



ENGLISH HERITAGE

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

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16 May 2013

Dear Ms Fettiplace

Notifications under Circular 01/2001, Circular 08/2009 & T&CP (Development Management Procedure) Order 2010

FORMER RUSKIN COLLEGE SITE, WALTON STREET, OXFORD, OX1 2HE Application No 13/00832/FUL

Thank you for your letter of 11 April 2013 notifying English Heritage of the above application. I have been involved in extensive discussions on this site which has recently been confirmed as a listed building (Grade II).

Summary

Ruskin College, now Grade II for both historic and architectural interest, may not be able without loss to accommodate a use as intensive as Exeter College now proposes in forming a 'Third Quadrangle'. This loss would, if the programme is accepted, involve the loss of the interior and back walls, a partial survival being clearly problematic. In that case, the street elevations of the 1913 building should be accorded more respect than in the current submission.

English Heritage Advice

Ruskin College

Ruskin College had a difficult birth. Gestation was long, and even after the architectural competition of 1907, it was six years before the building began. Only about half of what had been envisaged was then constructed, and only a little more was added, in 1936, before a decisive break, after which the later twentieth-century work was different and much inferior. Consequently the main architectural interest is concentrated on the Walton Street front, where the entrance was always to be, though



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there was meant to be a longer facade to Worcester Place round the corner.

Joseph & Smithem are not a well-known firm, but despite this they achieved the competence that was normal among Edwardian architects. Their craft was to handle a loose Classical manner so as to accommodate a great variety of internal rooms and purposes while giving them a decent and regular external form. As usual in this style, the ground floor is treated as a monumental 'basement' (i.e. a groundwork, not a cellar), as shown by the full use of stone, but in other respects it conforms to the style of the upper floors, and the whole has both unity and diversity, within the limits then expected. So the vertical dimension is consistently treated as if it has a giant order: the forward breaks are bounded by rusticated strips or long panels which would be understood as pilasters. There is no logic to the different types of window surround, but in each bay the vertical sequence is emphasised by the use of materials (so that they are 'laced' together) or by the use of features that prolong the openings, especially aprons and keystones. These last features are what this style (often called 'Wrenaissance') especially took from the English Baroque, and here they are given extra point by the engraving of the most prominent aprons as foundation stones. In common with most of its models, the building has small-pane windows - relatively few buildings of this style and period eschewed glazing bars altogether, and the large ground-floor windows on Worcester Place contribute to the geometrical play of the façade.

Internally the planning of the College was a greater challenge, and subject to some trimming in the early years as well as the severe budgetary constraints which tightened all the interior dimensions. The building is based on a slim steel frame which in the upper parts becomes a mansard roof, and which imposed a plan with small rooms and comparatively narrow corridors. Below, a curious decision to put the access to the main assembly room at a distance from the street entrance (so as to privilege a north-south axis that never materialised) allowed this area to be raised above either street level, and eventually the main entrance was altered to suit. This compounded the difficulties of the crossfall which could otherwise have been less severe. However, the simplicity of the assembly room and of the students' rooms clearly show the constraints of funding under which the institution always operated, and which separated it (as most thought appropriate) from the University, of which it was not a part. Such internal décor as it had has mostly been altered over time, though the list description notes that some cupboards and other fittings survive in the rooms.



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The impact of the scheme on the interior

Recently listed, Ruskin is finally appreciated as of special architectural and historic interest. The list description puts the historic interest first: 'a pivotal institution in the history of working-class adult education in the UK, and one that shaped the consciousness of generations of trades unions and labour leaders'. After that comes 'architectural interest: a capable and restrained - albeit incompletely realised - design in the late seventeenth-century 'Wrenaissance' manner'. This order of priority raises an immediate question for the scheme under consideration.

The proposal would remove all of the College behind the two 1913 street facades, that to Walton Street and that to Worcester Place. In addition to the removal of the interior, the return facade on the south, visible up Walton Street, and those to the rear, now partly engulfed in later work and very obviously incomplete even after 1936, would be lost. In place of these would be a scheme which would occupy roughly the same footprint, even involving a cloister in the place where Joseph & Smithem had hoped to build one, but with a consistent block plan extended across the whole Ruskin site. As the sign of this wholesale redevelopment, a sinuous metal roof would extend the profile of the building dramatically upwards, and lap down over those areas where the 1913 facades were not being kept or had never been. The rhythm of this roof would be complex, laying strong vertical notes in the form of boxy windows over the free-flowing diagonal pattern of the metal tiles. The extremely simple form of the upper windows is proposed also for those in the retained facades, and the ground floor windows would lose their proportions in this change.

Clearly the major impact of the scheme would be on the character of the building as a three-dimensional composition. Whatever the shortcomings of the first design, and the problems created by the failure to complete it, what was put in place in 1913 speaks of the difficulties under which Ruskin laboured throughout its time on this site, and the shape which was considered appropriate to an establishment of this kind: this part of the building has historic illustrative value. The loss of all this work (i.e. the interior, the back wall and the existing roof profile) would therefore constitute harm. It has therefore to be asked whether this has to happen, i.e. whether there is 'clear and convincing justification' (NPPF paragraph 132). A part of this may be the public benefits that would accrue (paragraph 134). As the listing does not attach the historic interest to a particular aspect of the building, the loss of the interior need not be considered 'substantial harm', but the question naturally arises how much of the



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character of the building would survive, overall, to convey the special interest.

The existing buildings have been described (notably by Stockley in the 'Ruskin Building Structural Intervention Statement' of March 2013, p2) as not conforming to the Building Regulations. However a waiver could have been obtained in respect of these, as for so many other listed collegiate buildings; the localised damage inflicted to construct a lift shaft could easily have been accommodated; as could even the disruption involved in inserting service risers, despite the comparatively heavy loss of original floor construction due to the inflexibility of the filler joist system. If we grant that some constructional problems would have been best solved by localised demolition, perhaps including the south return facade due to the plant room problems at its foot, it would still not have been impossible to re-use the interior of the 1913 building.

The diagrams used to demonstrate the difficulties (for example in Alison Brooks Architects' submission of October 2012) relate less to objective physical impediments and more to the assumption that the building would have to provide at least as many rooms as it does now. This in turn arises from Exeter College's brief, which was sufficiently demanding for all the architects who competed to decide that the interior of the existing building, and the roof, would need to be removed. If the College were to accept a lower density in the 1913 part of the building, some survival would be feasible. This would most particularly be the case if the rooms with full disabled access and facilities were to be located in the new portion of the building.

However, to keep this possibility in proportion, there would still be significant alteration to achieve a fair degree of flexibility of use on the site, and the steel frame would be particularly unforgiving of small adjustments, necessitating much more wide-ranging changes than in a mass-walled structure. A major generator of this degree of change would be the need to make the corridor wider, with knock-on effects for the rooms. At the end of this operation, it is true that relatively little might survive of the sense of how Ruskin was inhabited and used.

The treatment of the exterior

At the heart of the arguments about the extent of change in this scheme has been the question of where (if anywhere in particular) the historic value of the building lies. The working assumption has come to be made that the preservation of the external elevations would sufficiently convey this story. This is not (as the paragraphs above



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demonstrate) the whole story that the building currently tells, but if the value of the exterior includes this historic illustrative value, its significance needs to be conserved; otherwise it is hard to see in what way the listed building is being respected.

The most dramatic change sought is the imposition of the new roof. There has been disquiet at the colour, and the reflective character of the metal (now stippled stainless steel tiles); disquiet which I share, since a roof of this character could throw back a good deal of light without actually being 'shiny' (we established that the stippling toned down the actual shine). However, I note that the elevation of the roof has been part of the design from the beginning, and is consequently the expression of the brief in the way it would rise above the current ridge. Whether to permit it is, therefore, largely a matter of whether or not the brief is accepted as reasonable.

It is otherwise with the windows. There is no apparent reason why these should be changed. The Heritage Impact Assessment (Richard Griffiths Architects) suggests that these might be changed because the existing is 'an architectural compromise', that to retain the windows would cause cold bridging and, in any case, 'the significance [of the 1913 building] lies more in its history than in its architecture'. It may be that there was a change of mind during building in 1913 from which the metal windows resulted, but it was far from an impoverishment of the building, giving us the handsome circular motif in the glazing of the Worcester Place ground floor bays. It is also to 1913 that the change dates which recognised the higher floor level on this side, expressed through the powerful segmental arches of the basement (not envisaged in 1907) which is one of the more Baroque touches in the composition. Clearly, the history of the building includes the aspiration to a dignified and well-handled exterior - the dichotomy RGA attempts to set up is false.

The practical questions are secondary and soluble (or very few historic windows would ever be preserved). As to the 'relationship with Walton Street' (Turnberry Planning, notes of meeting 20 March 2013), dropping the floor level in the entrance arch is easily the simplest and most effective way to improve this relationship, and would of course restore the first state, so this is a change we can welcome. It brings Ruskin once more into the general pattern of Oxford colleges, which have an easy if monitored entrance, but seldom share their inner life through the street windows. Our recommendation is therefore to leave the windows (on both faces) as they are fenestrated and in their current proportions, so that the facades have their own logic and character as designed. This will take them out of the relationship with the floors inside, but it is not



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essential for these rooms to have a view out (or in) at a low level. This scheme surely contains enough apparent new design for the historic facades to be left as they are. If Exeter College feels that its presence must be signed, it is welcome to propose some addition in the craft tradition which gave Ruskin its fine bossed cartouche.

The arguments brought for imposing the style and character of the new design on the old facades are in no way convincing. If the applicant does not wish to compromise in this, the effect on the facades would be pervasive and, I am afraid, clearly parodic. As such it would constitute substantial harm and should be refused.

Recommendation

If the overall case for this use is accepted, the application should nevertheless be improved to preserve the exterior more fully. If these concessions are not made, the loss of character would be serious enough to merit refusal.

We would welcome the opportunity of advising further. Please consult us again if any additional information or amendments are submitted. If, notwithstanding our advice, you propose to approve the scheme in its present form, please advise us of the date of the committee and send us a copy of your report at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely

David Brock

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