

Vernon-Sicilian House & 21 Southampton Row

Conservation Officer Comments - HBA Response
December 2022

halebrown

Introduction

This document has been prepared in order to address some of the comments received by the London Borough of Camden's Conservation and Heritage team on 9 November, 2022, regarding the proposed refurbishment works to Vernon and Sicilian House and 21 Southampton Row, which constitute Project 1 of the Holborn Links Estate.

This document will address the following comments:

1. In 21 Southampton Row, the primary staircase should remain in its original position
2. In 21 Southampton Row, the bike access should be limited to a lift only.
3. In 21 Southampton Row, the rear windows should remain as existing.
4. In 21 Southampton Row, the small staircase leading to rear yard should not increase in width and remain as existing.
5. In 21 Southampton Row, whilst the opening up works in ground floor are now supported, can the opening created to the right of the entrance (which leads to adjacent unit at Sicilian Avenue) be reduced in size and have a legible down stand?
6. Along the Sicilian Avenue retail parade, all historic staircases should be retained.
7. Along the Sicilian Avenue retail parade, the openings created between each unit at ground floor should be reduced - i.e. more wall should be retained to ensure the small-scale plan form is legible.
8. On the upper office floors of Sicilian and Vernon House, the vertical walls that contained fireplaces should be retained.
9. ON the upper floors of Sicilian and Vernon House, efforts should be made to reinstate historic features - e.g. parquet flooring, cornices, and hearth stones of fireplaces.
10. On the upper office floors of Sicilian and Vernon House, the lightwells should remain as existing with WCs moved internally.
11. At the roof level extension, can the window be repositioned to respond to the fenestration below?

It is hoped that this document will demonstrate that the design team has made every effort to accommodate the comments received and where it has not been possible to do so, a full explanation has been given.

Conservation Officer comment - 01

**'In 21 Southampton Row, the primary staircase should remain
in its original position.'**



Existing office view pre-strip out



Sketch proposed office view

Improving the office floors 21 Southampton - Reconfigured Core

- Retention of the existing stair and lift arrangement was extensively explored by the design team however, all options resulted in either compromised access routes into the offices, or significant loss of office floor area which impacted the viability of the refurbishment
- As the structural integrity of the existing stair is questionable and it cannot provide a landing with level access to the office floors it has to be completely replaced
- Both lifts also need to be completely replaced due to their age and condition, with the lift in the centre of the stairs also requiring a new shaft
- Due to the level of refurbishment works that are required reconfiguring the core's layout while retaining its central location is considered reasonable
- The reconfigured layout would offer direct access into the offices via glazed doors providing a great first impression and views of the improved office floor plates, similar to the historic arrangement.
- The benefit of this arrangement is considered to maximise the viability of the refurbishment works, maximising the office space's potential to attract the necessary tenants in a demanding market
- Reconfiguring the core also allows for other benefits such as providing an improved protected means of escape and improved fire safety



View with direct access

Improving the office floors 21 Southampton - Historic Floor Plan



Typical historic floor plan

- In its original configuration, the main core to 21 Southampton Row consisted of a stair wrapping around a hoist lift
- The floor plate was divided in two by large masonry walls which incorporated large swing doors
- A secondary stair was positioned within the floor plate providing access to the rear service yard
- Adjacent to this secondary stair was a small goods lift which again provided direct access to the rear service yard
- WC's were located behind the central stair accessed from the floor plate
- Access to the larger floor plate was directly from the main central stair offering good first impressions of the open floor plate and circular columns in the middle

Improving the office floors 21 Southampton - 70's reconfigured plan

- In the 1970's extensive alterations were undertaken to the office floor plates



Typical floor plan Pre strip out works



Existing core pre strip out

A photograph of a carpeted hallway. On the left is a wooden door with a small window. The floor is covered in a grey and black patterned carpet. A white wall is on the right, and a wooden door frame is visible on the far right.

Diagram illustrating a building floor plan with accessibility issues. The plan shows a central core area with a 'Refuge point' (wheelchair icon) and a 'DDA Lift'. A 'Small Lift' is also present. Red dashed lines and arrows indicate 'No Direct Access' and 'Compromised access route'. Red text labels point to 'No refuge point within core', 'Stepped access', 'Door swing encroached on stairs', and 'Ramped access'. A '1400mm' dimension is shown for a doorway. Green dashed lines and arrows indicate 'Compromised access route'.

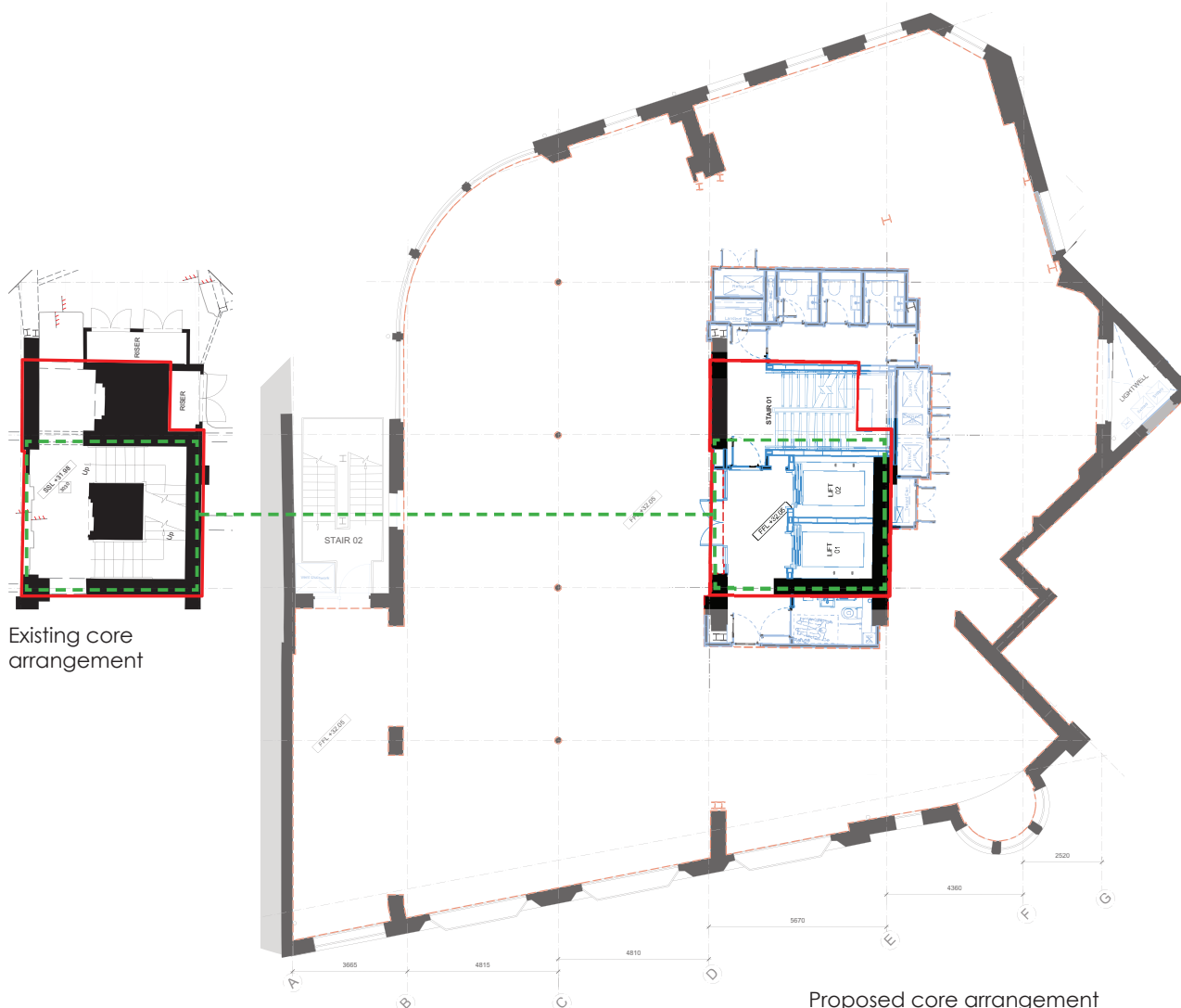
Improving the office floors

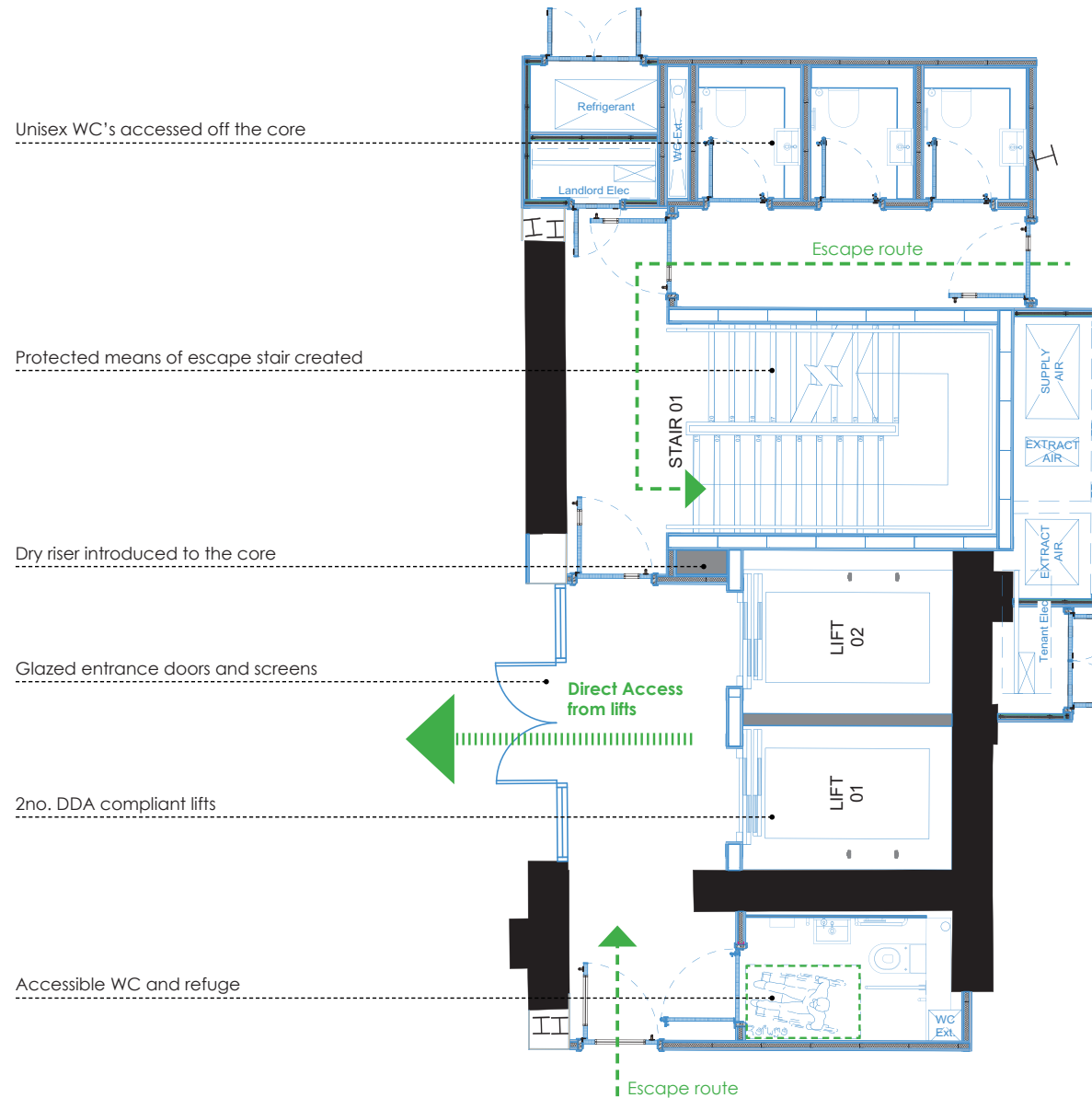
21 Southampton - 70's reconfigured core

- Undertaken as part of the extensive historic alterations a second DDA compliant lift was constructed adjacent to the stair as the central lift could not be DDA compliant due to space restriction created by the stair
- However, due to the existing landing by the stairs not being the same level as the office floors the new lift landing was set at a higher level with a trip hazard step
- With the second internal stair also being demolished and replaced with the current external escape stair, lobbies were still required between the existing core escape stairs and office spaces
- The lobbies that were created were however not compliant with current building regulation standards
- While the lobby next to the new lift did provide level access to the office, it did not have the required clear width between the doors
- The door also swung in the wrong direction for means of escape and did not provide level access to a refuge point within the core
- On the other side the lobby closest to the stairs compromised the escape width of the stairs due to its door swing
- Additionally it had restricted space between door swings with the space also being ramped, making general access tricky and difficult
- Overall the configuration resulted in very compromised access routes into the offices, that created poor first impressions and removed the direct access and uninterrupted views of the open floor plate that the original stair and lift provided

Improving the office floors 21 Southampton - Location of the core

- Within the feedback from Camden's Conservation and Heritage team much significance has been given to the position of the central stair with 21 Southampton Row
- While it has been acknowledged that the current staircase is modern the feedback is that it is in the historic position
- Repositioning the stair within the central floor plate is therefore not a discussion regarding removal of historic fabric but of how circulation through the building is read
- Taking this into consideration and reflecting on how people travel through multistory buildings today, it is felt that by positioning the lifts which will be the primary vertical circulation route, in the location of the original stairs, how people travel through the building will more accurately reflect how they did when the building was first constructed
- The central direct access point onto the floor plates from the lifts will also more accurately reflect how people originally arrived at each level
- If access to the floors is via lobbies similar to the 70's configuration then this original sense of arrival will be lost
- Additionally while it is proposed to relocate the stairs, to form a protected means of escape, discussed on following pages, it is believed that their retained central location maintains their historical significances within the overall floor plan
- If the location of the stairs was to be retained another modern stair would need to be constructed to remove the stepped landing levels created by the 70's arrangement
- Based on the finished floor to floor levels and the space restrictions of the current stair configuration a new stair in the current location would have steps whose risers would be more than current building regulations
- Reconfiguring the core also allows for other benefits such as providing an improved protected means of escape and improved fire safety





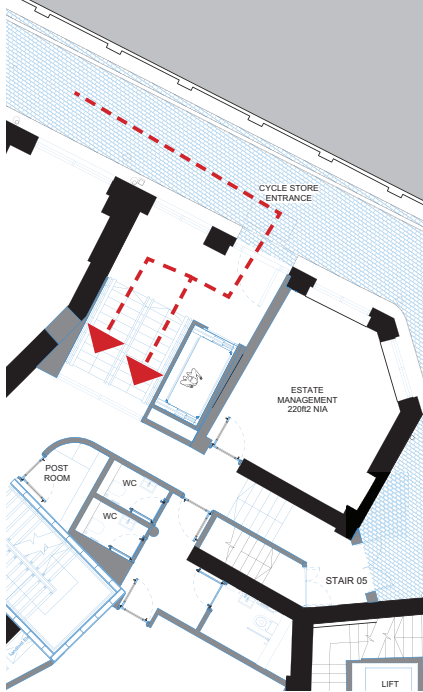
Proposed core plan

Improving the office floors 21 Southampton - Proposed

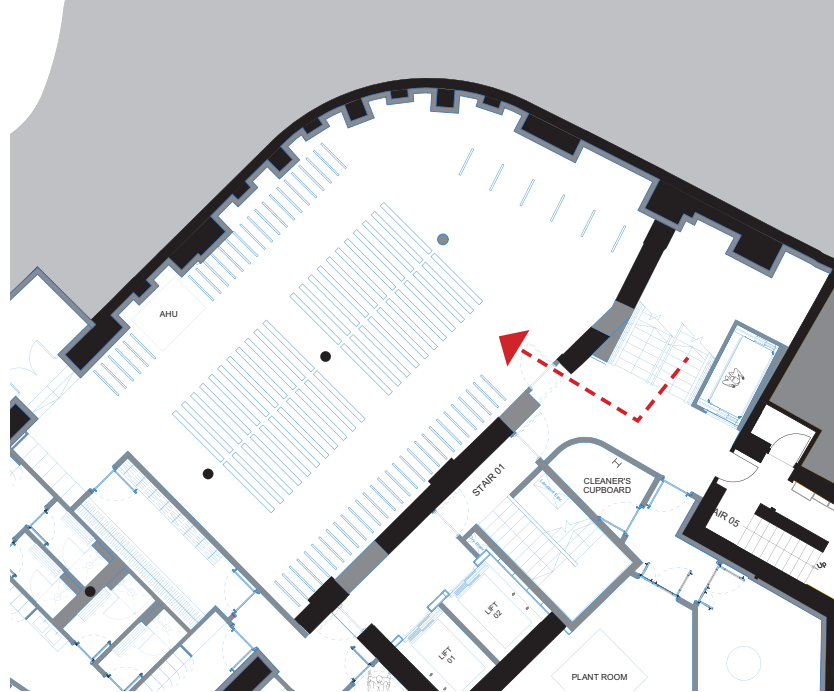
- The proposals look to reconfigure the core to create a compliant lobbied arrangement with improved direct level access into the offices.
- The reconfiguration also enables the construction of a new protected escape stair through the building, in an arrangement with the lifts that will provide improved fire safety and other benefits such as a Dry Riser.
- The improved lift lobby will benefit from direct access and views into the office, similar to how people would have originally arrived on the floors.
- Adjacent to the two new DDA compliant lifts will be an accessible WC and fire safety refuge space.
- 3no. unisex WC's will be positioned so access is directly off the core, improving the usability of the office space.
- New service routes from new risers can also be created within the reconfigured core, avoiding larger ductwork having to pass through the office space and below existing downstand beams.
- This allows new energy efficient fancoils to be positioned closer to the core, so floor to ceiling heights can be maximised around the perimeter exposed more of the original ceiling heights.
- This also avoids the requirement for ceilings to be positioned lower than the tops of existing windows while also allowing the decorative capitals of the existing central columns to be exposed on the lower floors.
- By reconfiguring the core and centralising the lifts as the new primary form of circulation through the building, a large number of benefits including fire safety, DDA compliance, improved servicing strategy and the usability of the building and offices can be unlocked.

Conservation Officer comment - 02

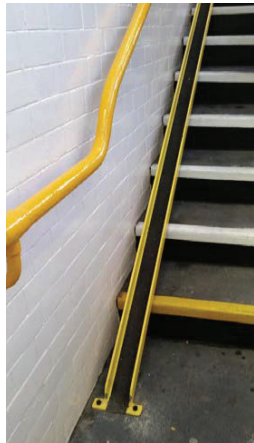
**'In 21 Southampton Row, the bike access should
be limited to a lift only.'**



Ground Floor entrance



Basement cycle store



Stair cycle ramp

Improving the basement Creating Shared Amenity Space

- For the new bike store and changing facilities to function as a real amenity space for the wider estate it has to be easily accessible
- To reduce the level difference between the entrance and the basement cycle store area down to 1.8m, the entrance door at ground floor has been positioned at the lowest viable part of the rear service yard
- The historic drawings also suggest that there was an access door within that bay
- While the platform lift will provide improved access to the basement storage area, as it is only feasible to install a platform lift, travel times over the 1.8m distance will be relatively slow compared to a conventional traction lift
- At peak times in the morning and evening, if access was limited to just one person using the platform lift, taking into account the 172 people capable of using the amenity space, waiting times would be excessive, resulting in the amenity space becoming impractical to use
- With the inclusion of two wide staircases incorporating side ramps it is understood that access at these busier times would become acceptable and practical
- It is worth noting that the proposals are broadly in line with the borough's Planning Guidance, which states that:

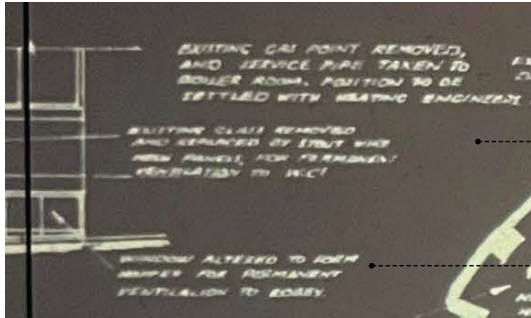
8.15: Cycle parking should be provided off-street, within the boundary of the site and close to the site entrance. Cycle parking needs to be accessible ... and secure ... Security is a critical concern and careful consideration must be given to the location, design, enclosure and surveillance of all cycle parking.

8.16: The route to cycle parking from street level must be step free. If level access is unachievable, the cycle parking must be accessible via a ramp or a lift that is adequate in size to accommodate a cycle and its user. Lifts should measure a minimum of 2m X 2m, although where many users are likely to arrive at a similar time, for example at a large office development, lifts will not be an acceptable option, as convenient access would be compromised

Conservation Officer comment - 03

'In 21 Southampton Row, the rear windows should remain as existing.'

Activating the ground floor 21 Southampton - Proposed Service Yard



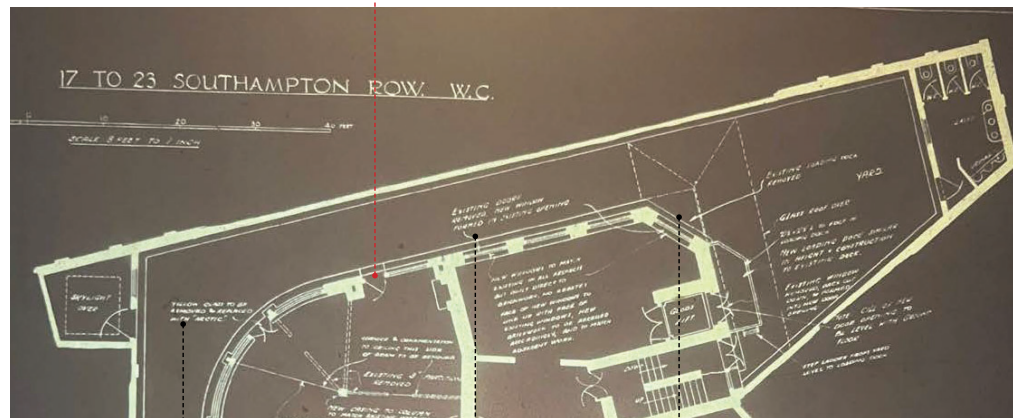
Extract from historic basement drawing

Existing glass removed and replaced by steel wire glass panels, for permanent ventilation to

Window altered to form for permanent ventilation to.....

- The proposals look to retain the spacing and rhythm of the existing opening in the rear service yard elevation, while improving their appearance to more 'front of house'
- The historic archive floor plans sent to Camden demonstrate that the windows have historically been altered with some converted from windows to doors and visa versa
- As part of the works the existing plant and service runs along this elevation will be removed

Indicated door has been removed



Yellow glass to be removed & Replaced with 'Arctic'

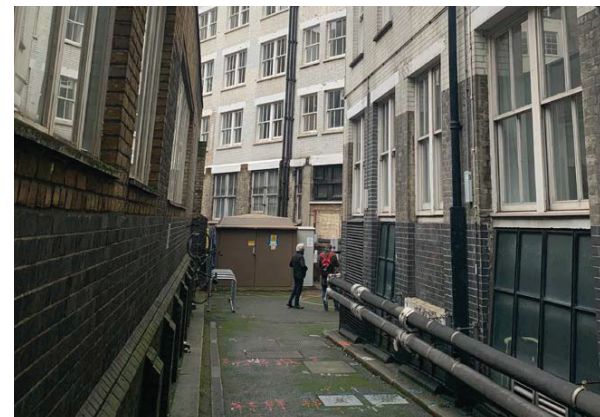
Existing doors removed, new window formed in existing opening

Existing loading dock removed

Extract from historic ground floor drawing

Vernon-Sicilian House & 21 Southampton Row

Planning Response - December 2022



Existing windows and plant runs

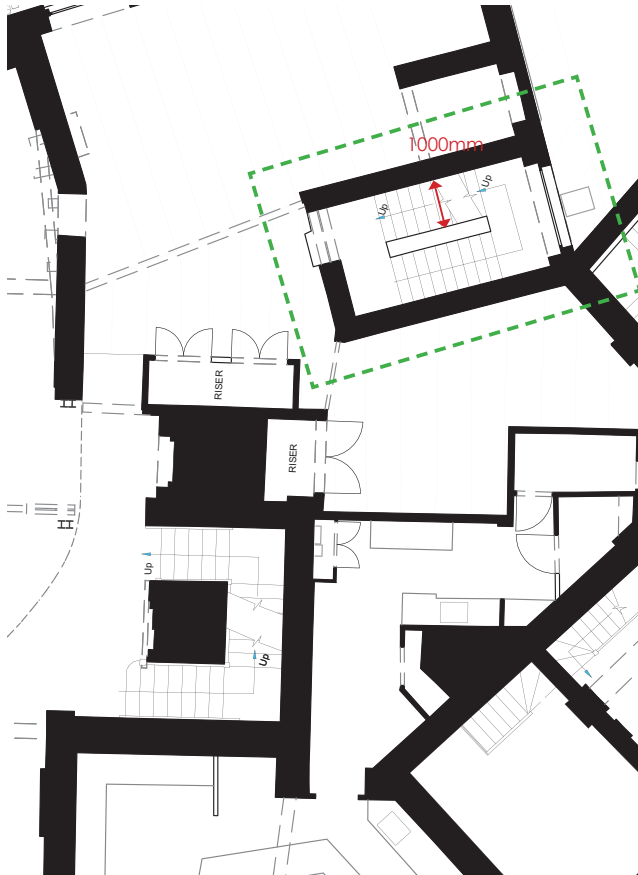


Proposed sketch view

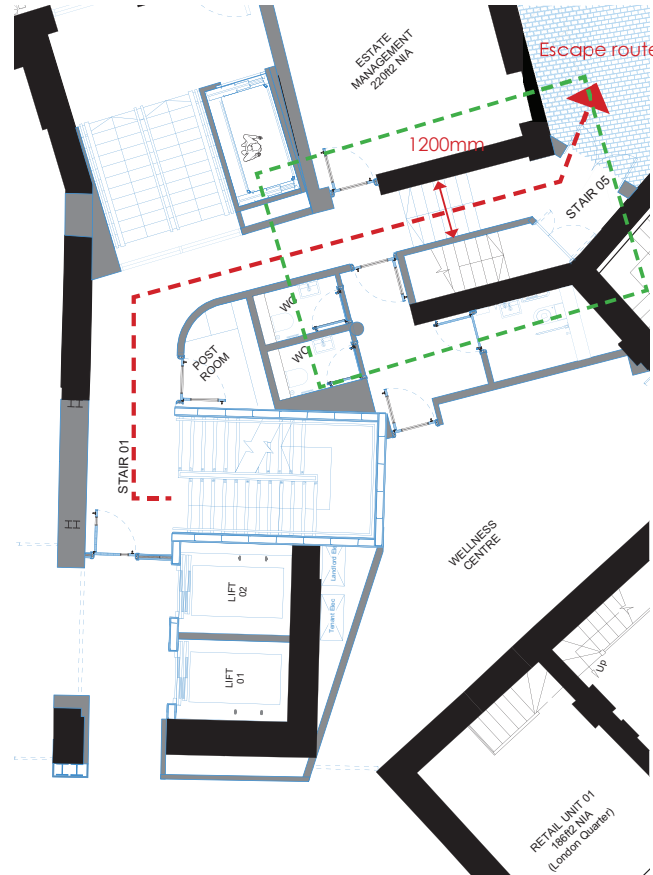
Conservation Officer comment - 04

'In 21 Southampton Row, the small staircase leading to rear yard should not increase in width and remain as existing.'

Activating the ground floor 21 Southampton - Proposed Service Yard



Extract from stripped out ground floor plan

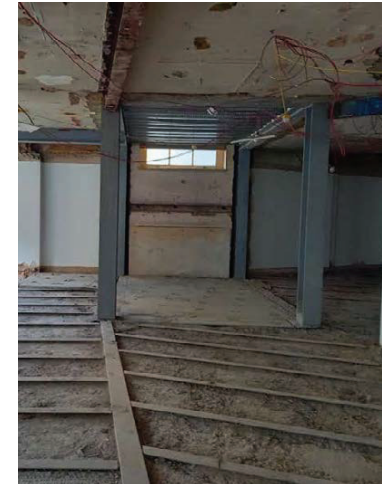


Extract from proposed ground floor plan

- As part of the reconfiguration of the core at ground floor it is proposed that the final escape exit from the new stair will be via the rear service yard
- In line with the buildings new fire strategy, to maintain a consistent clear width of 1200mm along the escape route the stairs leading to the service yard from ground floor will need to be replaced
- On the upper floors this secondary stair has already been removed as part of the building's previous extensive alterations



Existing stair



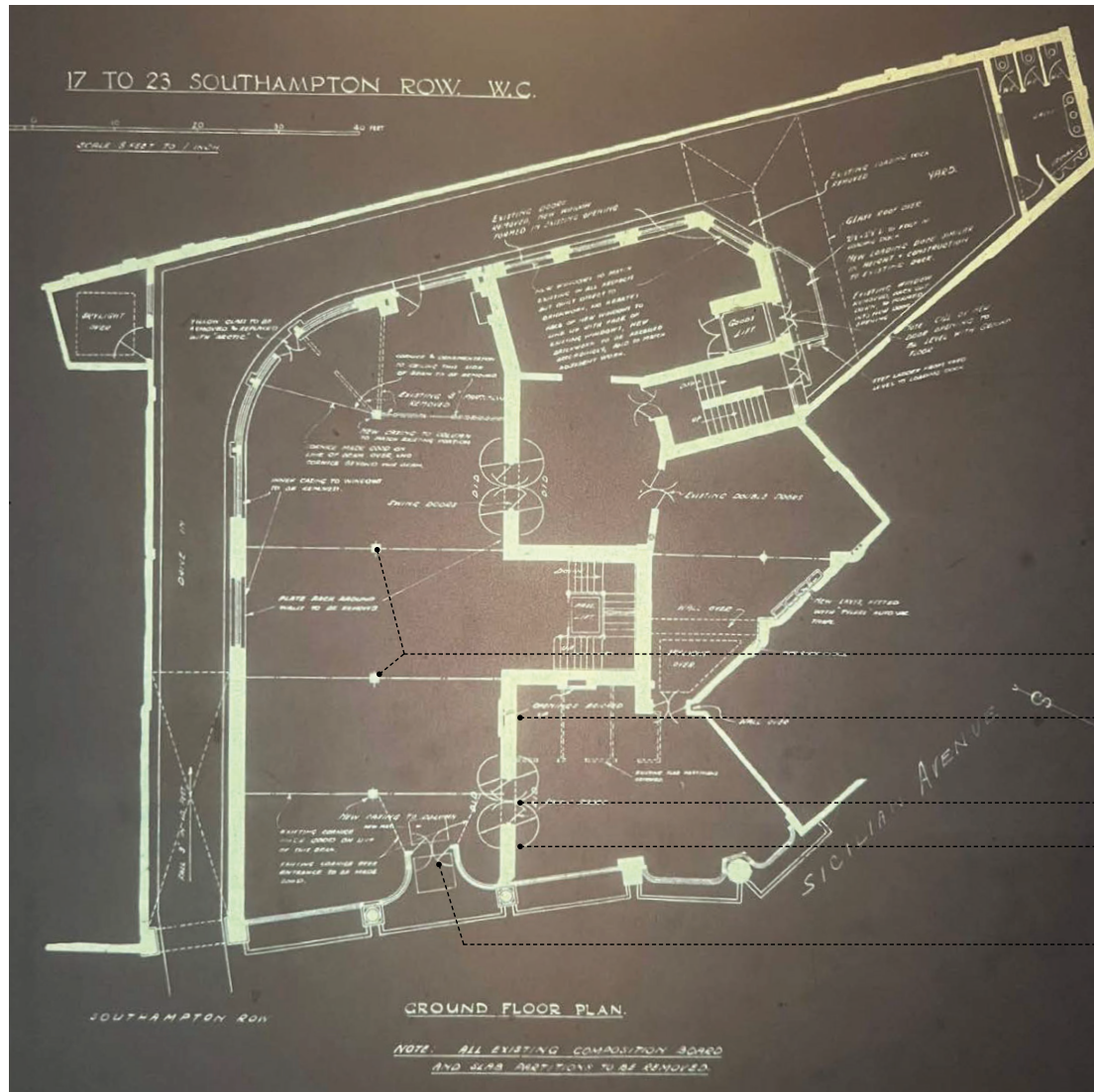
Location of stair at upper levels

Conservation Officer comment - 05

'In 21 Southampton Row, whilst the opening up works in ground floor are now supported, can the opening created to the right of the entrance (which leads to adjacent unit at Sicilian Avenue) be reduced in size and have a legible down stand.'

Activating the ground floor

21 Southampton - Historic Ground Floor



- The historic ground floor plan shows that the entrance doors were originally set back within the facade and that the reception was open plan through to the rear of the building
- On the right hand side a masonry wall divided the ground floor and defined a central core location
- Within this wall there were a number of openings including two sets of large double swing doors
- The proposals to create an open plan reception space accessed via recessed entrance doors therefore reflects the historic layout

Circular columns

Opening within wall noted as 'Opening blocked up'

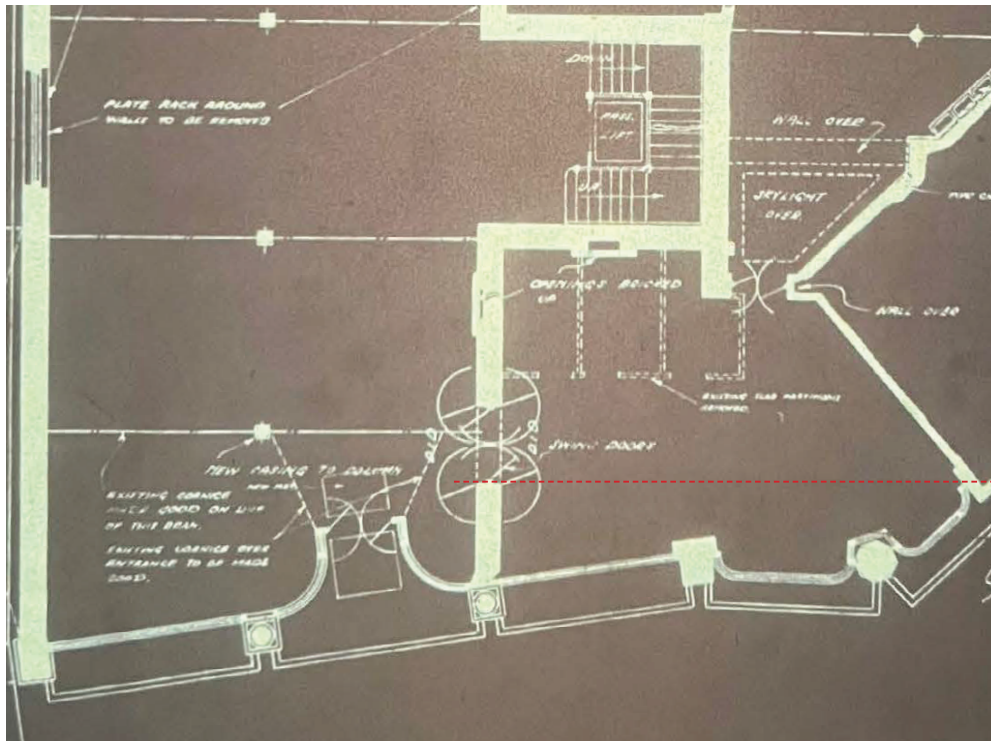
Large double swing doors

Masonry separation wall

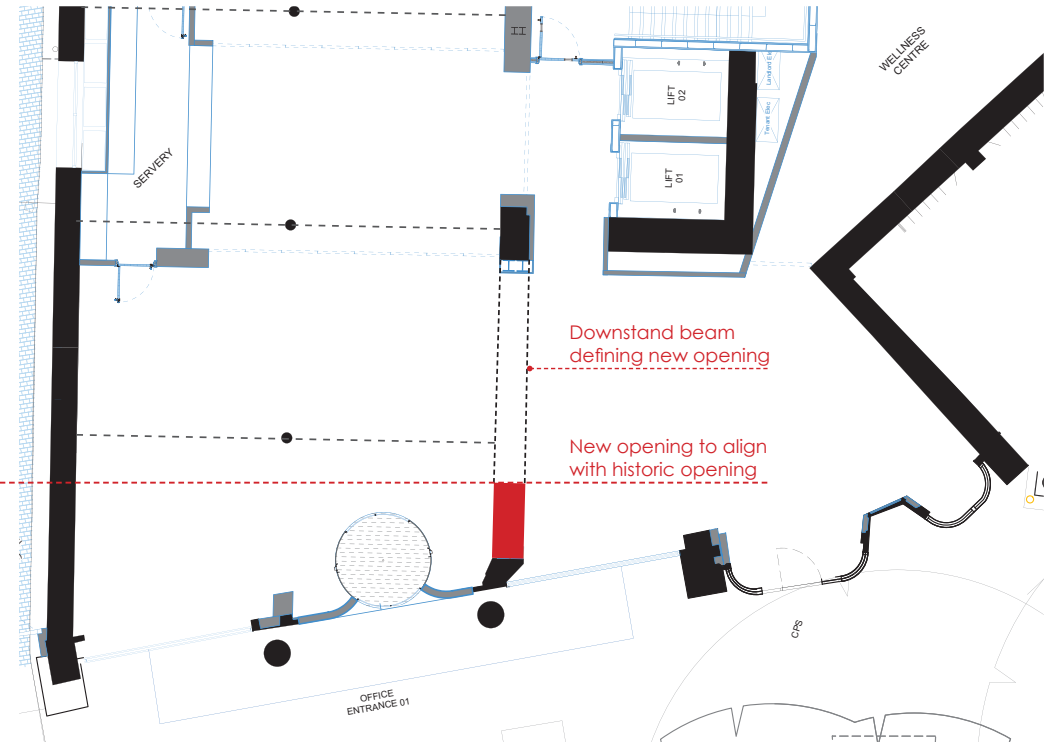
Entrance doors set back within facade

Activating the ground floor 21 Southampton - Historic Ground Floor

- At the front of the building the submitted proposals show the removal of most of the separation wall
- From review of the layout and the position of the original opening more of the wall could be retained and its original location defined within the space via a downstand beam
- The revised opening would align with the historic door opening



Extract from historic ground floor drawing



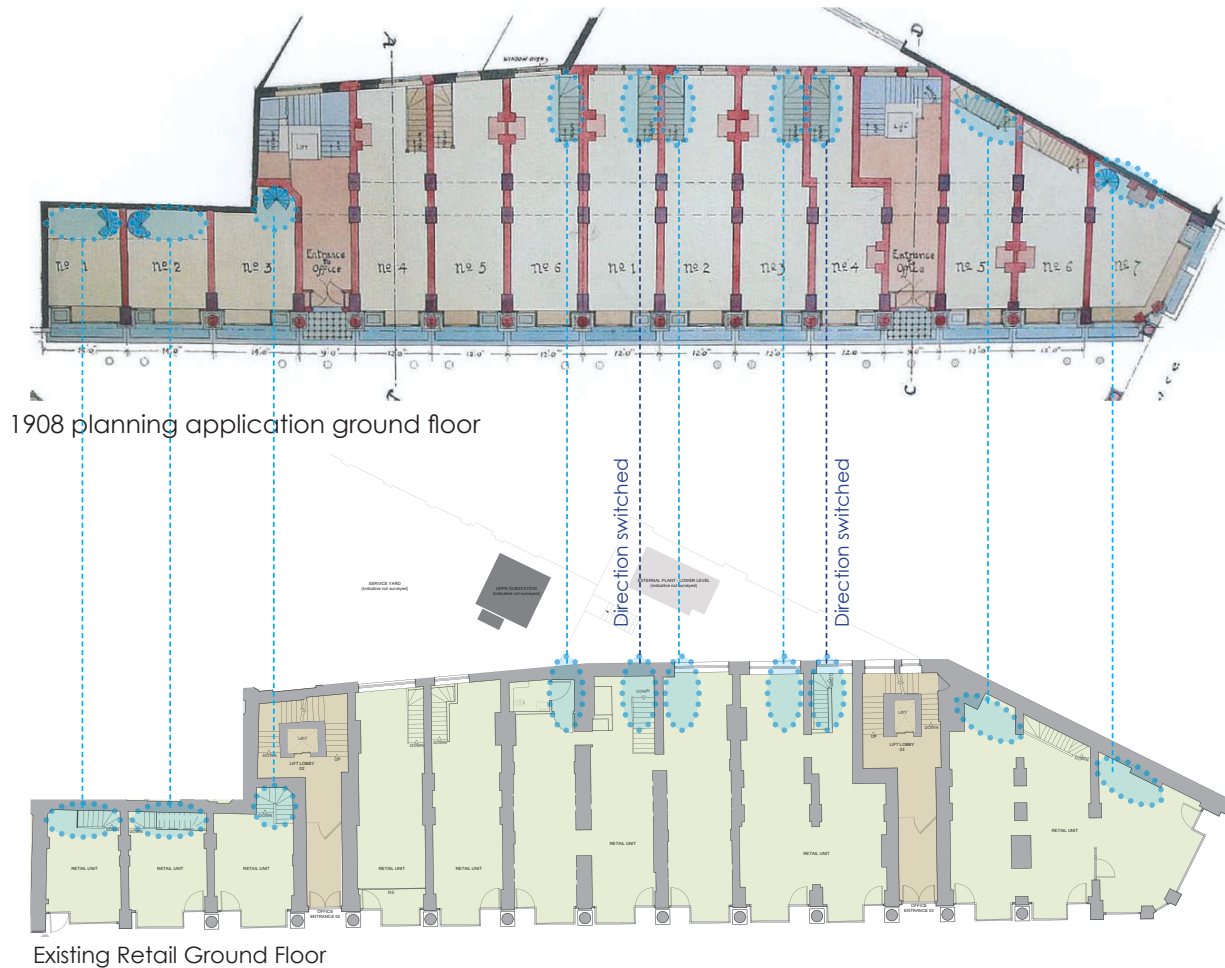
Proposed ground floor showing revised wall opening

Conservation Officer comment - 06

**'Along the Sicilian Avenue retail parade, all historic staircases
should be retained.'**

The Retail Strategy

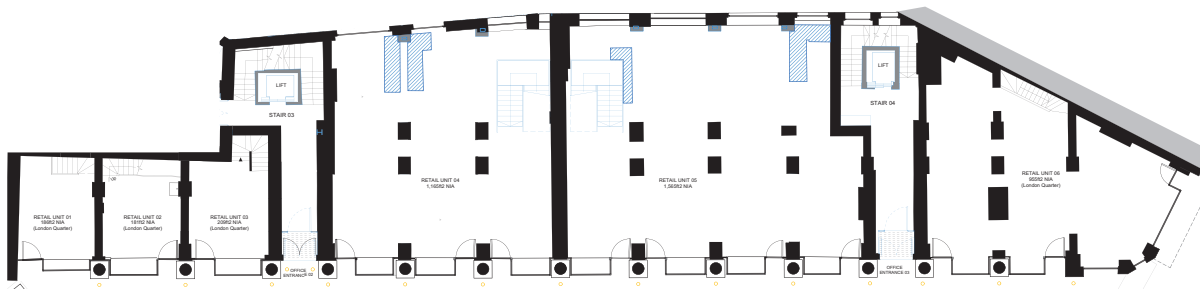
Existing Ground Stair Arrangement



- Review of the 1908 Approved planning application drawings suggests that potentially 10no. of the original timber staircases within the 13 retail units have either been removed or had their configuration changed
- Due to the narrow width of the staircases the basements have historically not been particularly accessible to the general public, meaning they have typically been used as back of house areas and store rooms
- As advised the configuration of the existing units is not in line with current market demands, with the configuration of the remaining walls and narrow staircases to the basements not providing the flexibility modern retailers require
- This has led to the units proving difficult to let at competitive rents
- Currently of these units only 1no. tenant remains, although they are now due to leave shortly
- As such the once thriving pedestrianised retail street has become a deserted cut through

The Retail Strategy

Proposed Ground Floor Arrangement



Proposed Retail Ground Floor

- The proposed retail amalgamation works are limited to the units between the cores of Vernon and Sicilian Houses
- Within these units it is proposed to remove the remaining separating masonry walls but retain the high strength brick piers, to create 2no. larger more open plan units
- This arrangement is driven by the market requirement to create two larger flexible units with basement fully accessible to the public
- While this arrangement would remove 2 staircases understood to be original, retaining these staircase for general public access and use is not possible due to their restricted widths.
- As the retail units are being enlarged, access to the basement will need to comply with the requirements of Approved document K of the Building Regulations, which states that for buildings other than dwellings, stairs should have a width of 1200mm. All of the existing staircases in the retail units have widths less than 1200mm.

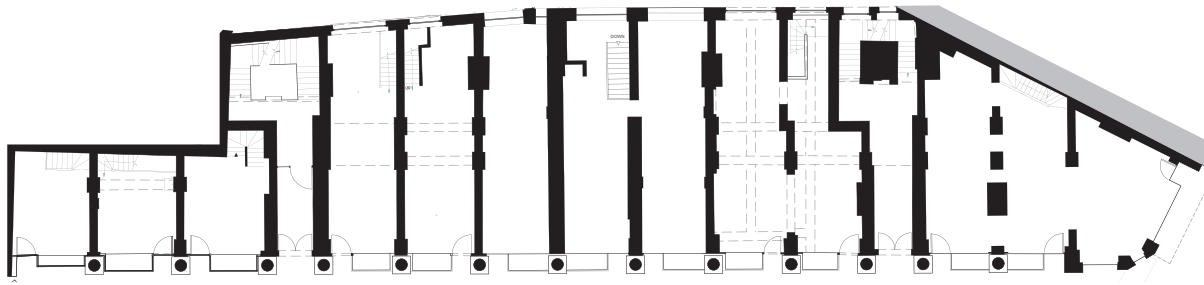
Conservation Officer comment - 07

'Along the Sicilian Avenue retail parade, the openings created between each unit at ground floor should be reduced – i.e., more wall should be retained to ensure the small-scale plan form is legible.'

'(N.B., this is not required at basement level).'

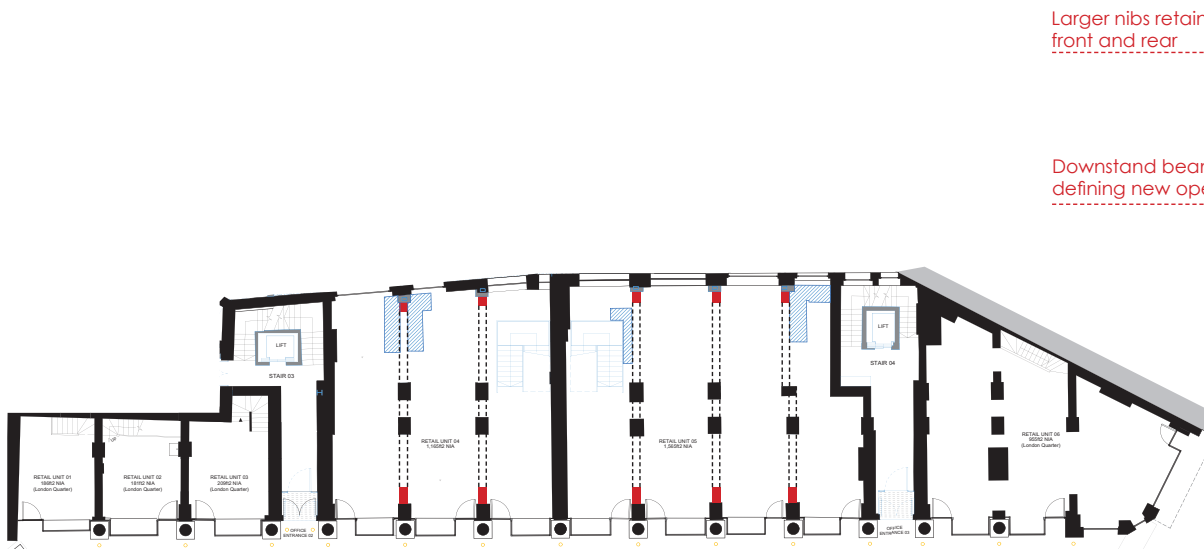
The Retail Strategy

Existing & Proposed Ground Floor

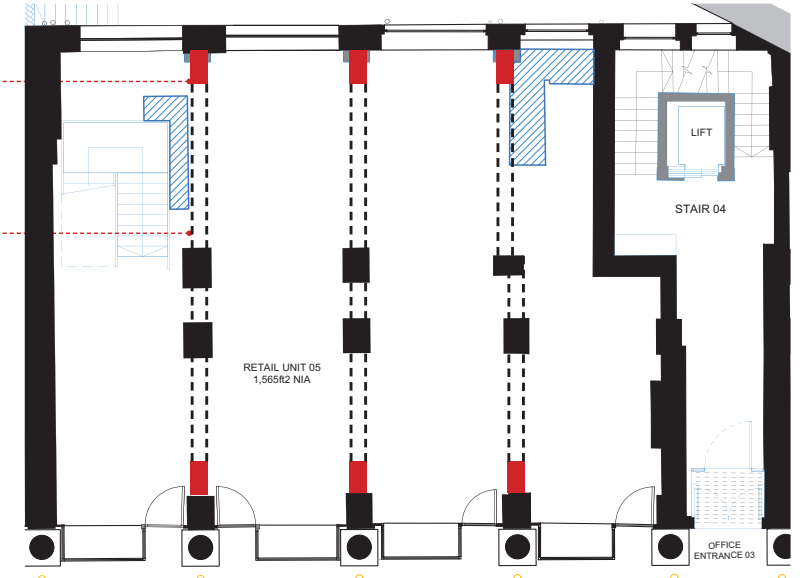


Existing Retail Ground Floor

- In order to ensure the small-scale plan form is more legible within the amalgamated units the revised proposals would look to retain larger nibs at the front and rear of the units where separation walls are proposed to be removed
- The walls locations would be further defined within the space via deeper downstand beams
- When viewed from both externally and internally the rhythm of the original unit bays would be clearly legible



Proposed Retail Ground Floor - showing revised structural proposals



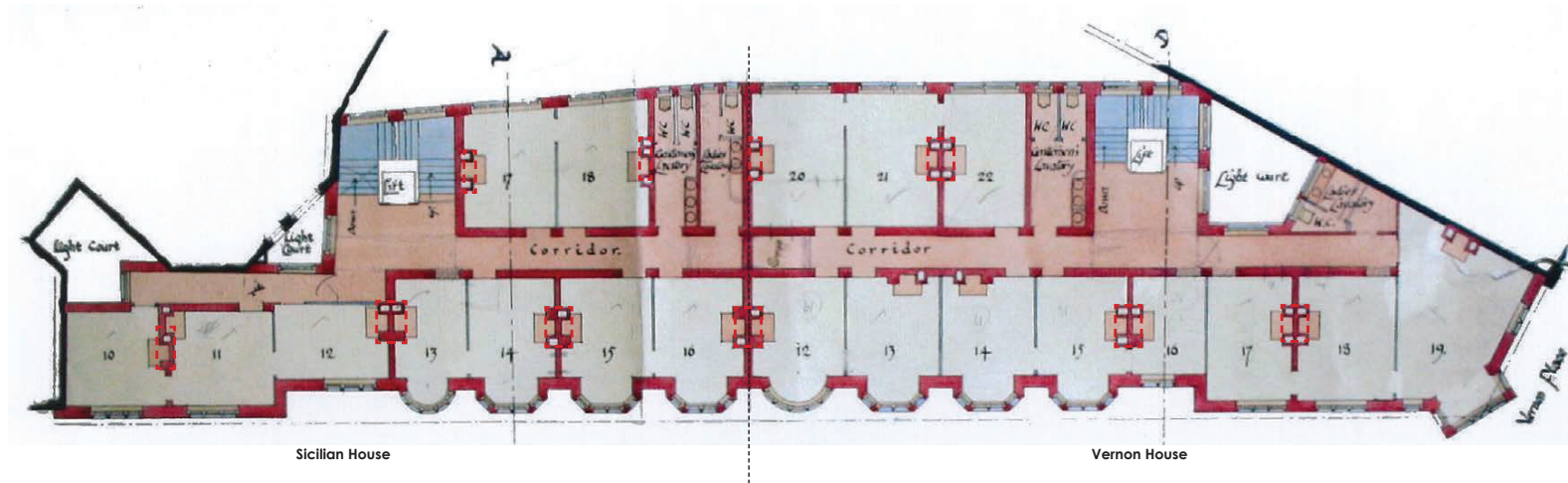
Revised structural works

Conservation Officer comment - 08

'On the upper office floors of Sicilian and Vernon House, the vertical walls that contained fireplaces should be retained.'

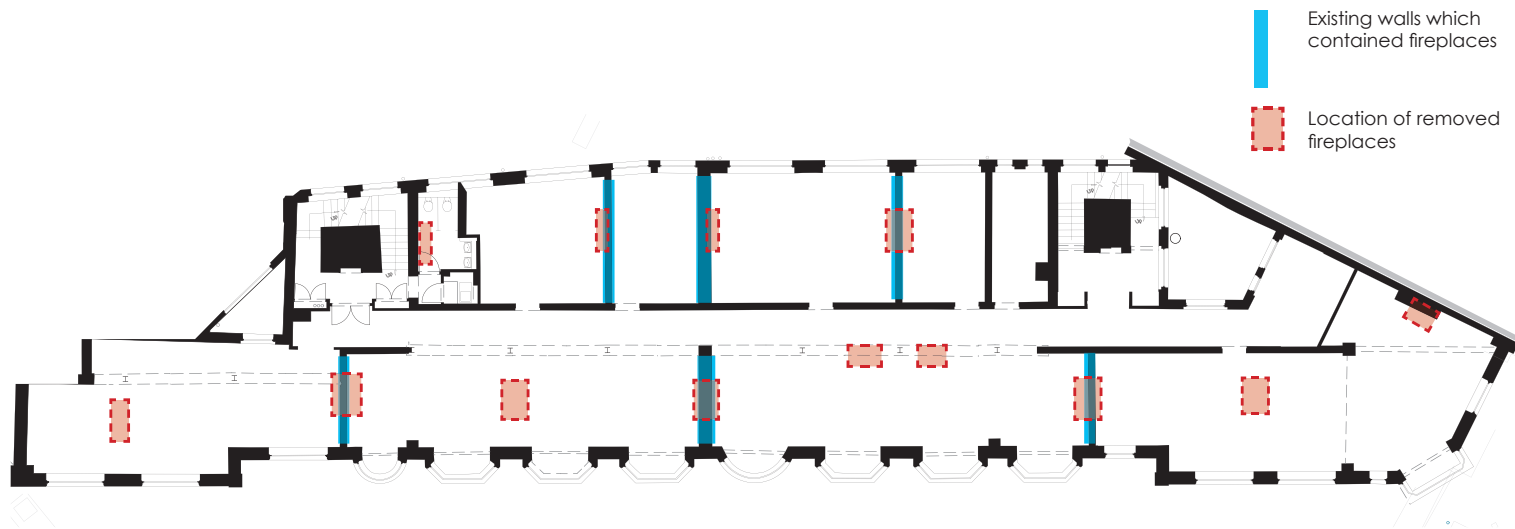
Improving the office floors

Vernon & Sicilian Hse - Existing arrangement

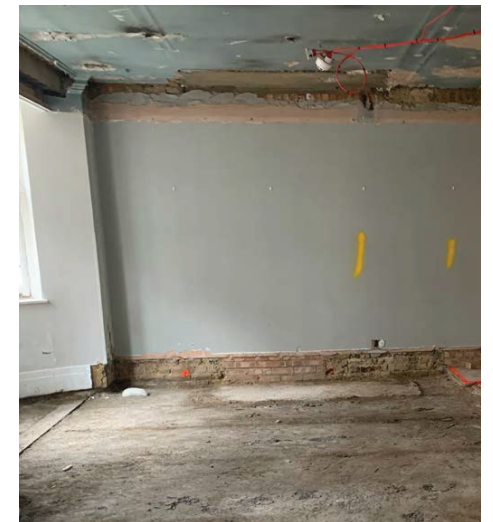


Original 1908 drawing

- Subsequent to the approved strip out works, the extent of alterations undertaken to the office walls in the 1970's is clearly evident
- While some walls remain where chimneys had been positioned, the chimney breasts and hearth stones have been removed and chimney flues have been filled with modern bricks

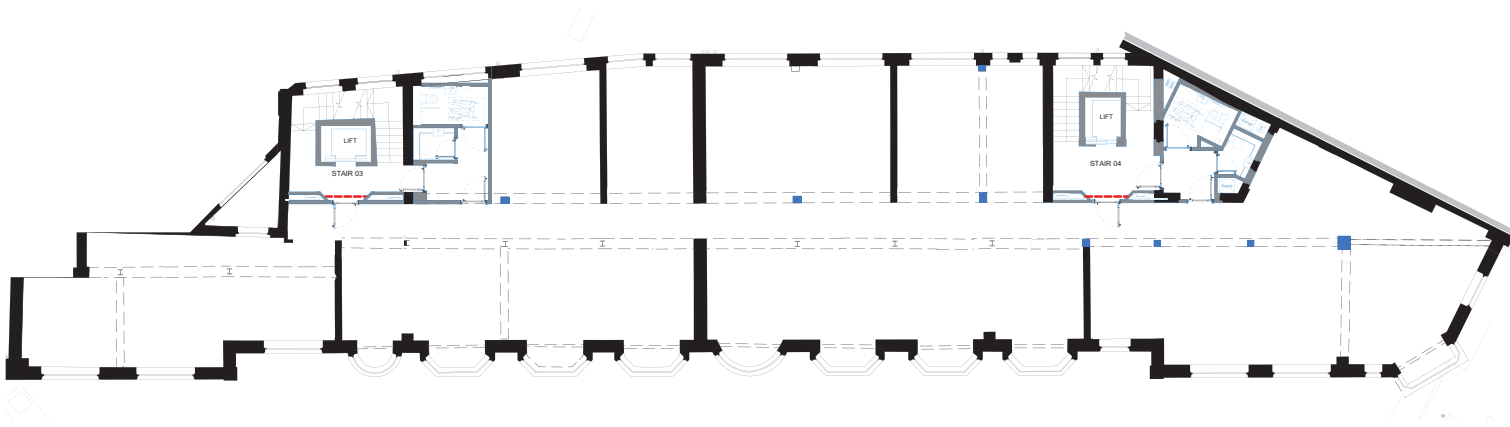


Existing Second floor plan indicating position of historic chimneys

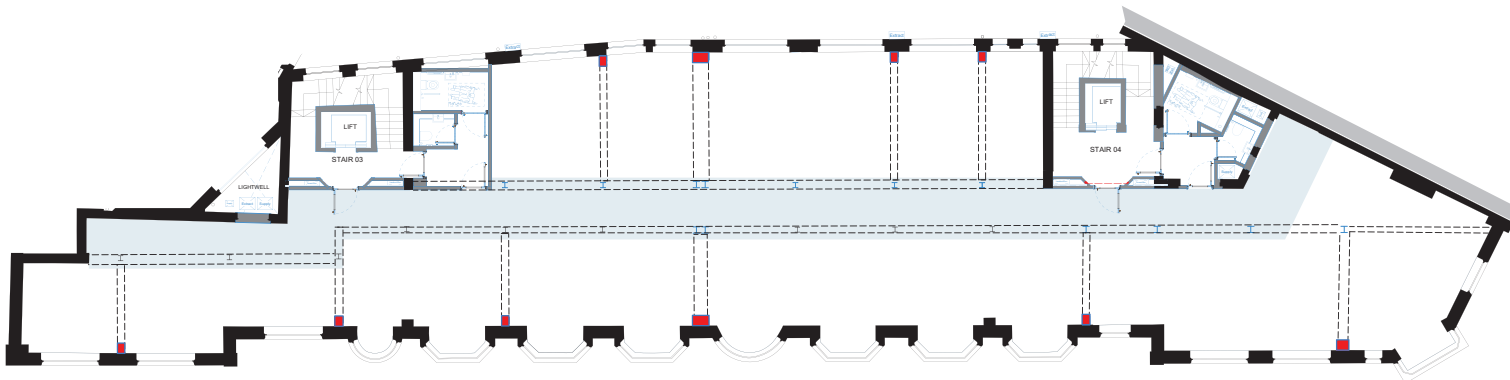


Typical removed chimney

Improving the office floors Vernon & Sicilian Hse - Proposed arrangement



Sketch second floor plan indicating walls retained where historic chimneys were positioned



Proposed Second floor plan

Vernon-Sicilian House & 21 Southampton Row

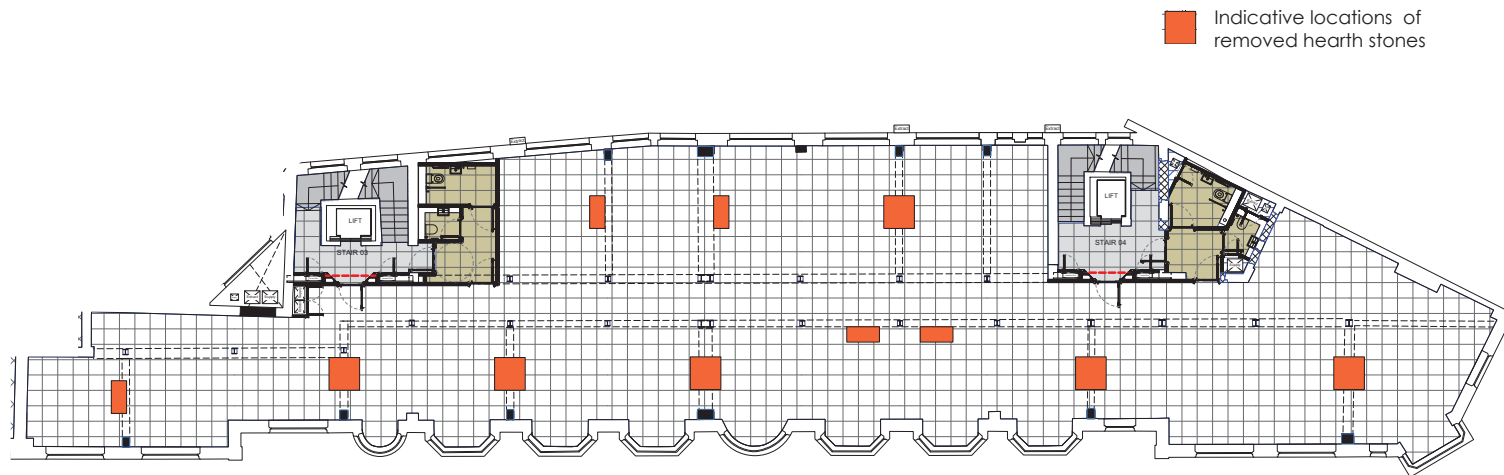
Planning Response - December 2022

- If only the existing walls that previously had chimneys were retained, not enough of the original fabric would be legible for the historic layout to be understood
- Therefore the remaining walls could appear incongruous within the floor plate
- Additionally market feedback has stated that the restriction caused by the retained walls would remove tenant flexibility for the layouts of the floors
- As a consequence the ongoing use and occupation of the building would therefore be at risk
- An alternative proposal that would provide a consistent language across the floors would be to define the original walls through extended nibs at the perimeter walls
- The nibs would then support downstand beams which would run to central columns, either side of the original circulation corridor
- This historic circulation corridor would then be further reinforced by the presence of the service raft
- With this proposal the historical layout would be clearly recognisable, within a bright and flexible floor plate

Conservation Officer comment - 09

'On the upper office floors of Sicilian and Vernon House, efforts should be made to reinstate historic features – e.g., parquet flooring, cornices, and hearth stones of fireplaces.'

Improving the office floors Vernon & Sicilian Hse - Floor finishes



Proposed second floor plan indicating position of original chimneys and hearth stones

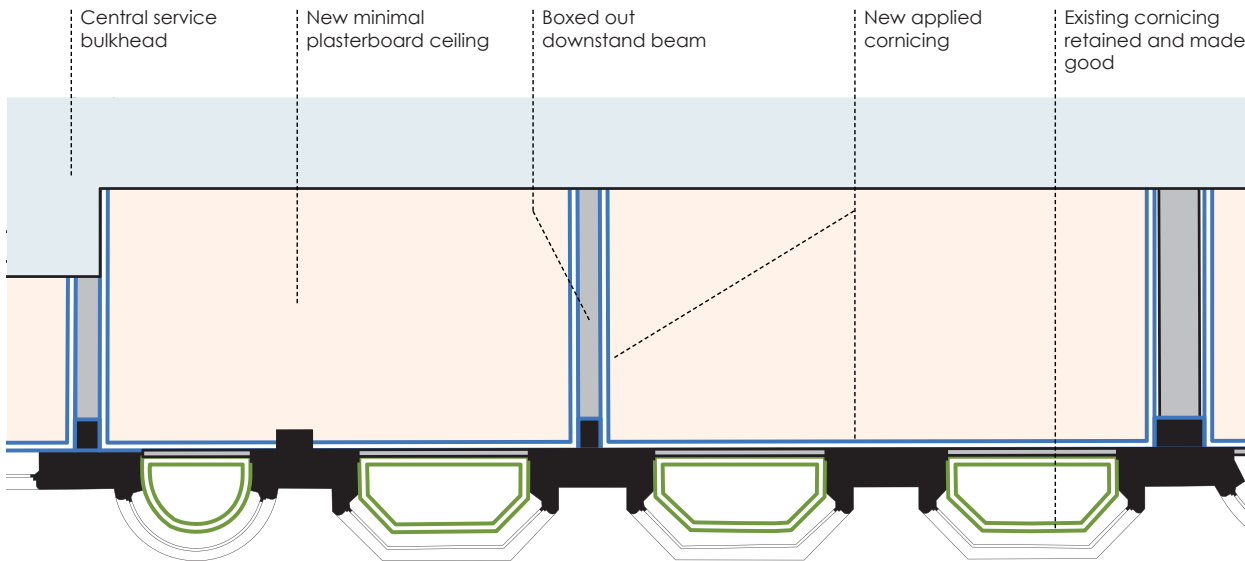
- The refurbishment works look to deliver flexible Cat A office spaces where incoming tenants can arrange and fit out the floors as per their individual requirements
- Offering this flexibility is paramount to attracting the widest range of potential tenants, to ensure the longevity of the building's use
- In line with market expectation for a flexible Cat A office space the intention is to install raised access floors within the offices
- The installation of new hearth stones in the historic positions across the floor plates would remove the option of installing floor boxes in these locations and therefore adversely effect the floors lettable
- While the installation of parquet flooring would undoubtedly enhance the look of the office spaces, as the tenants and requirements are not known, this floor finish would need to be removed to allow tenants to install underfloor cabling
- As reinstating and fitting the flooring would be very costly it cannot be guaranteed the incoming tenants would undertake this
- Therefore from a sustainability perspective this type of flooring or any additional floor covering on top of the raised access floor would not be preferable



Improving the office floors

Vernon & Sicilian Hse - Ceiling finishes

- Following the removal of the suspended lay in grid ceiling the condition of the original coricing is evident
- While coricing within the window bays is in relatively good condition, coricing along separation walls has been badly damaged or completely removed
- The condition of the underside of the clinker infill slabs is also in a state of disrepair
- The proposals look to install a new minimal plasterboard ceiling between the downstand boxed out beams which will define the original separation walls
- This minimal ceiling would conceal the slabs and also provide a cable void for lighting and alarm cables
- At the junctions between the new ceiling and boxed out beams new coricing could be added to replicate the original coricing
- The remaining sections of damaged coricing within these areas would need to be removed
- Within the window bays the intention while the addition of secondary glazing is proposed, the coricing will be retained and made good where necessary



Proposed RCP detail

Conservation Officer comment - 10

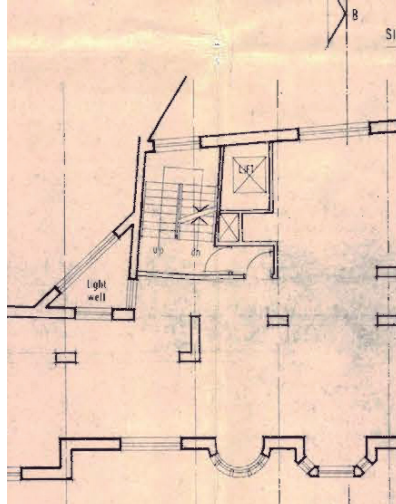
'On the upper office floors of Sicilian and Vernon House, the lightwells should remain as existing, with WCs moved internally.'

Improving the office floors Vernon & Sicilian House Cores

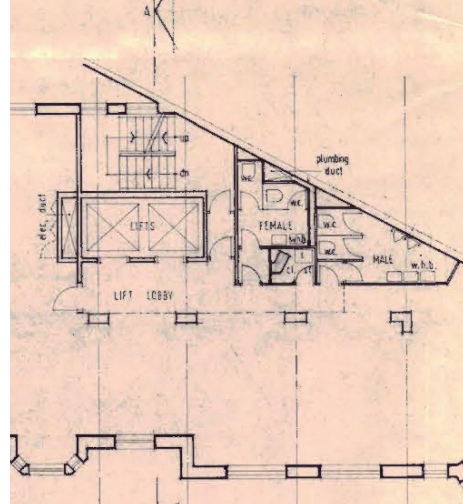
Sicilian House 'Lightwell'



Sicilian House Core - 1970 Approved Planning

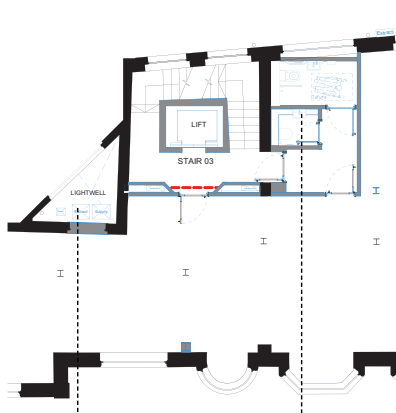


Vernon House Core -1970 Approved Planning

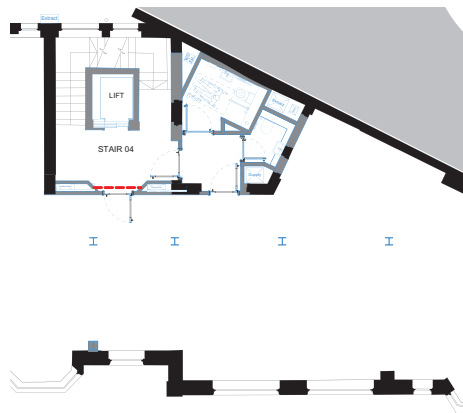


- Under the approved 1970's planning application both Sicilian and Vernon Houses cores were proposed to be completely reconfigured with new stairs and lifts
- Within Vernon House the lightwell was completely infilled to create male and female WC's
- While the lightwell within Sicilian House was retained the benefits it creates to the office environment is extremely limited due to the proximity of 21 Southampton Row
- While Vernon House's lightwell is larger in its pre-strip out configuration the office space did not benefit from its natural light
- Small WCs alternating male and female on different floors and access routes surround the lightwell
- The existing separation wall also prevented daylight penetration into the offices

Proposed Sicilian Core



Proposed Vernon Core

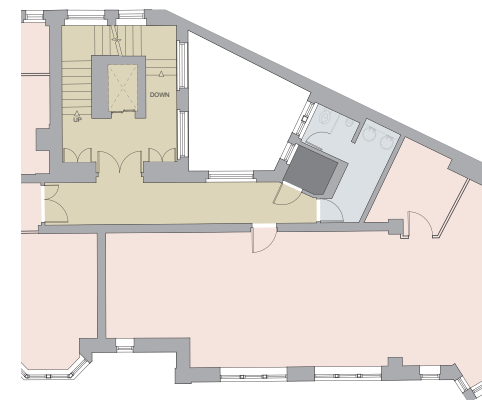


Ductwork rising vertically to roof

WC's reconfigured within existing location



Sicilian House 'Lightwell'



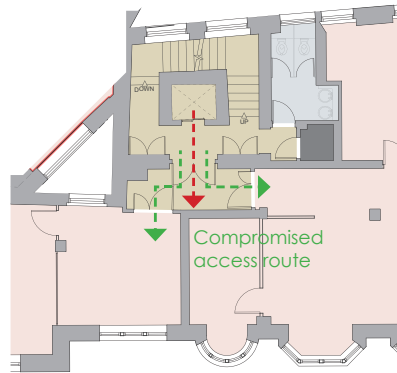
Vernon Core Pre strip out arrangement

Improving the office floors Vernon & Sicilian House Cores

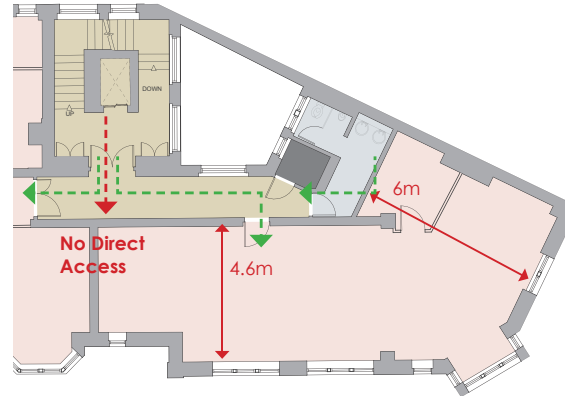
Vernon House Lightwell



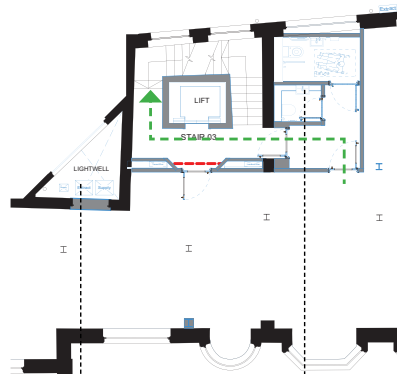
Sicilian House Core - Pre strip out arrangement



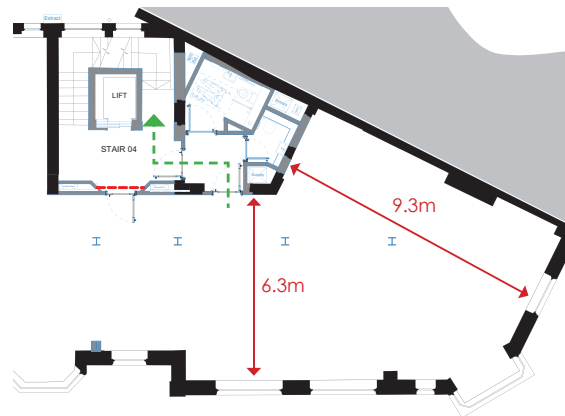
Vernon House Core - Pre strip out arrangement



Proposed Sicilian Core



Proposed Vernon Core



Ductwork rising vertically to roof

WC's reconfigured within existing location

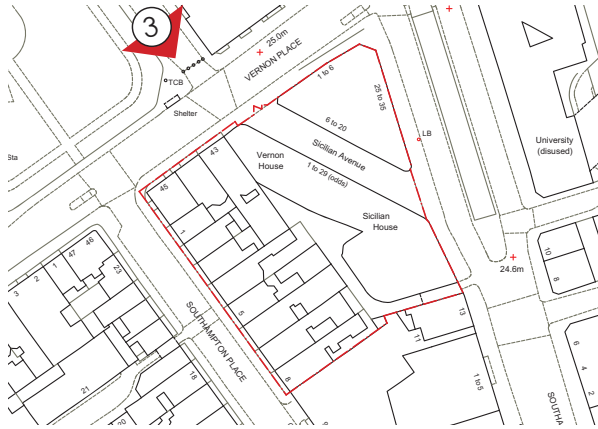
- As the building does not have a ducted fresh air supply to the floors, as part of the overall improvements to the building a new mechanical fresh air system is proposed
- The system relies on an air handling unit being installed on the roof with supply and extract ducts running down to the floors below
- Due to the size of the ducts large sections of the floor plates would need to be removed to create the vertical risers
- Therefore running the ductwork down the lightwells would overcome this while also retaining valuable lettable office space
- Locating the WC's within the remaining area of Vernon House's lightwell would dramatically improve the usability of the floor plates and provide maximum outlook onto Sicilian Avenue and Bloomsbury Way
- The location and configuration of the new WC blocks also enables them to form the lobbied escape routes from the offices
- The revised layout enables the arrival in the lift lobbies to provide a good first impression with direct access and uninterrupted views of Sicilian Avenue, through the new glazed doors with secondary protective fire curtains



Vernon House Lightwell

Conservation Officer comment - 11

'At the roof level extension, can the window be repositioned to respond to the fenestration below.'



View Key



View from Bloomsbury Sq

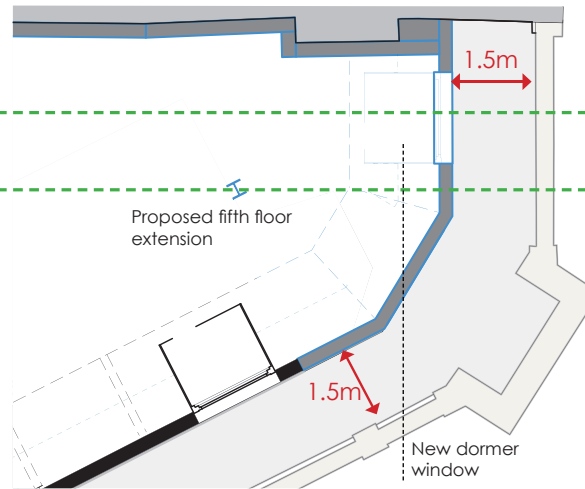
Improving the office floors

Vernon & Sicilian Hse - 5th Floor extension

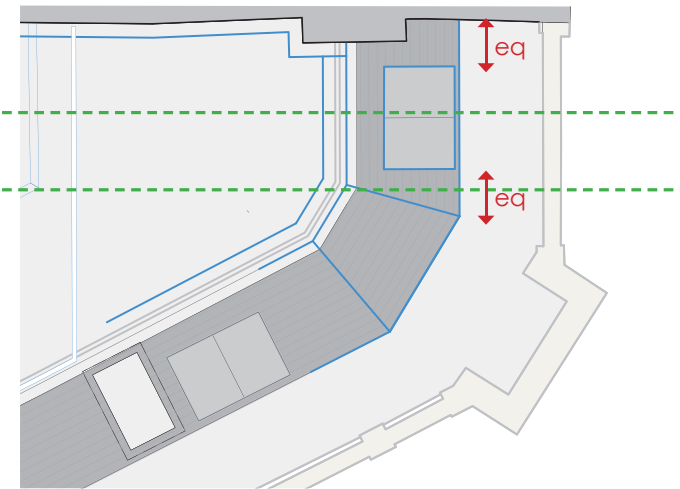
- The proposed 5th floor extension looks to infill the overshadowed and under used terrace space overlooking Bloomsbury Square
- To maintain the set back of the existing roof the new mansard would have a faceted corner
- Due to this configuration it is not feasible to position the proposed dormer window to align with the windows on the floors below when viewed square on
- Currently the dormer is positioned to sit centrally within its section of the sloping roof
- For the dormer window to align it would be necessary to increase the size of the extension reducing the set back
- If the window width was reduced to enable it to be centred on the windows below, it would require a reduction in width by almost half. This would probably also mean a change to its opening action, from a double casement to a single casement, making it inconsistent with the other dormers on the roof.



Proposed 4th floor



Proposed 5th floor mansard extension



Proposed roof plan