
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 Owen

RE: Former Ruskin College, Walton Street (Grade II, 1913, *Joseph and Smithem*): Demolition of buildings on site, excluding 1913 façades to Walton St and Worcester Pl. Erection of accommodation, teaching and library facilities.

Thank you for consulting the Victorian Society on this application. The proposal does not appear to have altered since the earlier Conservation Area and Full planning applications. The works proposed in those applications were discussed by our Southern Buildings Committee and I write now to convey their views, with particular reference to the status of the building since it was designated grade II in April.

We **object** to the application, due to the substantial harm the proposed development would cause to the listed 1913 building, contrary to clause 133 of the NPPF.

The heritage appraisal attached to the listed building application is to all intents and purposes identical to that submitted with the conservation area consent. The applicant has not reassessed the application in light of its listed status.

The 1913 building is a stocky, handsome Edwardian baroque building with clearly detailed and confident stone and brick façades. The historical value of Ruskin College's first purpose-built home is significant, and the listing description gives a detailed description of how its 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 proposals do not represent a respectful treatment of a valuable building of national significance, and would seriously harm its character, compromising its aesthetics and historical worth.

The most damaging 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

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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. The necessity of the change in ground levels and, if this occurred, of such an alteration to the shape of the windows, is not adequately justified. Use of, for example, the basement window openings to increase light without compromising the façade, does not seem to have been explored.

It is proposed not only that the ground floor window openings are altered, but also that all windows in the 1913 façades are replaced. The windows are currently metal framed at ground floor level, and timber sashes with glazing bars at the upper levels. The proposal is to insert bronze framed double-glazing into each opening, divided into three panes. The sash windows with exposed sash boxes are an important part of the character of the building, as an intrinsic component of Queen Anne-style architecture. The proposed 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 this substantial and harmful change. It appears that the proposed windows take their lead from the design of the new windows intended for the rear extension and roof, which is not appropriate for an historic building of architectural worth.

Removing and completely redesigning the roof of the 1913 building would be extremely destructive to its character. The attempt to draw together the old and new parts of the building is a flawed concept. The current slate-covered mansard complements the traditional materials of the building; its unobtrusive dormers are placed in alignment with the bays beneath. The new design attempts to combine a curved version of the mansard roof with the height of the originally intended steep-pitched roof, to gain a larger roof space. Unlike either the original competition design or the college as built, the effect is bulbous, overbearing, and out of proportion. Its negative impact on the buildings is exacerbated by the very modern roof covering. The proposed roof would be clearly and distractingly not of the original design, which would weaken the front block, reducing its walls to a large decorative panel of historical material rather than retaining a sense of a complete building.

The application proposes to demolish the majority of the 1913 building, except for its north and east façades. The interiors of the listed 1913 building have been much altered, and some further alteration would therefore be acceptable. However, the demolition of so much of the original building would entail the loss of much original material and any semblance of the historic plan, which only compounds the injuries which would be caused by the proposed changes to the roof and fenestration.

Overall, the proposals would unequivocally constitute substantial harm to a designated heritage asset. Clause 133 of the NPPF states that any application which would cause substantial harm to a designated heritage asset should be refused unless the loss is necessary to provide significant public benefits, or there is no viable use of the site. The building was in full use by an educational institution until 2011, and it has not been argued, and does not seem at all likely, that without this work there could be no reasonable use of the building. The changes are not necessary to achieve public benefits, and are intended only to provide more bedrooms for the college.

The application should therefore be **refused**. The proposals should be reconsidered giving full consideration to the value of the designated heritage asset. The external envelope to the 1913 block should be retained in its entirety, which will allow the listed and new buildings to keep their very different characters and retain their integrity.

Yours sincerely

Kathy Clark
Conservation Adviser