spatial hierarchy’. But this is not what the drawings (specifically here MW-A Proposed Section A-A at drawing P_20) show.

16. The original entrance level to no 18 Park Square East appears from the applicant’s drawings to be at the same level as the proposed level of the current front entrance hall (MW-A Proposed Section A-A at drawing P_20). That is, this existing level would appear to be unchanged in the proposal.

17. But the floor level within the drum (MW-A proposed ground floor plan at drawing P_02 and section A-A at drawing P_20) is then proposed to be at a lower level – 6 risers lower – than the front entrance level, creating a floor level which bears no relationship to the original working Diorama floor levels within the larger part of the drum. This original working level was either predominantly lower – accommodating the masonry pivot and bearing rails – or higher, for the public auditorium, which was a storey above. The proposed floor level within the drum does not recover the original predominant level within the drum. It creates a level which never existed as a floor level across the drum in the original building, or in the building as historically altered.

18. The Advisory Committee noted that, as part of the applications, the Bidwell’s Heritage Statement at 7.24 questions our pre-app advice in respect of the salon level. ‘The RPCAAC in their November 2019 pre-application comments objected to the alteration of the floor level of the Diorama saloon as the proposed lower level would be neither that of the 1850s or 1820s. The level of the lowest floor of the 1820s Diorama saloon is not known and so would be an approximation in any regard.’ While it is true that the actual level of the lowest floor of the 1823 Diorama salon is not precisely known, both the 1823 patent section and the printed 1823 plan show the levels including steps which allow a reasonable estimation of the floor level. What is unambiguously clear from the historical evidence is that the salon was accessed from first floor level and was a storey-height above the present proposed lower level, as we stated in our November pre-app advice.

19. We also question the implications of the lowering of the floor level in the drum for the original fabric of the Listed building. The demolition basement plan shows the demolition of the whole of the existing masonry substructure within the drum itself. This has been recognized as potentially, if still not certainly, original fabric, including elements of the surviving masonry foundations which supported the auditorium 'salon' (see Inspector's Report 1987 para 10.6). They were specifically retained in previous consents because of their potential significance. We would strongly object to their loss now. We note that no new investigation of survivals has been made available to us.

20. The Advisory Committee noted that, as part of the applications, the Bidwell's Heritage Statement at 7.25 questions our November pre-app advice. 'The RPCAAC also questioned 'the implications of the lowering of the floor level in the drum for the original fabric of the Listed building' and objected to the loss of the existing masonry piers which may date from the 1820s construction and have supported the saloon podium. Section drawings of the Diorama building from the patent in 1824 show there were masonry piers supporting the timber and metal structure which in turn supported the saloon floor and rotating mechanism. The entire saloon floor, timber and metal rotating structure have since been removed, however, and there is no evidence that the extant masonry structures date from the 1820s, whilst the position and scale of the masonry piers appear to be providing support for the later (1850s) structures above. Further investigation into the fabric of the structure would be required to help understand the age of these structures due to the fact that they have been completely rendered. If the masonry piers do date from the 1820s they would provide some evidence of the position of the saloon floor and scale of the podium supports, albeit compromised by considerable later alteration. Whilst their removal would result in a minor adverse impact on the significance of the listed building this harm could be mitigated through further investigation and recording of the structure.'

21. But the Advisory Committee made no comment in its pre-application advice on 'masonry piers'. We recognise masonry piers as part of the 1850s Chapel work but made no comment on them. We strongly refute Bidwell's argument that the removal of original fabric of a critical element of the construction of a unique surviving structure in the world – where historical evidence offers comparative reference for any surviving material evidence – in a Grade I Listed Building would 'result in a minor adverse impact'.

22. We also note that the proposals for the basement area are for plant and service provision like toilets. These could well be laid out to allow for any surviving fabric to be retained and revealed.

23. The proposals for the basement also conflict with the claim to be reinstating the original hierarchy of spaces: the proposed basement volume bears little resemblance to the original.

24. Given that it is common ground that the Diorama is a unique survival, we would expect that such a destructive approach should not be accepted. We strongly object to this element of the proposals. The structures of the lower ground floor are a critical element of the building. They are not acceptably remembered by a line in the floor.

25. Nor do the proposals reinstate the original spatial hierarchy. In the original Diorama, the front entrance hall was an enclosed space: it did not link directly, as now proposed, to the Diorama drum. The volumes of the entrance hall and the Diorama drum were distinct, and clearly dramatically so. It was the Chapel alterations which opened that link. In the absence of the Chapel alterations, it would misrepresent the history of the Diorama itself to do as proposed.

26. We have no objection of principle to the reinstatement of the original first floor vestibule as a board room but only in the context of a less destructive scheme overall, so that the significance of the volume is comprehensible.

27. The incorporation of the second and third floor front rooms of 18 Park Square East into the houses 17 and 19 Park Square East, and their separation from no 18, where they are part of the original plan, is harmful to the historic and architectural significance which derives from the interplay of the house plan – with its distinct, self-contained houses – with the exceptional Diorama plan. For further details of the Advisory Committee's advice on this issue please see our advice on those applications, refs 2020/0801/P + 2020/0844/L and 2020/0804/P + 2020/0845/L.

28. The treatment of upper levels of the drum as a void from the proposed lowered entrance level to the soffit of the proposed suspended office (MW-A Proposed Section A-A drawing P_20 and third floor plan P_05), and further to the rooflight, is a further confusion of the original historic perceived volumes of the Diorama. The original historic perceived volumes within the drum were subdivided by the horizontal enclosure of the viewing 'salon'. The proposals do not reinstate the original spatial hierarchy.

29. The Advisory Committee concluded that the proposals for the original entrance space and main auditorium drum of the Diorama do not reinstate the original perceived spaces, the spatial sequence and hierarchy, original main levels, or original perceived volumes, and do not justify the destruction either of surviving elements of the original Diorama building itself or later work. They would be overwhelmingly harmful to the historic and architectural character of the Grade I Listed Building and its unique significance.

The Baptist Chapel survivals

30. In reviewing pre-app a proposal for the building in February and April 2019, the Advisory Committee was prepared to envisage the demolition of the Baptist Chapel screen and the double-stair (Pre-app advice dated 30 April 2019 at 6.3). This was on the basis that the demolition would both (1) 'enable the volume of the original Diorama auditorium drum to be revealed, and (2) that 'It would then be important to retain and appropriately restore the other surviving elements of the 1853-54 Baptist Chapel conversion, including details to the ceiling of the front entrance space, and the columns flanking the entrance to the rotunda.' We also sought (3) that 'The surviving masonry foundations which supported the revolving auditorium (see Inspector's Report para 10.5) should also be retained as in previous consents.' We also sought provisions for public access, to which we return below.

31. It is clear that none of our three provisos allowing the demolition of the surviving Baptist Chapel fabric are met in the present application.

32. In considering the present applications, the Advisory Committee recognized and endorsed the important concern that, in Listed Buildings, features of merit from the later history of a building should normally be retained. We noted that the Planning Inspector in 1987 identified the survival of a significant amount of the 1850s Romanesque Chapel screen which he saw as 'worthy of retention if at all possible' at his para. 10.6. We acknowledge that the screen and the curved stairs were reconstructed in the 1990s (Insall 2014 Report p. 33 at 18 G1). But the first set of entrance stairs, and the columns flanking the entrance, with the details to the ceiling above the entrance, are of

considerable significance as additions from the 1850s Chapel to the earlier building. They are essential elements in the history and architectural richness of the Grade I Listed Building. It would be seriously harmful to the significance of the building demolish them.

Proposals for the rear part of the building including the former rheumatism clinic 1922

33. We would not object in principle to the roof addition, subject to our para. 34 below, and to detailed design which also ensured that there was no light emanation or reflection visible from neighbouring areas.

34. We object to the loss of the glazed rooflight or lantern to the 1920s octagon and note that the 1987 Inspector's report specifically mentioned the lantern. He referred to 'the octagonal central light well and lantern, have both architectural and historic interest – this being the first clinic of its kind in Britain.' (Inspector's report 10.6). We also note the Inspector's comment on the 'attractive octagonal light well' (Inspector's report 10.12). The 1920s lightwell with its lantern was a means of bringing natural light into the treatment space and pool below. We endorse the Planning Inspector's finding on its interest. It would be harmful to the special interest of the Listed Building to lose the lantern which is an integral part of the light well.

35. On the proposed entrance to the offices from Peto Place, we note the potential impact on neighbours but would not object in principle.

Public access

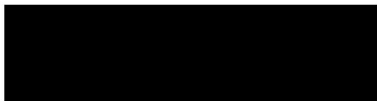
36. We argued in our pre-application advice for any consent to be accompanied by a legal agreement securing public access at reasonable times, as well as London Open House, to the fabric of the Diorama building, retained as set out in that advice. We advise that the destructive nature of the present applications would not be outweighed by public access to the building.

Conclusions

37. The Advisory Committee objects very strongly to the proposed destruction of surviving elements of the original Diorama building itself and of later (1850s and 1920s) work. The proposals would be overwhelmingly harmful to the historic and architectural significance of the Grade I Listed Building and its unique fabric.

38. We note that the current application proposals do not provide public benefit that would outweigh the harm to the exceptional heritage assets.

39. We are happy to discuss any aspect of this advice with officers.



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Chair RPCAAC