



Email: [Connie.Davis@wokingham.gov.uk](mailto:Connie.Davis@wokingham.gov.uk)

27 September 2024

Dear Connie Davis,

**SITE: Former College of Estate Management and Urban and Regional Studies Building, Whiteknights, University of Reading, RG6 6AE**

**REF: 241743 & 241744**

Thank you for notifying the Twentieth Century Society of the above listed building consent and full planning applications for the external refurbishment of the Grade II listed URS Building at the University of Reading. The Society attended a site visit on the 1 May and provided a written pre-application response to the project team on 17 May, having sought the view of our Casework Committee. The Society is broadly supportive of the proposed work.

### **Building**

The College of Estate Management building (1970-3) was designed by Howell, Killick, Partridge & Amis to house the College following its incorporation into the University of Reading. With its strong silhouette and distinctive form, this 'extrovert building' stands out from its context and forms an important point of reference on the campus. Pevsner's Buildings of England volume for Berkshire notes approvingly that architecture at the University 'reached a climax with Howell, Killick, Partridge & Amis's College of Estate Management of 1970-3, a linear megastructure that is at once rigorous and extravagant in its deployment of closely spaced concrete framing' (p. 80).

Constructed as a major new teaching building of four and five storeys, the building was designed to house two lecture theatres, tutorial, studio and conference rooms, and a range of other teaching spaces and offices. These spaces extend from a central spine accommodating circulation cores at its centre, sandwiched by long corridors. 'The concept is a linear stack of corridors and services, from which the rooms and halls jut out and step up in irregular blocks and groupings, precariously

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crowned by a small water tank.’ (Pevsner, p. 461). On the north side, the open ground floor is sheltered by the overhanging floor above, creating a colonnaded undercroft.

The structure consists of a series of reinforced concrete frames throughout the length of the building. The major frames are placed in pairs at regular intervals, with the beam-ends projecting both horizontally and vertically and with uprights clasped between, giving the building its distinctive rugged appearance. In contrast with its red-ish/tan fair-faced concrete frame, it is clad in red-ish/brown pre-cast concrete panels incorporating a Thames Valley aggregate, giving the building a distinctive two-tone colouring.

## **Policy**

The building was listed at Grade II in July 2016. As a listed building, the local authority should be mindful of sections 16(2) and 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) which state that, in the decision-making process on applications affecting listed buildings, “the local planning authority [...] shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.” The application should also be assessed against paragraph 205 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2023) which requires that “When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation”. And paragraph 206 which states that “Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification.”

## **Assessment**

The current applications relate to Phase 2 of proposed work to refurbish the URS building for continued use by the School of Built Environment’s Construction Management & Estates Department, which is temporarily being housed in the Chancellor’s Building on campus. Phase 1 involved essential strip-out work, and Phase 2 proposes to replace windows and doors, replace roofs and carry out concrete repairs.

The Society is broadly supportive of the proposed work, as outlined in the current applications. Our views on specific proposals are outlined below:

- We welcome the University of Reading's decision to commission a survey identifying current issues with the concrete structure and Purcell's production of a report setting out the findings and offering guidance to inform future repair and maintenance work. As noted in the report, the URS building's use of concrete contributes much to its architectural significance. It is essential that future repairs are informed by a thorough understanding of the concrete's various material and aesthetic characteristics, and seeks to conserve them. We welcome the University's decision to implement an initial package of repairs focusing on high priority defects in particular locations as part of the current proposals (the scope of repairs being identified in Purcell's submitted 'Heritage Offer Addendum'), and to then carry out further repairs over the following years.
- We have some concerns about the proposed replacement of the existing single-glazed aluminium windows with triple-glazed composite timber and aluminium windows, powder coated metallic silver. Our concerns relate to fabric loss and increases in the chunkiness of the frames which would alter the building's appearance, both of which would result in some harm to heritage significance. We understand, however, that the proposals are underpinned by a desire to improve the building's operational and energy performance, which we are sympathetic to. We also appreciate the project team's efforts to retain, and in places reinstate, the essential fenestration pattern and rhythm. In terms of existing window types, the oriels to the lecture theatres at Levels 1/2 are particularly high quality and we would encourage their retention and upgrade rather than full replacement.
- We do not object to the proposed replacement of doors with higher performance units, as we consider the existing doors to be of limited significance.
- We have no objections to the like-for-like replacement of the vermiculated aluminium sheet roof coverings or introduction of insulation here, neither of which will change the external appearance of the roof.
- We have no objections to the replacement of roof lanterns with triple-glazed metallic silver aluminium units. The replacement lanterns would be of matching size and similar appearance, and would be largely concealed from view.

- We raised concerns in our pre-application feedback about the application of insulation to external soffits between the concrete beams and its potentially detrimental impact on the appearance of the building's exteriors. We therefore welcome the decision to remove this proposal from the current application.
- We have no concerns about the proposed replacement of the roof deck/ceiling and addition of insulation here. We understand that the thicker roof deck could be accommodated within the dwarf wall zone and would therefore not diminish the legibility of the concrete beams internally.

The current proposals, as set out in these applications, are a significant improvement on the previous application for external alterations and extensions to the building to house the University's Built Environment Faculty, which the Society strongly objected to in 2018 (planning references 182220 & 182221).

Overall, while we have some concerns about the replacement of the windows, we are broadly supportive of the proposed work.

We hope that these comments are of use to you. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,



Coco Whittaker

**Head of Casework**

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**Remit:** The Twentieth Century Society was founded in 1979 and is the national amenity society concerned with the protection, appreciation, and study of post-1914 architecture, townscape and design. The Society is acknowledged in national planning guidance as the key organisation concerned with the modern period and is a constituent member of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies. Under the procedures set out in the *Arrangements for Handling Heritage Applications – Notification to Historic England and National Amenity Societies and the Secretary of State (England) Direction 2021*, all English local planning authorities must inform the Twentieth Century Society when an application for listed building consent involving partial or total demolition is received, and they must notify us of the decisions taken on these applications.

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