
THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY
The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

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Our reference: 2013/04/010

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Dear Ms Fettiplace

RE: Former Ruskin College, Walton Street (unlisted, 1913, *Joseph and Smithem*): Demolition of buildings on site, excluding 1913 façades to Walton Street and Worcester Place. Erection of student and staff accommodation, teaching and library facilities.

Thank you for consulting the Victorian Society on this application. The application was discussed at the last meeting of our Southern Buildings Committee, and I write now to convey their views. We **object** to the application, due to the significant level of harm the proposed changes to the 1913 building would cause to the conservation area.

The heritage appraisal for the 1913 building acknowledges the real value of its 'Wrenaissance' exterior, describing it as 'very competent'. The building is a stocky, handsome Edwardian baroque building whose clearly detailed and confident stone and brick façades are make it a building of merit within the conservation area. Its historical value is significant, as it was the first purpose-built home of Ruskin College, whose foundation was a milestone in the development of further education for working class people. The college was based there for almost a century, and an impressive roll of political luminaries studied or taught there during that time.

The most significant change to the Walton Street façade of the proposed scheme, particularly from the perspective of those passing or entering at street level, would be the significant changes to the windows. It is argued that the changes to the windows will "subtly transform the building's ground floor façade from a forbidding and authoritarian frontage to a more open, permeable façade" (D&A, p51). It is not accurate to describe the street frontage to Walton Street as forbidding, with its pale stone, large proportion of glazing both at ground and basement level, and inscribed stone window aprons at just below eye level. Rather than 'opening' the façade, the changes to the window openings would create an oddly elongated effect and spoil the classical proportions.

It is proposed not only that the ground floor window openings are altered, but also that all windows in the 1913 façades are replaced. Currently sash windows with glazing

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bars, the proposal is to insert bronze framed double-glazing into each opening, divided into three panes. These windows do not fit with the style of the façade or respond to it in any way, and justification is not given for making such a substantial change to the appearance of the building.

The proposed new roof for the 1913 building would take a very different form to the existing, and be constructed of a contrasting material. The attempt to draw together the old and new parts of the building is a totally mistaken concept, and this approach is too destructive to the character of the front block. The new roof, which is clearly and distractingly not of the original design, weakens the front block, reducing its walls to a large decorative panel of historical material rather than retaining a sense of a complete building.

A detailed conservation area appraisal has not been produced for the Central Oxford Conservation area, in which Ruskin College sits. However, the Jericho Conservation Area is immediately adjacent to the site to the north and (partially) to the west, and Ruskin College is undeniably part of the setting of this area. Walton Street is highlighted within the Jericho Conservation Area appraisal as being particularly important for its architectural details, with less than 10% of buildings having had their window openings altered, and the vast majority retaining their original sashes or sympathetic replacements. The lower part of Walton Street, immediately north of the college, is also noted for the unaltered nature of its roofscape. In both these regards, Walton Street stands as an exemplar in the area, with other parts of the conservation area having undergone much greater levels of change. The changes proposed for the east façade will be detrimental to Walton Street.

The changes proposed to the roof and fenestration of the 1913 building are extensive and destructive to the overall appearance and historical material of the building, and would cause substantial harm to the conservation area. Under clauses 138 and 133 of the NPPF, this means that the application should be refused unless not going ahead with the work proposed 'prevents all reasonable uses of the site', and if 'the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use.' The harm caused has not been justified in terms of the viability of the building; there is no suggestion that the building would not be able to be used without the changes proposed.

Even if it were argued that the harm to the conservation area from the proposals would be *less* than substantial, the scheme should still be refused. The harm caused is not only unnecessary, but its benefits would not be great; the vast majority of what the college wish to achieve does not rely on these alterations. The required use of the site could still be achieved without the high level of interference to the windows, and with a more appropriate treatment of the roof. With the extent of development behind the 1913 building, it is difficult to imagine that extra space gained in the proposed roof would not be achievable elsewhere in the site. The necessity of the change in ground levels and, if this occurred, of such an alteration to the shape of the windows, is also not explained, except that the original competition design was for a lower ground floor. Use of, for example, the basement window openings to increase light without compromising the façade, does not seem to have been explored. The alterations to the finish and glazing bars of all the windows is not justified at all, and seems to take a lead entirely from the windows in the new elements of the site.

The benefits gained from these changes cannot therefore be shown to outweigh the harm, and the application should be **refused** on that basis. The external envelope should be retained, allowing the new and retained buildings to keep their very different characters and retain their integrity.

Yours sincerely

Kathy Clark
Conservation Adviser