

27th April 2026

WBC Built Heritage Officer comments for application 252302/Timber Screen Report

From a heritage stance the replacement of the existing historic screens is still objected to, in part as it is not thought it has been adequately demonstrated the existing cannot *be upgrade or that matching replicas with the fire retard treated timber and using 7mm thickness fire safety glazing.*

I do not agree with the statement made in the Timber Screen Report that I had acknowledged that 'the issue of fire safety and certification was not surmountable, and that the existing screens would need to be replaced.' As at the onsite meeting the question raised is what could be done to make the screen compliant and for further investigation into that. And that only when shown this could be achieved, Option 1B was seen as the least bad alternative, in terms of the ratio of glazing to the heavier frame elements whilst including the recessed base, horizontal running mid timber panel feature as with the existing. The result being for the stair core and lightwell screen with a reduce number of the vertical glazed panels set between noticeably more blunt vertical timber frame elements (broader timber elements with the glazing set less recessed back) compared to the existing

At the time of the pre-app meeting on site in July 2025 to discuss the replacement screens on site only one of the stair cores screen and door were looked at along with the close-by light well screen. Whilst the Level 1 screen forms were not discussed or examined at that time.

The screens have previously been assessed to hold high significance – as an original surviving feature of the building, visually important to internal design/appearance. An allegory here would be with the value/significance held with respect to historic/original windows to a listed building and/or interior historic panelling. The replacement of the screens represents yet a further erosion and loss of the building's original features and appearance and in so doing ultimately the quality of the building as conceived and built is eroded detrimentally to its significance.

It was noted the timber for the frames of the screens have been previously referred to as being of 'low quality' timber, which appears somewhat dismissive, and without seemingly recognition being given to the use of varnished pine in early 1970s being fashionable material used for interiors and furniture of that time.

Whilst in agreeing with the HIA that taken in the whole, the loss of the original screens represents a low level of harm, however I do not necessarily concur with the view held of the level of harm being at the 'lower end of the scale' of less than substantial. More on par with say the levels of harm to significance to a say a Georgian era dwelling having its original sash windows replaced with new ones that are not strict copies of the originals.

It is not clear whether in the decisions made to replace the screens for fire safety reasons this was informed by companies/individual with specialist knowledge with regard to issue of designated heritage assets. It is noted Certifire is third party fire

certification scheme, with the section apparently an indicative cross-section hard wood frame profile for a 18mm thick Pyroguard produced glazing system, intended for 'periods of 30 minutes integrity and insulation'. It is not known whether the frame dimensions are for timber with no finish coat or whether the application of a fire-retardant finish coat (varnish or paint) to the frame could reduce the needed frame thickness.

It is note on page 7 of the Timber Screen Report under the heading of Existing Timber Screen Locations – Fire Rating Required, that for:

- STAIR CORES - All existing stair core timber screens require 30min are rated construction (integrity and insulation).
- LEVEL 1 CORRIDOR - the timber screens across level 1 corridor/gallery require smoke retarding full height of construction.
- LIGHTWELS – All existing lightwell timber screen require smoke -retarding full height construction (integrity)

It is noted whilst the existing screens frames are made of pine/soft wood the proposal is to for the new screens frames to be in oak, a denser and heavier wood. No explanation is provided for using oak rather than pine. The glazing being proposed would have an overall thickness of 18mm, of a layered construction with this glazing appears to be a major factor for the need for more substantial framing being required. and hence why true replicas, albeit potentially in an alternative wood, is said not to be achievable. It would appear the intended use of the 18mm glazing system is not solely for safety reasons but seems also in part to meet the University's strategy for thermal improvements thought the building.

Given the stated requirement in the Timber Screen Report for the screens and doors to the stair cores to have at least a 30min fire rating and elsewhere seemingly for the screens to be required to just be smoke retardant, it is not at all clear then why a 30+minute fire rated 7mm thick glazing (noted on the internet to be available) cannot be used, and in so doing should allow for the replacement screen to accurately replicate the fenestration form and frame timber dimensions of the existing.

Whilst it is noted that with respect to Option 1A that the text below the images whilst stating the need for the timber section sizes needing to be increased to meet the necessary fire rating however no explanation if given to qualify that. This seems evidently due to the intended heavier glazing. It would seem the selection of appropriate hard wood could provide improved fire rating and cope with heavier glazing.

The scale and form of the submitted drawings (the AI of detail provided to be able to assess the screen form of the Option B being proposed replacement screens, to be able to fully understand/appreciate what is intended - axonometric views are not enough nor are the elevation views. There is a need for appropriately scaled cross-sections through the screens to understand the frame profiles, beading detailing, and position within the frame of the glazing:

- The beading in the elevation views would appear noticeable wider than that of the existing, only adding to the already bulked up frame surrounds
- Three lightwells – whilst numbered 1 to 3 on different labelling of the submitted revised proposed floor plans are not identified (nor are the stairs) however the

proposed floor plans of the original permission (243127) are annotated to reference to the stair cores drawings.

- No appropriately scaled horizontal cross-sections for the stair core/lightwell screens and for the level 1 screen. Such sections are considered necessary to be able to fully understand the form of the replacement screens, it being noted there is a difference in the positioning of the glazed panels in the Level 1 screen to those of the stair core/lightwell screens

In summary, from a heritage perspective, I remain opposed to the replacement of the screens as the screens are an intrinsic feature of the building's original form and character. I remain unconvinced measures to retain the original or to have replacements that faithfully replicate the form and dimensions of the original (but not necessarily need to use the same timber or glass) have not been fully explored.

It is acknowledged the loss of the original screen amounts to less than substantial harm to the significance of the URS Building as a designated heritage asset, such it is for the case officer in accordance with guidance contained in the NPPF under paragraph 215 in determining the application to weigh the harm that would occur 'against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.'

Keith Frost

WBC Built Heritage Officer