

DELEGATED OFFICER REPORT



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Application Number:	243128
Site Address:	URS Building, Whiteknights Campus, Earley, RG6 6BW
Expiry Date:	17 March 2025
Advert Publication Date:	17 December 2024
Site Notice Date:	18 December 2024
Site Visit Date:	26 April 2024
Proposal: Application for Listed Building consent 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.	

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS/STATUS

- Listed building

PLANNING HISTORY

Application No.	Description	Decision & Date
180220	Full Planning Application for internal and external alterations and extensions existing building and external works including new footpath, landscaping and external working area	Refused 19/12/2018
241743	Full application for proposed internal and external refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns and concrete repairs.	Approved 23/10/2024
241744	Listed Building Consent for proposed internal and external refurbishment, repairs and alterations consisting of replacement windows and doors; replacement roofs including new roof lights, cowls and lanterns and concrete repairs.	Approved 23/10/2024
243127	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	Pending Consideration

	upgrade; erection of two external staircases; new detached bin and bike store, and hard and soft landscape and accessibility improvements	
--	---	--

PLANNING POLICY

National Policy	National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)
MDD Local Plan (MDD)	TB24 – Designated Heritage Assets (where site is within a Conservation Area)

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

WBC Built Heritage	Objection due to loss of original fabric of the building (although conditions recommended in the event of an approval)
--------------------	--

REPRESENTATIONS

Reading Borough Council – Objection/ further clarifications needed

The Twentieth Century Society – Supportive of the work in general but is concerned about the design of the two proposed external stairs, particularly the proposed lift and stair addition to the east elevation

APPRAISAL

Site Description:

The URS Building is a Grade II Listed building (designated listed status in 2016) with distinct post and lintel joints. As well as the building, the Listing includes the paved surface of Chancellors Way and raised edges of the ornamental pool. Surrounding the building are other academic buildings, including the newly refurbished Library. A public right of way (EARL6) runs underneath the overhang of the URS building. The majority of Whiteknights Campus is a designated local park and garden.

Proposal:

Planning permission is sought for internal and external refurbishment of the URS building, University of Reading. More specifically the proposal comprises of:

External works

- Concrete repairs
- Roof replacement
- HAVC works
- New fenestration
- Construction of new stair and lift towers
- Undercroft brick slip paving
- Soffit refurbishment
- New bike and bin store
- New solar panels

Internal works

- Alterations to staircase screens and room division
- Works to lecture theatres
- Improved third floor circulation through removal of corridors/ partitions

It should be noted that an associated application for Listed Building Consent is currently under consideration for the scheme.

This proposal constitutes as 'Phase 3' of the proposed refurbishment of the building. The 2 x applications approved in 2024 (see planning history) were 'Phase 2' and Phase 1 comprised of some internal works – albeit no Listed Building Consent or Certificate of Lawfulness for works to a Listed Building was submitted, and it was considered that Listed Building consent was not required for these.

Assessment:

Applications for Listed Building Consent can only assess the impact on the Listed Building and no other matters.

Policy TB24 states that designated heritage assets (Listed Buildings, Historic Parks and Gardens, Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Conservation Area) should be conserved, or where possible enhanced as a result of development.

The site is a Grade II Listed Building and is within a locally designated Park and Garden.

Impact on the Listed Building

There are numerous works proposed to the listed building. Assessment will therefore be broken down to discuss these different components. Both the 20th Century Society and the WBC Built Heritage Officer were consulted on this proposal and comments were received from Reading Borough Council. These comments, where appropriate, will feed into the assessment:

External Works

External Structural Concrete Repairs

It is welcomed that the university has commissioned a survey identifying current issues with the concrete structure. The submitted report sets out the findings and offers guidance to inform future repair and maintenance works. 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. The initial package of repairs focusing on high priority defects in particular locations as part of the current proposals and to then carry out further repairs over the following years.

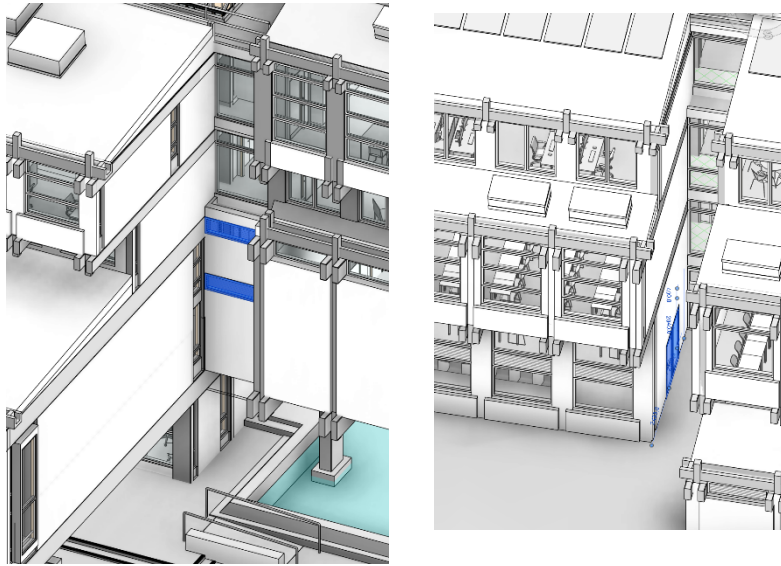
Roofs

The roofs are understood to be original elements of the building, as built, and as such are believed to hold a degree of significance as a consequence. The apparent requirement to replace this aluminium sheet covered roof appears to be driven by a need to upgrade the thermal efficiency of the building. From a heritage stance the

loss of these original roof structures and their covering is disappointing to see being proposed rather than measures to make repairs to the existing covering material and retro fit thermal improvements measures to the roof structures. However, it is noted that re-covering of the roof was already approved under Phase 2 works. It is understood the re-covering is to be done in an almost identical aluminium sheeting.

New Opening to Exterior Walling

There are to be three new openings; two on the northern elevation and a new opening for a set of doors:



These new opening being for intake/vent louvres for the intended HAVC system and for entrance/ exist doors. The Built Heritage Officer raised concern that there was no assessment given of the need for these new opening or as to their impact to the significance of this designated heritage asset. However, within the applicant's heritage assessment outlines the need for these elements of the proposal, noting the proposed new doors are necessary additions for the purposes of fire safety and emergency escape. The applicant is also of the view that they have been placed in areas where their visibility and impact on the wider aesthetic of the listed building is minimised. Planning Officers are minded to agree and accept this justification.

HAVC (Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning)

As mentioned above the proposed HAVC systems does require additional openings to formed on the principle north facing elevation and there would be the potential visibility of the plant on the top flat roof.

Reading Borough Council raised concern that the building would be read as an industrial building with mechanical ventilation.

However, Planning Officers consider that on the whole, visibility from ground level and public viewpoints would not be overly substantial. The mechanical system has an intended function to bring the building back into use. Whilst there would be some level of harm, this has to be weighed against the benefits which will be done so.

In terms of the placement between the concrete structural cross beams of the HAVC units with the room spaces, this would appear to avoid any need to alter the cross beams and avoids pipework being routed along the axial corridors/spaces.

New Fenestration (Windows, External Glazed Screen, Glazed Exterior Doors, Roof Lanterns & Roof Lights)

From the perspective of the WBC Heritage Officer, this aspect of the proposed works would it is believed result in the single greatest overall change in the appearance of the URS Building. The use of uncoated aluminium and the slim profiled frames of the windows, exterior glazed doors and glazed external screens is considered to greatly contribute stylistically to the building's distinctive original appearance, being reflective of the technology and styles indicative at the time of the building's construction. The consultation from Reading Borough Council echoes the potential harm to the building as a result of this change – they believe that leaving no original fenestration should not be the only option.

It is acknowledged the existing unsympathetic replacement of a number of windows, (with ones of different fenestration arrangement, albeit whilst still utilising a similar looking slim profiled aluminium frames), has somewhat eroded the visual contribute the windows make to the appearance and form of this building as a starting point. However, the great majority of the building's windows, exterior glazed doors and external glazed screens are contemporaneous with the construction of the building and as such are considered to be original features that are very much of important visual component to the appearance of this particular building. From a heritage stance the expectation should be for these original elements of the building to be retained, and the unsympathetic windows replaced for ones to match with the originals.

The justification being given is the need to improve the thermal efficiency of the building but also now, with respect to a number of the horizontal narrow single windows (predominately on the southern elevation), to provide a series of louvred vents for the HAVC system.

Whilst it is acknowledged that re-establishing an order and commonality to the design of the windows across the building would be a visual improvement, the replacement windows are to be triple glazed, with more substantial aluminium framing to them, which is to be have a silver powder coated finish. As such, these changes would lead to the frames and surrounds for the new windows being noticeably 'heavier' in appearance and potential a marked difference in their frame finish compared to the existing original features. These changes to the fenestration is very much believed to have visually an impact on the overall form and appearance of the building. However, it is acknowledged that the principle of replacing fenestration was established by the granting of the phase 2 of the works and needs to be considered in the overall heritage balance.

With respect to details that have been submitted and notably with respect to the replacement windows, but as well for the roof-lanterns, external glazed screens and external doors the details are thought deficient to give approval for these element without further details being provided, which could be dealt with by means of a

condition.

Stair/Lift Towers

Two new stair and lift towers are required in light of the building's existing arrangements owing to the internal staircases and restrictive size of the lift shafts. Both a rectangular and curved stair core are proposed

The location of the of the staircases and lift towers are deemed to be appropriate and having the least harmful impact to the historic fabric and appearance of the building (when compared against previous alternatives).

As shown in the Design & Access Statement there were two different forms proposed for the new tower structures, one of rectangular form and the other with a curved end walling to it. In commenting to the two proposed forms, each were recognised to have merits in their form. The rectangular form seen to reflect the angular form of the building, whilst the curved one is clearly statement that these structures are contemporary additions to the building. The curved form also allows for better visibility of the detective oriel window on the side of the adjacent lecture room. In both forms the shown intention is for a pattern perforated aluminium external treatment, which is believed to add visual interest to the new towers, especially during the hours of darkness when the internal light will show through. A condition would be applied to secure further details of the aluminium external treatment.

Previous discussions were had about whether these stair cases could be glazed, however this was not possible from the applicant's perspective. It is acknowledged that the rear staircase would also protrude onto the roof, however this is required because the existing lift shaft is not adequate to provide disabled access to this floor. The staircase must also reach level 4, to allow the dry riser to serve all floors and to provide adequate fire fighting access.

It is acknowledged that the 20th Century Society are concerned about the design of the two proposed external stairs, particularly on the eastern elevation. They consider the scale, form and perforated aluminium finish of the lift and stair addition to the east end and do not feel that this addition has been convincingly justified. However, taking into account the comments from the WBC Heritage Officer, Officers consider that this element of the proposal is suitable and the design justified, albeit it is one that is subjective. The requirement for this element of the proposal is also justified and required to meet accessibility requirements which ultimately are required to ensure the building can be brought back to its optimum and viable use.

Under Croft Brick-Slip Paving

In the Design and Access Statement (page 59) it is proposed to introduce a black coloured step tread edging tiling to replace the existing brick slip paving to the edge of the steps of the north side under croft pavement as part of repairs and upgrading to this paved thoroughfare, which is to include an anti-slip treatment to the brick slip pavers. Whilst it is appreciated that there a need to make the steps to the under croft area safer, there was concern from the WBC Heritage Officer over the choice of colour for edging tread tiles for the leading edge of the lengths of the stepped areas is considered to be somewhat detracting in its stark contrast and at odds visually with the palate of colours used for the exterior of the building. As such it would seem a tonal contrasting colour of the brick slip paver for the edging tread tiles would be more

visually harmonious than those proposed in black.

The applicant has responded to the above concerns and advise they remain convinced that contrasting edging tiles will strike a suitable balance between ensuring health and safety is improved on the footpaths beneath the undercroft (while also avoiding a bright yellow paint being added in the future if a non-contrasting tile was used) and being sympathetic to the heritage value of the URS Building in general.

The above is noted and accepted, with a contrasting edging being more sympathetic and quality compared to painting safety lines on stepping, as noted. The precise tile colour to be agreed via a suitably worded planning condition.

Soffit Refurbishment

Originally, it was proposed to insulate the overhangs with an upgraded insulated soffit. However, the proposal now is to remove existing soffit boards to expose the original concrete deck and thermal improvements will instead be achieved by introducing concrete screed to internal flooring. This approach would allow for the beams to be fully expressed beneath the building which is positive as this is a key element and distinguishing architectural feature.

Bike & Bin Store

The bin and bike store will be located at the western end of the building. It's siting at the rear of the building may have been preferable in terms of impact on the setting of the Listed Building. Whilst it will have visibility from the front elevation, it would be set back from the main frontage so this will help elevate its prominence to some degree.

Solar Panels

Given the low profile of the solar panel would have on the slopping roofs would suggest that in those view adjacent to the building the solar panels would not be visible. This is not to say that in those views from further away or from elevated positions within the adjacent buildings that the panels would be visible in view of the building.

Internal Works

Stair Case Screens & Room Divider

With respect to the internal alterations to the building, much of what is proposed is considered to result in either minor or no harm to what contributes to the significance the building, as advised by the WBC Heritage Officer. That said, the covering up of the cinder block walling which are thought to be somewhat of a ubiquitous for institutional buildings of the era. As such the visual loss of the painted cinder block walling is another visual loss under the works being proposed. It is also somewhat regrettable to see from a visual stance, the proposed room divider in the large teaching room/workshop space which would lead to a visual break in what is presently thought to be an impressive large space with its series of the vertical concrete side columns and the horizontal structural beams.

Lecture Theatres

It is positive that the raked seating is being retained. There is no objection to the timber panelling and woodwool between exposed beams.

Third Floor Circulation

Reading Borough Council raised concerns over the significance assessment on the floor plans where the portion walls are indicated. Losing some corridor partitions is unfortunate given it forms a distinct part of the layout of the Listed Building and these being elements of significance of the building. However, it is understood that the intention is to maximise the functionality of the building which the corridors currently prohibit.

Other

The gradient of the ramp at the eastern end of the building is inadequate to meet current regulations. It would be reprofiled in line with the existing forecourt and brick pavers (as discussed) will be used. Way finding information is also proposed. However, should any of this way finding information constitute as an advertisement, separate advertisement consent would be required.

Impact on Local Park and Garden

In terms of impact on the local park and garden, the proposal would not substantial impact on this asset, owing to the location, nature and scale of the development. The new development which will be introduced to the Local Park and Garden (construction of new staircases/ lifts and a bin/ bike store) would be concentrated around the Listed Building and would have minimal encroachment into undeveloped parts of the Local Park and Garden. The bin/ bike store would be located on an existing car park (so physically previously developed land) and the stair cores/ lifts would encroach minimally onto the grass surrounding the building.

Heritage Balance

The proposed works would lead to the loss of original fabric of the building and most notably from the above assessment there would be harm from the replacement of the fenestration with 'chunkier' frames.

The Built Heritage Officer would wish to raise objection to the extent of loss of those historic elements and features of the building, both externally and internally, contributory to its design, appearance and significance, as those changes are considered to lead to the erosion of its overall significance, as a distinctive early 1970s era building that encapsulates the materials and design ethos of the time it was built. It is considered that the level of harm that would arise from the proposal would be 'less than substantial'. However, in taking account of the earlier phase of internal strip-out works, and those previously approved under phase 2 works, when taken together cumulatively, the harm are believed overall to at a level quite high within that classification of harm.

Paragraph 208 of the NPPF states that '*where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.*'

The benefits of bringing this building back into an optimum use for the continued success of the University are noted. However, there are benefits of securing the

optimum use in relation to heritage also, as noted by the above paragraph of the NPPF. The building at present is in a poor state, having remained empty for many years. As well as having public benefits; notably for staff, students and the wider community attending the university and using its facilities it would also bring the Listed building into a functional building where the elements of the significance of the asset can be conserved rather than falling into further disrepair.

In summary, policy TB24 of the MDD seeks to conserve, and where possible enhanced as a result of development. The proposal on the whole conserves the Listed Building and setting of the Local Park and Garden, with the shortcomings (in terms of window replacements) outweighed by the public benefits when applying paragraph 208 of the NPPF. The scheme will also result numerous enhancements/ restoration to the Listed Building both and so, on balance, complies with policy TB24. However, this is subject to conditions relating to the following:

- Details of windows/ glazed screens and external doors
- Details of rooflights
- Details of roof cowls
- Replacement aluminium sheet covering to roof and walling
- Details of roof lantern lights
- Matching external finishes
- In accordance with concrete repair

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010):

In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

RECOMMENDATION

Conditions agreed:

Yes

Recommendation:

Approve subject to the following conditions:

1. Time Limit
2. Approved Plans
3. Details of windows/ external glazing/ doors
4. Details of roof lights
5. Details of roof cowls
6. Replacement aluminium sheeting
7. Roof lanterns
8. Matching external finishes
9. Concrete repairs
10. Materials for external stair cores
11. New openings to external walling
12. Louvre details

	13. Roof guttering 14. Brick slip pavers
Date:	12 March 2025
Earliest date for decision:	23 January 2025

Recommendation agreed by: (Authorised Officer)	
Date:	12/03/25