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Accessibility improvements and restorative work to listed building.

1. The Bloomsbury CAAC supported previous proposals for an external stairlift at the rear of this Grade II listed townhouse. These were refused under 2020/5385/L and 2020/4848/P. The decision was dismissed at appeal under references APP/X5210/W/21/3274863 and APP/X5210/Y/21/3274864.
2. The present scheme seeks to provide disabled access to all floors of the property, while proposing a number of alterations with the aim of enhancing the significance of the listed building. It is presumed that these alterations are proposed to offset the harm caused by the accessibility improvements to the building.

Accessibility alterations

3. The main element of the proposal under consideration is a proposed internal stairlift from ground to second floor, and an internal lift from second to third floor.
4. The installation of a stairlift would cause harm to the significance of the listed building. It would interrupt and obscure the elegance of the typical late Georgian staircase, and introduce an alien, bulky, and modern feature. Without further details, which have not been supplied, it is difficult to say more about this element of the proposal.
5. The internal lift from second to third floor would introduce a further alien, modern feature to the historic building, upsetting the plan form considerably at second and third floor. The lift would be centrally placed and appears as a circular 'tube' extending from floor to ceiling. Without further details, it is difficult to say more about this element of the proposal, except for that it would cause further harm.

Heritage alterations

6. The scheme seeks permission for a number of alterations aimed at enhancing the significance of the listed building. These mainly pertain to replacing the front balcony, replacing a number of modern windows with traditionally detailed sash windows, reinstating a fireplace, modern partitions, and a fanlight.

7. There is a lack of detail which makes the benefit of these proposals difficult to understand. Juliet balconies were often later additions and there is therefore no guarantee that replicating those at 7 and 8 restores the heritage asset. There are also a number of fanlight designs and there is as such no guarantee that the existing fanlight is not original. It is similarly difficult to understand whether any of the proposed alterations genuinely conserve the building, although certain alterations such as replacing the modern window and under-stair entrance at lower ground floor would enhance the significance of the listed building.

Neutral Alterations

8. There are also a number of neutral alterations, such as glazing the rooftop room, and making alterations to the 1951 closet wing.

Impact of Proposals on Significance

9. It is clear that the proposals have capacity to cause quite considerable harm to the significance of the listed building, at least in the short to medium term. There is a lack of detail about the proposed stairlift and the internal lift to be able to properly assess the level of harm. Conversely, there is also a lack of detail about the proposed beneficial alterations which makes it difficult to weigh these against any harm. Nevertheless, the intention of these proposals is clearly to bring benefit to the significance of the building.
10. We disagree with the applicant that the internal lift from second to third floor causes no harm. Paragraph 15 of the appeal decision states about the previous internal lift: 'this installation would dominate these rear-facing rooms and result in a further harmful disruption to the plan form of the property, substantially altering the proportions of these rooms. Whilst I accept that the plan form of the second and third floors have already been harmfully eroded due to previous alterations, this does not in itself justify a further harmful intervention. In this regard, the internal lift would amount to an unsympathetic addition to the property, at odds with the historic plan form of the property and thereby resulting in clear harm to the heritage asset.'
11. The proposed benefits are of moderate importance to the conservation of the heritage asset when taken as whole.

Conclusion

12. The Bloomsbury CAAC must regretfully object to the current application due to a lack of detail about the accessibility alterations and their impact upon significance.
13. It is considered that a stairlift is acceptable in principle subject to appropriate choice of design and general detailing. This is because a stairlift is a demountable and entirely reversible installation that would not affect the long-term conservation of this heritage asset. Nonetheless its presence in the building, even in the short term, would cause harm that should be offset.
14. The CAAC has greater reservations about the proposed internal lift from second to third floor. It is acknowledged that these floors have been substantially altered and have largely lost their significance in plan form and historic features. The existing stair is too small for the stairlift to be continued. It is suggested that restorative efforts be focused on these floors, where the greatest benefit could be brought through reinstating proper room divisions and a traditionally detailed staircase which could accommodate a stairlift. The proposed circular stairlift, especially in its prominent, shared, central position, would be an entirely alien feature to a building of this type.

15. Further detail is required about the proposed benefits to ensure that they successfully offset any harm brought through these alterations. In the event of any eventually approval, conditions should be attached to ensure the benefits are implemented and to an appropriate standard.

Bloomsbury Conservation Areas
Advisory Committee