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Our Ref: PL/24/1682
Your Ref: 243127
Direct: ☎ 0118 937 3699
03/02/2025

Your contact is: Marcelina Rejwerska, Planning

Dear Sir/Madam,

Consultation on your application no: 243127

Application Type: Adjoining Authority Consultation

Location: URS Building, Whiteknights Campus, Earley, RG6 6BW, Reading

Proposal: Request for observations by Reading Borough Council to Wokingham Borough Council on full application for proposed external and internal refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns; installation of solar panels; concrete repairs; full mechanical and electrical services upgrade; erection of two external staircases; new detached bin and bike store, and hard and soft landscape and accessibility improvements.

Applicant: Wokingham Borough Council

I refer to the consultation of the above application which was received on 17/12/2024

The following were consulted on the application:

- RBC Transport Development Control
- RBC Conservation Officer
- RBC Natural Environment

Full responses were received as follows.

RBC Transport Development

This application for observations by Reading Borough Council for the full refurbishment of the Grade II URS Building located on the University of Reading Whiteknights Campus. The building is currently vacant, however, it is the intention of the full strategy to reintegrate the Construction Management & Estates department back into the renovated building once the works have been completed.

I have reviewed the Design and Access Statement and the works consist largely of external and internal refurbishment works which will not have a transport or highways impact. It is noted that the 10 existing vehicle parking spaces at the west of the building will be lost as a result of the proposal and replaced with a bike and bin store accommodating 36 bicycle parking spaces. The loss of the 10 vehicle parking spaces has not been addressed within the Design and Access Statement, however, it is assumed any

demand for staff parking spaces will be managed within the wider UoR Travel Plan and Parking Strategy.

Given the scale of the works, a Demolition and Construction Method Statement should be submitted, and Reading Borough Council should be consulted for observations. The routing of construction vehicles should be submitted for review.

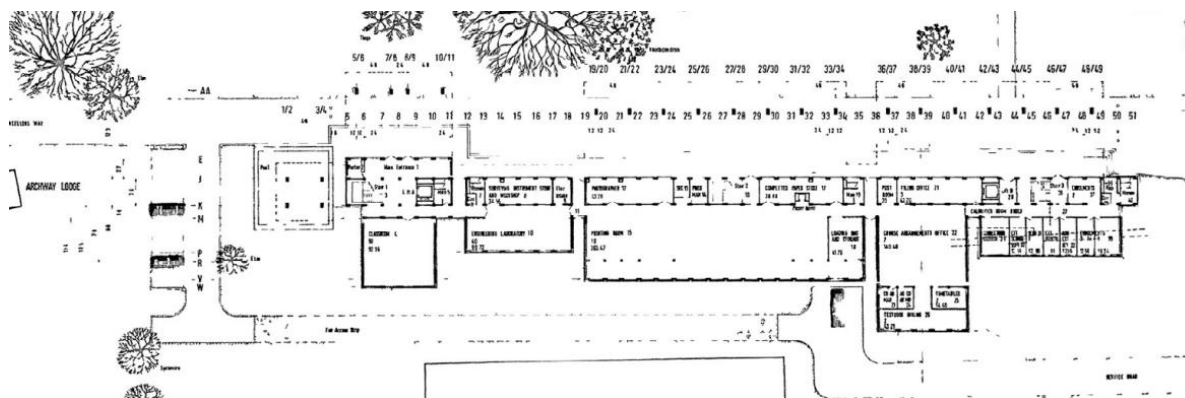
RBC Conservation Officer

Please note – These comments are limited to the design and access statement and heritage statement only and do not include the assessment of all impacts (either positive or negative). Please consult with your conservation specialist for the local policies on heritage assets.

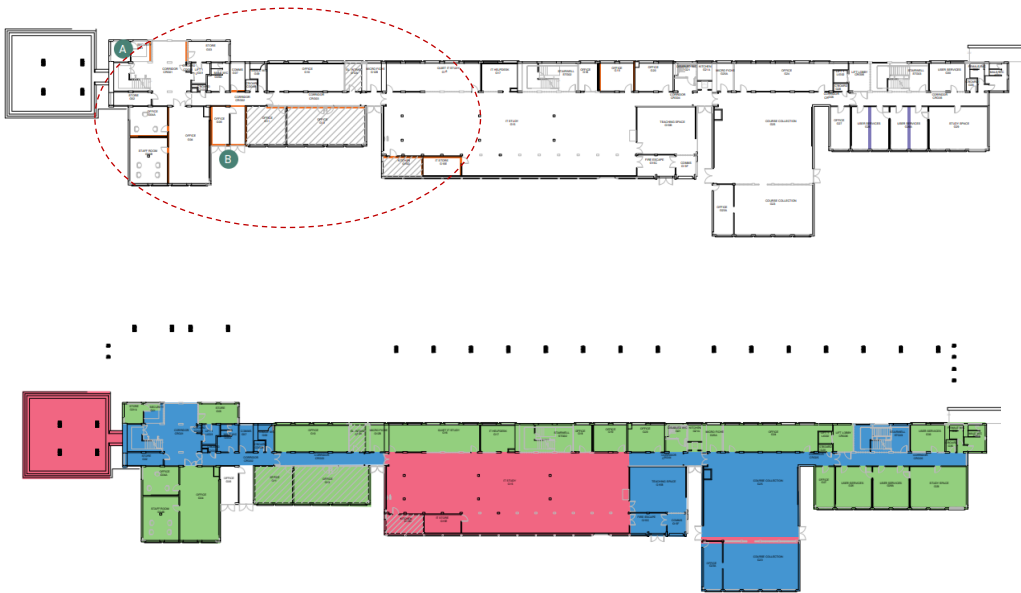
I noted that the subject Grade II listed building, URS Building, including the paved surface of Chancellors Way and raised edges of the ornamental pool, University of Reading, is located in a historic environment with many periods, the lands of Whiteknights and Whiteknights Park, which was a large estate constituting a number of a Victorian building which were replaced with the university buildings after the WW2. Due to the large footprints of the education buildings and their positions creating a sense of a university campus, the legibility of the historic park is very limited. However, the environment in which the URS building forms a part still has a composition of historical layers, with the university buildings dominating. Within this environment, given the positions of the Victorian buildings and their arrangement with the university buildings and the scale of the proposed works to the URS building, I could conclude that, possibly, none of the settings of listed buildings, except for the URS, would be substantially impacted by the proposal (This needs to be checked on site). As such, the emphasis should be put on the impact on the significance of URS Building.

Without knowing the planning history and details about the external and internal alterations that have taken place, I am only able to make the following comments.

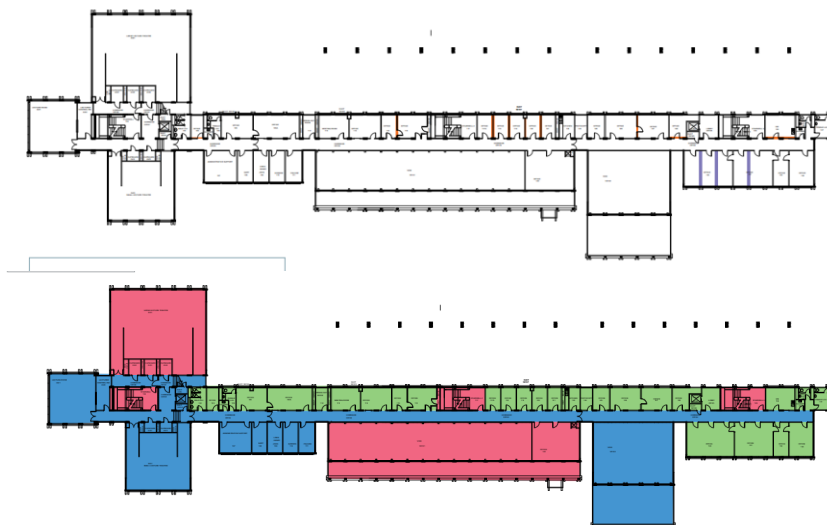
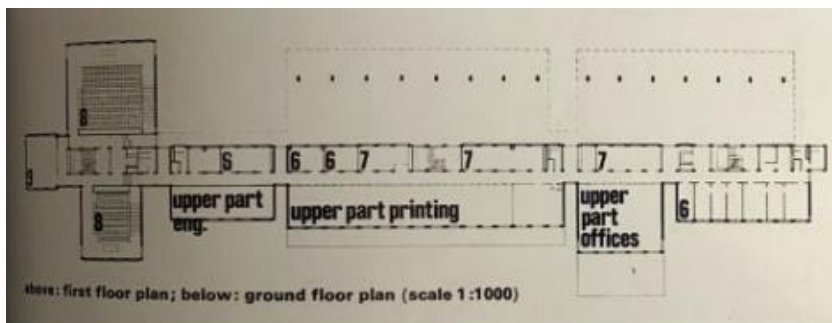
I have reviewed the submitted heritage statement. I would argue that the term 'neutral' significance is not applicable to this building or any building. If the building has been altered very little, given its architectural composition as a whole, its authenticity is still there, and all original forms, spaces, construction system, architectural language, and detailing are legible, then it is a very strong statement for this 1970s building to have low and neutral significance in some parts.



The above is the original ground floor plan (from the heritage statement). Compared with the existing plan, the circled area appears to be the most changed one. Therefore, it is hard to understand the rationale between the medium and low significance as the original plan is preserved for those areas.



Similarly, I think the significance assessment on the floor plans needs to be revised. The internal spaces without alteration and others with alterations, for instance, on the first floor, are all indicated as low significance – green. Is this related to the non-structural partition walls, and are they not significant? That means the second-floor half of the building has some importance, which should not be the case. Defining partition walls not significant or not contributing to the special interest of the building does not mean that the spaces to the north do not form part within the significance of the building.



Original, existing plans and significance assessment for the second floor. The difference or relationship between significance and alteration is not clear.

The demolition strategy of the proposed works includes demolition of all partition walls. No matter whether the significance assessment concludes high, medium, or low, they are proposed to be treated the same. So, I assume none of the internal partition walls in the phase 1 are structural? Or is the colouring of the drawing below wrong? Phase 2 says external fabric but all blues are internal? Demolition Strategy states "Phase 1 works are currently underway, Phase 2 has recently obtained planning permission/listed building consent and this planning application represents Phase 3 of the building strategy." I note that there is no space untouched by the proposed works; this could be an excessive intervention. However, I am unable to know the details. I assume there are already structural assessment and condition assessment for the listed building.

On page 28, the design statement includes "Significant concrete & structural issues." So, does the building need structural strengthening, or is it just an energy efficiency problem? If it is the latter one, I should remind that these should not be imposed on the architectural significance of the building.

Window replacement – needs to be further analysed as all windows appears to be proposed for replacement. Some would not have the original design because "The minimal horizontal transom to the sliding sash has not been replicated, as it is a secondary element in a strongly vertical pattern and its introduction would have no functional reasoning." (page 33) I think there should be left some original windows, it is not a reason of being functional but the originality of the design and in line with the official description of the use of aluminium harmoniously in roof sheets, panels and windows and their integration. The details are important for listed buildings and leaving no original fenestration should not be the only option. The fact that the building is modern does not mean its original elements can easily be replicated or replaced. I think the windows should not be 'composite' either.

Similarly, external doors would not have period features and introduce a common design to today's buildings. The details and some significance would be lost due to the proposed works to the windows and doors. The new windows and doors would not be 1970's design and material, would not reflect the period or technology of the listed building.

I would leave the full roof replacement to the Wokingham Council's officers.

The proposed perforated metal roof deck would bring an alien use of metal not appearing light but bold statement. As the building is not an industrial one, I find it excessive and competing to the original concrete elements of the structure.

The proposed mechanical ventilation would bring the same problem; when the ceilings of the structure are perceived, it would be read as an industrial use or purpose. Acoustic baffles could also create an imposing element from ceilings. Therefore, I'm not sure about these proposals either.

I would like to add that, the works should be addressing an existing important problem for the life of the building and its structure and should resolve the existing problems of conservation. Works for only 'insulation' or due to the 'likely issues' cannot be justified on heritage grounds. Rooflight replacement, roof cowl replacements, and some other works when all come together, this would be no original part left on the roof, from the 1970s roof.

Soffit refurbishments – which ones, what is the original material /timber, and what is the proposed one? These should be answered to make an assessment. All of them should not be replaced.

Aluminium façade panels – Only positive work, without a question.

Concrete repair – CARE registered engineer could be involved in defining the necessary structural works. A methodology for concrete repair should be well-defined by a specialist.

Additional Stair – I note the only reason is to comply with the current fire regulations? Compared with the significance assessment, Options 4 and 5 appear to be the most suitable ones as they are either low or

neutral significance areas. However, the design statement mentions the significant impact on the concrete structure. Option no 2 and 3 would touch and change the medium significance areas of the listed building. No. 2 appears to be the better option compared to the others, as the only problem is that it “does not access the fourth floor” (page 50 of the design statement). However, I see that Option 3, being the largest staircase, is proposed.

Impact of the proposed stair (A) – this proposal would be higher than the height of the existing building and would bring a new circular form and solid appearance. This would be against the planning interest of the listed building: “the practical, cost efficient, central corridor plan is innovatively re-imagined to bring natural light into the core of the building and to create a linear plan of dynamic cross section” AND “ The plan is centred on a 120m long top-lit spine, which forms the principal internal circulation space. Rooms, lecture theatres and teaching spaces, project irregularly out from the spine, and to the north they project over a wide double-height, brick-paved, pedestrian walkway known as Chancellor's Way.”

The proposed stair would act as an element that divides the building into two, competing with spaces projecting from the spine of the building on all floors, dominating. Due to its large external surface - the material difference would be so high that the principal design of bringing natural light would also be broken. Against the linear plan, it would be a vertical addition that does not integrate into the basic design principles of the building but contrasts. This could be applied but my concern is not only the new architecture to be added but the location and position of it as well. All staircases are located at the core of the existing building, enhancing and supporting the linearity. The circulation is linear, somehow hidden. That is why the (largest) recessed rear main entrance would not be read anymore. I would prefer a more transparent solution if this location were the final choice. If possible, rather than aluminium, maybe the use of large sheets of glass or large glazing could be an option.

The second additional stair on the north façade would have less impact, although it would cover a considerable space on this elevation as it would be a linear element on the end of the plan, an extension of the circulation core. The appearance would be much better without intervening in the architectural rhythm of the external envelope.

I am unable to provide a detailed analysis of the impacts of landscape proposals and other internal works.

To summarise, bearing in mind that I do not have full access to the submitted documents of the proposed works, pre-app discussions or planning history of the site/building, I would like to raise some concerns, some of which may not be applicable:

The attention should be paid to the necessity of the proposed works and their justification from the heritage conservation angle. The building is 50 years old. Therefore, such a comprehensive refurbishment work could not be the only option. As previously stated, there are concerns about replacing original architectural elements with new ones with different appearance, not period features, leaving no original part except for the concrete structure.

Therefore, there should be a powerful justification for the proposed works. The current and improved building performance could be presented. Is there any report showing the energy level and sustainability impacts of the proposed works? However, please be advised that this/energy efficiency improvement does not constitute a heritage benefit, and if all elements are replaced due to higher energy efficiency, there is no heritage benefit. All left is a building shell. There can be some environmental benefits for this building; however, if it were not listed, the same benefit would be gained again. Therefore, an obvious heritage benefit should be defined.

The new services, PV panels, and other additions would all incur additional costs and affect the structure itself. Some may reduce the internal height, perception of space, and original atmosphere of the building.

The harm of energy efficiency works would be considerable due to the reasons as I stated. There would not be almost any untouched surface except for the external walls. The solutions for the existing

condition problems of the building are not clear enough. The concrete repairs are not explained sufficiently, and heritage benefits cannot be fully assessed.

Additional harm is expected due to new stairs, altering external appearance-transparency, internal circulation principle, hierarchy of the spaces, and readability of the southern façade as a whole of the listed building.

I am not sure whether the heritage benefits outweigh the harm to the appearance, built form, layout, original materials and elements, legibility of the circulation and façade organisation, etc.

RBC Natural Environment

Comments are provided on the submitted Arboricultural Impact Assessment and Method Statement by Challice Consulting Ltd, dated 28 November 2024.

Appendix 1 shows the removal of 1x A category tree, which is not ideal, but it considered acceptable on this occasion. The proposed works should be discussed with the University of Reading grounds maintenance team, and I trust that proposed landscaping and tree protections will be secured using appropriate and reasonable planning conditions.

I hope the above is of use to you. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Marcelina Rejwerska

Senior Planning Officer

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